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A Sheltering Service for Women

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Photo courtesy of Womanspace, Inc.

Womanspace is calling for volunteers to help organize its signature campaign, “Communities of Light”, to raise awareness of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Patricia Hart, Executive Director of the Mercer County nonprofit, says the goal is to “join together

with one voice to say domestic violence is wrong.”

Womanspace hopes to send a message to the victims of domestic violence that “there are services out there and you are not alone”. On Oct. 25th, Rider University is hosting an event to launch what will be the tenth anniversary of Womanspace’s “Communities of Light” campaign. The campaign culminates on December 12th, with a display of lights in solidarity with the victims of domestic violence.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of Womanspace, which has been in existence since 1977, and is one of the largest domestic violence agencies in the state. Hart describes the breadth of services her agency offers:

- For shelter, there are three housing options: two for transitional housing, and one supervised living program
- Counseling and Support services
- Emergency Services, including a 24-hour hotline
- Domestic Violence Victim Response team and Sexual Assault

Support advocates

- educational training for Womanspace volunteers
- a growing array of children's services.

According to Hart, 120 active volunteers saw over 950 victims of sexual assault and domestic violence in 2010. "Domestic violence victims can be anyone of us," says Hart. "You can be intelligent and affluent and still find yourself in the midst of a relationship that's debilitating."

People who would like to volunteer on a Domestic Violence Victim Response Team or the Sexual Assault Response Team can expect to receive 80 hours of training. Once a domestic violence volunteer is trained and screened, she will be called out to the Police Department to meet with victims to provide support and referrals.

Womanspace developed the model of the Response Team and looks for "caring, informed people" to join them to support someone in need. While there is a risk that the volunteer might know the victim if she is volunteering in her community, she is trained to keep all information confidential, and so far that has not been a problem.

In the case of sexual assault, the call comes from the Sheriff's Department. An advocate then goes to the hospital and is part of the Sexual Assault Response Team, which includes a forensics nurse and law enforcement. The advocate is often with the victim during the physical exam, unless she or he prefers otherwise.

Womanspace has had enormous success with their volunteer training: every police department in Mercer County has a response team, the College of New Jersey has a response team, as does every municipal and state police department. Currently Womanspace is in talks with Princeton University to set up a response team there.

Womanspace has also spearheaded the Domestic Violence Healthcare Initiative to train medical professionals on how to screen for abuse and support victims.

The faltering economy has kept Womanspace's shelters full for months. A lot of issues arise, says Hart, when people don't have anywhere else to go. Womanspace has been seeing more homelessness and a greater need for shelter. Counseling services are always busy as well, due to the increased stress of unemployment and other issues related to the recession.

Over the years Hart has seen a rise in the acceptance of violence in our society through increased bullying and violence in the media. Womanspace conducts media literacy groups for children, using ads and videos to get them thinking about gender-biased imagery. Domestic violence starts with gender bias by treating women as objects, says Hart. The workshop asks children to look critically at media, and then takes them through the exercise of developing a message that is neither violent nor gender-biased.

There are many situations, says Hart, where educational outreach volunteers are giving presentations in classrooms and are later approached by students who have concerns. "Often an external cue has made the victim question his or her relationship," she says. "It is one of the reasons that Womanspace visits so many schools, universities, civics groups, and healthcare institutions, intersecting with as many places as possible to provide support and services."

Regarding domestic violence, Hart said "no one deserves to be hurt *ever* in a relationship, but domestic violence can take lots of forms. Someone who verbally abuses you, makes you feel bad through name-calling, keeps you from seeing friends, takes away your rights in a relationship...if you don't have freedom in a relationship to be who you are, with a partner or spouse putting you down or criticizing you, if there are consequences when you go out with friends or you don't have control of your own money, these are all warning signs."

Domestic violence can be insidious. If a new boyfriend (or girlfriend) acts jealous, the partner might feel flattered, and think "he must really love me because he won't let me talk to anyone." But then the attention becomes oppressive and might lead to physical violence.

However, says Hart, people should be aware that domestic violence is not always physical. "Situations where someone is restricted from going places, seeing whom you want and spending your own money -- when your world is drastically narrowed -- can be included in the category of domestic violence." Hart says people in this type of situation might wonder, "I don't feel good about myself, what happened?" In cases like this, calling the Womanspace [hotline](#) offers an opportunity to ask questions.

Hart says the counseling staff sees people in all sorts of situations: victims who are wondering about a relationship; survivors who have left a relationship and are trying to cope with the aftermath; men who are in an abusive relationship with a woman or other man; children of domestic

olence victims.

When President Obama proclaimed October to be “[National Domestic Violence Awareness Month](#)” this year, he described it as a devastating public health crisis, when “one in four women will be physically or sexually assaulted by a partner at some point in her lifetime.”

In the following months, Womanspace will be holding a number of events to raise awareness of domestic violence. Some highlights:

- October 25: [Communities of Light Launch Event](#) at Rider University
- November 8: The College of New Jersey will be holding Dance Away Domestic Violence at Travers Bldg., 9PM to midnight
- December 9: [Ten Thousand Villages](#) in the Princeton Shopping Center will be holding Womanspace Benefit Day from 4:00 to 8:00.
- December 12: A countywide [Communities of Light](#) lighting. The Communities of Light builds awareness of domestic violence, and hopes to tell victims that they are not alone, and help is available.

In December, Womanspace plans to consolidate its offices into a building recently purchased in Lawrenceville. The administrative office will be moving there from Trenton, having outgrown its current location. The counseling center, already located in Lawrenceville, will be joining them.

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About the Author »



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Bonnie Schultz has worked as a technology and marketing writer in the Boston area. She moved here in 1997 and is the mother of two boys. Since 2007, Bonnie has been blogging about food and community happenings in the Princeton area.

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