



MY SISTERS' PLACE

Giving Voice

2 Lyon Place
White Plains, NY 10601

fall 2005
providing hope...achieving justice...saving lives

Nick Spano Supports Rights of Domestic Violence Victims - Secures Funding for My Sisters' Place

My Sisters' Place salutes New York State Senator Nick Spano, a long-time supporter of My Sisters' Place who is committed to the effort to end domestic violence. Two years ago, in the wake of devastating funding cuts for all non-profits in Westchester, My Sisters' Place was forced to close its Life Skills Program. Senator Spano responded by securing state funds in the amount of \$40,000. With additional gifts from private donors, including \$25,000 from the Price Family Foundation and continued support from the Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation, My Sisters' Place was able to start up Life Skills again. This year, as pictured above, Senator Spano secured \$25,000 in legislative grant funding so that Life Skills can continue.

Life Skills is key for our clients because it offers them the career-building and home-strengthening tools they need to create a sustainable life for themselves and their children, free of fear and abuse. For more detailed information about this critical program, please turn to the "Life Skills Provides a Lifeline" article on the inside center page of this newsletter.

This year, Senator Spano also sponsored a bill known as the Unintended Pregnancy Prevention Act, which would allow pharmacists in New York State to dispense emergency contraception under



Julie Domonkos, Executive Director of MSP accepts \$25,000 check from NYS Senator Nick Spano

a non-patient specific prescription. Emergency contraception prevents pregnancy if used within 72 hours of unprotected sex. This bill would allow women to go to a pharmacy and obtain emergency contraception, thereby avoiding an unintended pregnancy, in a safe, timely and private way.

This bill is especially important for victims of domestic violence .
please turn to inside right page

Increased Access to Justice for Immigrant Victims

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women has formally recognized MSP's Legal Assistance and Relief for Immigrant Victims of Abuse (LARIVA) program with a grant of \$431,876.00.

The LARIVA project provides documented and undocumented immigrant victims of domestic violence with the comprehensive legal and support services they need to achieve justice. As a result of this grant, we will enhance and expand our current LARIVA project by promoting Hamra Ahmad to Supervising Attorney of the Immigration Unit, hiring a full-time Immigration Attorney, and hiring a full-time Paralegal. These changes will afford hundreds more victims the opportunity to work with LARIVA project staff and, in turn, receive the following benefits:

- The ability to stay in the United States legally, even when their immigration status is "tied" to that of their abuser.

- The ability to achieve economic independence through: receipt of a legal work permit, affording access to legal employment at regulated wages; court-ordered child support, spousal support, and other economic supports; and administrative advocacy with government organizations that provide social services such as public assistance, Medicaid, food stamps, and housing vouchers.
- Increased safety through safety planning with LARIVA project staff and, if appropriate, the issuance of judicial orders of protection that carry penalties for the abuser if violated.
- Advocacy and support during participation in criminal investigations and prosecution of abusers.
- Education and outreach through community forums.

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From the Executive Director



Dear Friends:

In September, a 22 year old Guatemalan woman was rescued from two men who have been charged in Westchester County with kidnapping and raping her. This woman was part of a population of crime victims who until now have been invisible to all of us: victims of human trafficking. She paid \$5,000 to one of her captors, a man who told her he would get her into the United States and then kept her here in a state of modern day slavery. She was raped, threatened and abused. She was vulnerable because she had no immigration status in the United States, and her traffickers used that to make her fear deportation if she didn't submit to them.

Human trafficking is a huge criminal enterprise that is only now being exposed and addressed. It is estimated that there are two million victims of human trafficking worldwide each year, with over 20,000 cases in the United States annually. Poverty, oppression and the hope of a better life often lead people to leave their home country and go abroad. Some of them end up in the hands of traffickers, who take away their passports, coerce them into the sex trade or horrendous work conditions, and threaten their family members back home if they don't comply.

My Sisters' Place believes that sex trafficking is yet another manifestation of violence against women. Often the connection to domestic violence is quite direct – some of the victims are brought into the United States as mail order brides or the traffickers' girlfriends. My Sisters' Place has joined statewide and countywide initiatives to redesign our law enforcement, prosecutorial and victim services efforts to identify these victims, provide the wide array of intensive services they need, and put traffickers in prison. We have collaborated in the drafting of comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation, and support a bill based on our work which has been introduced by NYS Assembly Member Jeffrey Dinowitz. We provide services to trafficking victims in our shelters and with our counseling and legal services, and we will continue to work to end this form of modern day slavery, which occurs right here in Westchester County. I ask the many great friends of My Sisters' Place to support these efforts to end human trafficking.

Julie A. Domonkos, Esq.

News 12 Examines Domestic Violence in Westchester

My Sisters' Place commends News 12 Westchester for airing its captivating two-day and night series on domestic violence in late August entitled, "When Love Hurts." As a result of this broadcast, calls from domestic violence victims to our hotline, administrative offices and legal center increased.



image courtesy of News 12 Westchester

News 12 reporter Juri Tatsuuma chronicles abuse experienced by a MSP client

Reporter Juri Tatsuuma gave a comprehensive look at the issue of domestic violence in Westchester County, chronicling the story of a former MSP client who was shot seven times by her husband. Juri's in-depth report included insight into police procedures for handling domestic violence cases, and a look at how local non-profit agencies and service providers assist victims of this devastating problem.

MSP's Executive Director Julie A. Domonkos, who was featured twice during the series and appeared live on the morning edition, spoke about the crucial role that My Sisters' Place plays in supporting victims of domestic violence in Westchester County.

Additionally, News 12 Westchester's morning edition hosted Heather Storer, coordinator of MSP's Domestic Violence Education and Prevention Program. With "back-to-school" just a week away, reporter Lisa Salvadorini's morning segment focused on dating violence and date rape. Heather offered startling statistics on the high incidence of teen dating violence, and helpful tips to assist parents with talking to their teens and college aged young adults about date rape.



FACT: Between 1995 and 2000, trafficking worldwide increased nearly 50%. Annual profits from the human trade have been estimated at \$5 to \$7 billion – UNIFEM fact sheet

My Sisters' Place and Westhab Collaborate to Help Clients Obtain Permanent Housing

On September 13, 2005, the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women awarded a three-year grant of \$175,000 for a new collaborative project between My Sisters' Place and Westhab, entitled Survivors of Abuse Achieving Permanent Housing (SAAPH). Over the course of three years, this program will provide 150 homeless victims of domestic violence and their children who currently reside in Westhab's family homeless shelters with the services, support and resources they need to obtain safe, permanent housing, apart from their abusers.

Bob Miller, President of Westhab, remarked on the importance of this collaboration: "Westhab and My Sisters' Place continue to find ways to benefit from each others' expertise. This grant provides additional resources to further expand our work together to help our mutual clients."



"Domestic violence survivors need to build a brand new life for themselves and their children. It often takes the combined efforts of community partners to make that happen. This grant will bring together the strengths of two fantastic organizations, Westhab and My Sisters' Place. With Westhab's emphasis on housing advocacy and MSP's on victim support services, we will bring permanency and peace to the lives of our clients."

Julie A. Domonkos, Esq.,
Executive Director of My Sisters' Place

Spotlight on MSP's Finance Department

Providing vital services to our clients is a team effort, and while the counselors, attorneys, educators, and advocates work on the "front lines", what happens behind the scenes is equally important. The Finance Department, though not often spotlighted, is critical to carrying out the MSP mission. David Forbes-Watkins, Finance Associate, joined MSP in 1997. He has seen the organization grow with the addition of the Mamaroneck shelter in 1998, the opening of the Legal Center in 1997, and the vibrant growth of non-residential services, including the opening of the Yonkers office in 2001. He initiated the installation of our first computer network and has continued to provide technical support throughout the agency.

In 2003, Barbara Roth, Associate Director of Finance, brought her expertise to MSP to help meet the growing needs of the department. "I arrived when MSP was at maximum capacity. David and I work seamlessly together to manage the finances, report to funders and the Board, ensure that insurance and certifications are in place, and maintain the overall fiscal health of the organization. What I really like about MSP is that it's a solid organization. We squeeze everything we can out of each dollar, maximizing the impact of each donation."

David and Barbara have done a great job managing tremendous growth while maintaining excellence, integrity, and focus.



Barbara Roth and David Forbes-Watkins focus on fiscal accountability at My Sisters' Place.

With sincere apologies...

In the last issue of Giving Voice we misspelled the names of long-time supporters and friends Steven and Tina Price. We regret this error and appreciate their ongoing commitment to the clients and staff of My Sisters' Place.

Rising Stars at My Sisters' Place

My Sisters' Place congratulates and welcomes all newly hired and recently promoted staff.

Jessica Tenzer	Clinical Social Work Supervisor
Deana Nogales	DVEP Educator
Gail Cohen	Children's Advocate
Rosie Morales	Counselor at CPS in Mount Vernon
Norma Fernandez	promoted to the Intake Specialist position at our Yonkers office
Monica Winters	legal translator and advocate
Stephanie Pacheco	legal translator and advocate
Hamra Ahmad	promoted to Supervising Attorney, Immigration Unit

Pro Se* Divorce Clinic Helps Secure Independence

Obtaining a divorce can be a Herculean feat for someone who has experienced domestic violence, especially since abusers often use the legal process to further intimidate their partners. In addition, the cost of a divorce can present a seemingly impenetrable barrier to this much needed legal remedy. For some, like L., it becomes the symbolic line of demarcation between victimization and survivorship.

"Because of my domestic violence situation, I needed to know that we were completely separated. I couldn't live with the screaming, yelling and punishments anymore. It was bad for me and my kids. I really wanted a divorce."

L., a participant of MSP's pro se divorce clinic

In an effort to address victims' needs, the Legal Center at MSP implemented a series of pro se uncontested divorce clinics to assist women in obtaining divorces.

Women who are eligible for the clinic are matched with a staff attorney and/or trained volunteer who drafts and files the required paperwork. Clinic participants also attend two formal sessions which act as both support group and legal clinic.

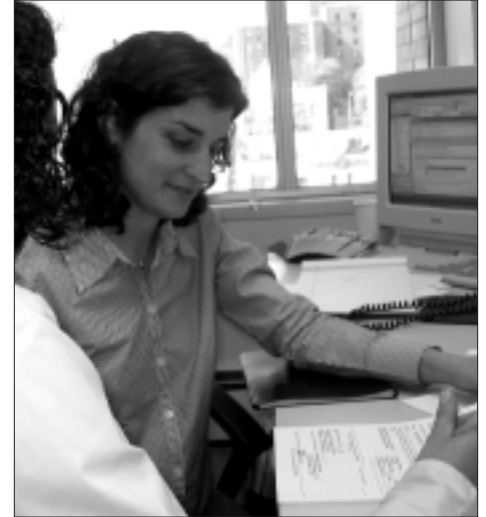
L. described her experience in the clinic this way:

"I was nervous at first but the staff put me at ease. I gathered all the documents and they filed them

with the courts. The day I got the divorce papers I felt free. I could breathe again. I didn't know I could do it, but I did. I now have the confidence to rebuild my life. I visited the second clinic to encourage those

women, to tell them that MSP made it a painless experience and that when they get their papers in the mail, they will feel liberated."

*Pro se is Latin for "on one's own behalf; without an attorney."



Rachel Chazin Halperin, Legal Center Director, works with a clinic client

Life Skills Provides a Life Line

Domestic violence is about power and control, and abusers use many tactics to maintain their power. Imagine being restricted through force, fear, or coercion from obtaining information and making decisions about family finances, child rearing, and other important daily matters. Imagine being denied the right to work or go to school. Imagine being "allowed" to work, but having your work habits monitored and scrutinized by your partner, making it impossible to retain employment. This is the experience of many of our clients.

Given these circumstances, it is common for victims of domestic violence who are transitioning into independent living to lack the up-to-date life skills, financial literacy, and employment skills required to obtain and maintain viable employment. This limits their options as they seek to create a sustainable life for themselves and their children, independent of the abuser.

In response to this problem, MSP offers a comprehensive Life Skills program that addresses the unique obstacles victims face as they negotiate work, parenting, and

The following is a letter from a Life Skills graduate who, we are pleased to report, was recently hired as a nurse's aide.

The life skills program at my sisters' place has been a wonderful experience for me. The people who I have met here, especially the coordinator, Carol Greenspan, helped me to acquire my apartment. She, along with the other great teachers encouraged me to keep on being strong and to always reach for higher heights.

independent living. To address the barriers victims of domestic violence often face, we provide childcare, transportation, and meals. The Life Skills program not only provides participants with the concrete employment skills they need to enter or re-enter the workforce, it also offers them help in improving their personal living skills, coping strategies, self-confidence and much more. Carol Greenspan, MSP's Life Skills Coordinator, explains it this way:

"Here in Life Skills we recognize that participants come to the program with great strengths, skills and talents. It's our job to help our clients transition from thinking of themselves as victims, to thinking of themselves as independent, confident, individuals, ready to enter the workforce. Of course support services are always available, like counseling, support groups, and legal help, but the Life Skills classroom is also a place where they are unconditionally recognized for their intrinsic ability to succeed."

Nick Spano Supports Victims

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and teen date abuse. Abusers typically coerce unwanted sexual activity on their partners. They frequently refuse to allow their partners to use birth control and they isolate their partners from access to caregivers including doctors and clinics. Often this is motivated by the abuser's fear that his partner will disclose the abuse. Girls are at similar risk of sexual abuse in teen dating situations, and for many reasons, including fear of the abuser, do not wish to disclose to their parents what is happening to them. Girls can also be the victims of sexual abuse by family members and friends, who typically threaten their young victims not to disclose the abuse.

Clearly, the ability to access emergency contraception confidentially and at the convenience of the neighborhood pharmacy is essential for these victims. Senator Spano's bill, which was authored and sponsored in the New York State Assembly by Assemblywoman Amy Paulin, is critically important for victims whose control over their bodies has been taken away by an abuser. Under his leadership, Senator Spano was able to get the bill passed in the Senate, as it was in the Assembly. My Sisters' Place applauds Senator Spano for his perseverance and courage in getting his Senate colleagues on board and for striving to help victims of domestic violence and teen date abuse.



Rachel Chazin Halperin, Legal Center Director; Hamra Ahmad, Supervising Attorney of the Immigration Unit; Julie A. Domonkos, Esq., Executive Director; and Karen Cheeks-Lomax, General Counsel work to protect the rights of immigrants

Justice for Immigrants

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Additionally, this grant will further enhance MSP's existing collaboration with community partners. For example, a portion of a LARIVA project staff member's time will be spent at the New Rochelle Family Court working with immigrant victims to file family court petitions.

Karen Cheeks-Lomax, General Counsel for My Sisters' Place, expressed great enthusiasm about this grant: "Being able to reach this deeply vulnerable population of victims of domestic violence – immigrants who fear not only the violence, but also the threat of deportation – is immensely satisfying. These individuals often remain invisible and voiceless. The LARIVA project will provide them access to justice."

Hamra Ahmad, MSP's Senior Immigration Attorney and supervisor of this new initiative, echoed those sentiments: "I am so grateful to work with this collaborative effort to reach documented and undocumented immigrant victims of domestic violence. Through this grant we will help hundreds more women and children achieve freedom from abuse."

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Our Mission

My Sisters' Place strives to engage each member of society in our work to end domestic violence, so that all relationships can embrace the principles of respect, equality, and peacefulness. Since 1978, we have advanced this mission throughout the Westchester County region with advocacy, community education, and services to those harmed by domestic violence. *Through advocacy*, we act as a force for social change in law and public policy. *Through community education*, we challenge public perceptions of intimate violence and the social inequities that give rise to it, and we promote prevention with a special emphasis on youth. *Through direct services*, we support the abused, primarily women and their children, in seeking safety, self-determination, and justice.

New Challenge Grant Doubles Donations

Every dollar you donate will be matched by a long time friend of My Sisters' Place. Now your donation can provide twice the support for victims of domestic violence and their children.

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featuring Ted Bunch and Tony Porter
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 8:30 am - 1 pm • free admission
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GENERATIONS
 of WOMEN

*Luncheon featuring author
 Lauren Cowen and
 photographer Jayne Wexler*



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 11:30 am Mamaroneck Beach and Yacht Club
 for reservations please call 914.683.1333

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Evening Program and Silent Auction

Thursday, March 16, 2006

Hilton Rye Town

Wise Wonderful Women of Westchester

Panel and Reception to benefit My Sisters' Place

Sunday, March 5, 2006

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Call 914.238.3928 for reservations and information