

Courier Times

NEWS

How four women started a lifeline for survivors of domestic violence in Bucks County

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Published 10:00 p.m. ET Jul. 18, 2021 | Updated 10:54 a.m. ET Jul. 20, 2021

Forty-five years ago, four young women from Bucks County saw a need in the community and took action.

Patricia Groff, Mary Jane Kirkpatrick, Doris Payne-Camp and Beverly Frantz were looking to make a difference in women's lives.

Their efforts led to the creation of A Woman's Place, which for decades has worked to end domestic violence and provide support to survivors.

“We knew there was a need and we were going to try to fill that need,” said Frantz.

Now, A Woman's Place is looking to honor the legacy of its four founders through the Founding Mother's Society, launched in May. The society is continuing the mission the women started: to provide a safe place for women and children who were victims of domestic violence.

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How A Woman's Place began

The women met through an organization called Women's Network, in Doylestown. Frantz and Groff were friends in high school, and Groff was a member of the organization along with Kirkpatrick and Payne-Camp.

The Women's Network was looking into various social issues, including domestic violence, and members realized the only way to really accomplish something would be to have a safe, private place for women to go.

According to current A Woman's Place executive director Marianne Lynch, there was no protection from abuse law at the time, and there was not much protection for women if they ended up in an abusive situation.

The Women's Network was not in the position to act, but Frantz, Gross, Kirkpatrick and Payne-Camp were. Groff's husband owned property in Sellersville and offered it for rent.

To Frantz's understanding, none of them had personal experience with domestic violence, and therefore it was a "learn as you go" approach to running the organization. All of their knowledge came from books that they read and what they'd heard from other women.

The founders started a storefront at the Sellersville property to fundraise. On the weekends, they would buy pottery, prints and art made by other women to be sold at the store. At night, women fleeing abusive situations lived in a shelter behind the store. The first family entered the little apartment on Christmas Eve 1976.

"They were pretty naïve in their approach, and I think that's probably a good thing because they didn't know what they weren't allowed to do, and they just did it," said Lynch. "It was really their commitment to empowering women and being the feminists that they were that now 45 years later this is where we are."

While money always poses an obstacle in running any business, this was not the biggest challenge as the organization came into fruition. Rather, it was the transition from understanding domestic violence in theory to actually seeing it up close, and seeing how many women came in from various paths of life.

"That was really difficult. Trying to find money is always difficult, but that was very concrete. We're dealing with the emotions of women coming in," said Frantz.

Frantz recalled a quiet woman who often came into the store looking at pamphlets and buying items. After a while, she came into the store to say she was a victim of domestic violence.

"We were pretty naïve because we expected to see bruises, and she was a well dressed woman, and there were no bruises. But if she said she was battered, then we believed her," said Frantz.

Soon after, Frantz was walking through the apartment as the woman was changing, revealing black and blue marks under her clothes.

“I’m sure my mouth dropped open and my eyes popped out,” said Frantz. “She looked at me and said, ‘You don’t think he would ever hit me where anyone would see it, would you?’ ... What had stayed with me all these years is how easy it is to hide battering.”

Protections pass: PA Senate passes Kayden's Law, mandating judges put child safety first in custody judgements

Community continues to support A Woman's Place

Frantz said the founders expected some pushback upon opening a social change organization. After painting a sign on the front with a symbol for a female, people started to pay attention in Sellersville.

Yet the women were pleasantly surprised by the support from the community, whether it was donating clothing, furniture, financial donations or volunteering. The local police would make laps around the back of the building in the evening hours, as that's where women would enter the shelter.

“Volunteers are so important to the organization because we could not have done it on our own. So volunteers from the community played a huge part,” said Frantz.

Today, the four founding mothers remain active supporters of the organization but are not involved in day-to-day operations. All are members of the Founding Mother’s Society.

There was a point that the founders “felt too much ownership, that it was our baby,” Frantz said. “We knew that if it was going to grow, we had to let other people really come in and take the lead.”

More: CB East Girls Lacrosse honors suicide awareness program LAX for Life during game against CB South

Today, A Woman's Place still operates a safe house at an undisclosed location for survivors of abuse and their children, and accommodations for men also are offered. “We know that anybody can be a survivor of domestic abuse and we welcome everyone into the fold,” said Lynch.

The organization has significantly expanded with 40 employees, counseling and legal program services, and staff talked to 5,900 schoolchildren about healthy relationships and dating violence this year. This was in the hopes of catching violence earlier rather than later,

as the biggest predictor of abuse in adults is whether they have seen or suffered through domestic abuse as a child.

This past year, AWP served over 1,000 people in its counseling program. Its 24-hour hotline has experienced an uptick, with 6,000 calls this year compared to 4,300 in the previous year. In addition, this past year AWP has had 14,610 hours of volunteer service and there are currently 168 active volunteers in the organization.

“The fact that we are busier than ever 45 years later is a problem. It’s just the pandemic has really highlighted how much of a problem it really is,” said Lynch. She mentioned it takes about eight times for somebody to permanently leave their abuser. “I want to cut that cycle.”

In the future, Frantz hopes to see a transitional housing that would help women gain independence and own something of their own. She currently works in the disability field and wishes for more work focused on helping the disabled who also are victims of domestic violence, often by caregivers who act as partners.

“The biggest one is there would be, of course, no domestic violence,” said Frantz. “But in lieu of that, I think a transitional housing and ownership program for women, education, helping people get jobs that pay well that will help support families.”

If you or someone you know who is a victim of domestic violence, please call A Woman's Place hotline at 1-800-220-8116