



My Sister's Place
2001

Mission

My Sister's Place is an interactive community committed to eradicating domestic violence. We provide safe, confidential shelter, programs, education, and advocacy for battered women and their children. Our goal is to empower women to take control of their own lives. The following principles guide the MSP community and are the foundation upon which our programs are built.

Guiding Principles

1. We are committed to providing accessible services to battered women and their children.
2. We believe that the provision of services is only a band-aid solution to a problem with much greater social impact.
3. We are committed to assisting women to acquire the information, resources and skills they need to move beyond violent situations and into healthy, safe, self-sufficient environments.
4. We believe in the empowerment of women. By this we mean that we encourage self-determination and self-sufficiency for all women. We are committed to helping women understand the systems and processes that affect our situations. With a heightened understanding, we hope we will be able to grow in our awareness and self-determination.
5. We strive to share in a dynamic process that transforms us from victims into survivors. Survivors are not static victims of a disease, syndrome, or psychological illness.
6. We recognize that violence in all forms is a destructive force in our society. Violence is not only a crime but a violation of basic human rights.
7. We believe that relationship violence stems from a systematic inequality in the distribution of power.
8. We believe violence against women is rooted in sexism. It is not only an individual survivor's problem, but one that fundamentally affects society as a whole, and is, in various ways, an institutionalized form of oppression.
9. We must work within our communities to change attitudes and institutions that support violence against women and their children. We will encourage and support grassroots activism to create a society where feminism, womanism, equality and peace will flourish for the good of all.
10. We believe in sisterhood of women and promote unity among those who seek to end all forms of oppression. In our work, we strive to affect broad social change through community education, outreach, and coalition building.
11. We believe in the empowerment of staff and volunteers as part of our mission. By this we mean that we work with staff and volunteers as a part of our personal and professional growth in our organization. We support staff and volunteer development and the acquisition of self-management skills.

(Adopted July 12, 1994)

In 1999, more than 790,000 people were injured by acts of intimate-partner violence. Eighty-five percent of the attacks were against women, and included 1,218 murders, 91,470 rapes and sexual assaults, 68,810 aggravated assaults and 444,860 simple assaults.

— U.S. Department of Justice, 2001.

SOS

Latino Outreach

A Latina woman who finds herself physically and emotionally abused faces a daunting challenge. Her financial resources may be poor, her knowledge of the American language and legal system limited, and her loyalties to family, and husband, ingrained in her upbringing. Where does she turn?

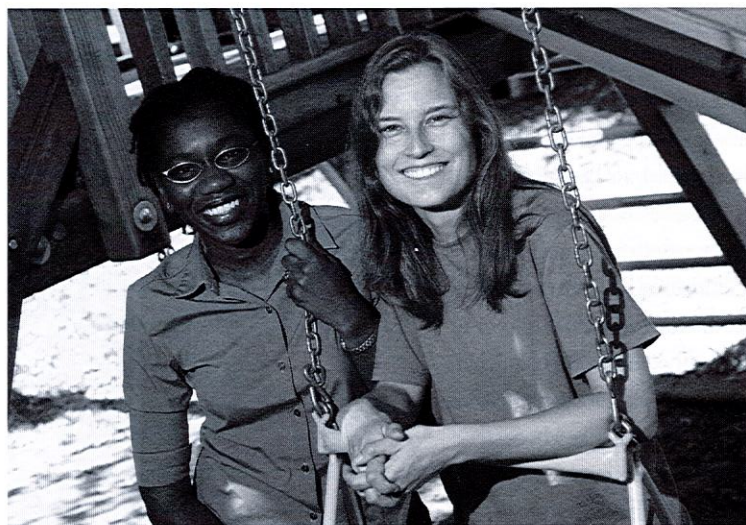
She can turn to El Hogar de Mi Hermana, as My Sister's Place is known in Spanish. But she might not ever know of it without the hard work of Silvia Diaz, a native of El Salvador, who runs our Latino Outreach program. Silvia's presence is felt throughout the Latino community. At health fairs, festivals, community meetings, school events, youth centers, and on Spanish-language radio and television, Silvia is there getting out the MSP message that help is available, and that Hispanic women have options. With Silvia's help, the Latino population, in her words, "is listening—we are educating the community."

In downtown Washington sits a small suite of offices, plus a bright and colorful children's play therapy center, where women and their children can get free professional counseling and advice about domestic violence. This is the Supporting Our Survivors Center of My Sister's Place, and it is a vital part of the spectrum of MSP services.

Some of the women and children from the shelter come here for counseling, as do women in the transitional housing program, or survivors who have gone through both programs and who are now out on their own. Many women come to SOS after a referral by the Hotline. But mainly SOS is a place where women who cannot get into the shelter, or who are still living with their abuser, can get help. Here they learn about domestic violence, attend group meetings with other survivors, and get professional therapy and counseling.

Amy Mudd and Schwanna Cockerham-Qualls are the SOS Center's two counselors. Each of them has about 20 clients at any one time, and the women cut across all ages, incomes and ethnic backgrounds. Not long ago, a woman in her 80s called SOS seeking help after being abused in her late-in-life relationship. Another woman came in saying that her boyfriend had broken her arm, and given her a black eye, yet she wasn't sure whether she was experiencing domestic violence.

Children also come to SOS. The youngest ones may not be articulate enough to express all that they are feeling. But they can act out what they see, and what they feel, using play-therapy techniques such as



SOS counselors Schwanna Cockerham-Qualls and Amy Mudd

sandboxes with toy dinosaurs and animals, and doll-houses with furniture and characters. Children can be hurt terribly by domestic violence, but SOS counselors can see results pretty fast. "Children are more resilient, they can heal pretty quickly," Amy says.

But for adults, it is sometimes harder. Many women who come to SOS have decided, for now, to stay with their abuser. My Sister's Place counselors never judge whether that decision is right or wrong. Each woman must make that choice for herself. But, as always, MSP counselors get women to think about options. "For some people, staying is the safest choice," explains Amy. Leaving an abuser can trade one kind of anxiety for another. Some abusers become stalkers, and a woman who has left her abuser has no idea when, or where, the next attack will come. At least at home she knows where he is, and from where the attack may come, and she may be in a position to protect her children.

Still, knowing that their clients are not in the safety and sanctuary of a shelter is difficult for Amy and Schwanna. Says Amy: "It's hard to be afraid for a client's life; you don't know if you'll see them next week."

Jan's Story

"Why did you marry him, then?" was one question I was asked by several therapists. It was their standard response to stories of verbal and emotional abuse by my husband. I always left therapy feeling worse than when I went in. I've been to several therapists—sometimes alone and sometimes with my husband for "couples counseling." I was always to blame. I was addicted to the abuse; I was prolonging it because of my emotional outbursts; I must be getting something out of it because I put up with it.

None of them understood me or my situation at all. I didn't "put up with it," I just didn't know how to stop it effectively. It's not like I'm a wallflower and I never spoke up. Nothing ever worked.

Eventually I just spoke up less and less because of the pain it always caused me. I never got what I was seeking, which was understanding of my feelings. I finally made an appointment and went for my first visit to the SOS Center at My Sister's Place. I was hesitant, a bit

defensive, and on-guard for the familiar condescending questions, assumptions, and advice. I honestly cannot say what I expected, but what I found was nothing short of miraculous for me. At the end of my very first session I felt enormous relief. My counselor was patient with me and understood that this was a difficult and scary step I had taken, but she was not patronizing; she wasn't feeling sorry for me, like I was some poor, pathetic woman who had let herself be abused. It was quite the opposite.

She let me know right away that she respected me, and that she was not there to judge me, or my husband. The therapist at MSP, upon hearing how there were times I just didn't want to go on, first asked me if I was suicidal. When I assured her I was not, she said that my feelings were perfectly normal for a person in my situation, and those feelings were not unusual. We didn't dwell on them; she validated my feelings, and then we went on. Amazing! I was so relieved!

Relieved I wasn't told my feelings were bad; relieved that my feelings were normal; and relieved that I didn't have to dwell on them, so that I could talk more about other things.

All I know is, I never felt better coming away from my therapy sessions. I always do when I leave MSP, and that is not an exaggeration.

I hit rock bottom and I was drained emotionally and economically. By reaching out for help from My Sister's Place, I found a ladder that is taking me upward. I finally can see a glimmer of hope, and I am climbing.

At My Sister's Place:
I didn't have to defend my husband—they understand that I love him. I didn't have to defend myself—they know why I've stayed. I didn't have to make excuses—they know why I get hysterical sometimes, why I can't take out the trash some days. I blamed myself for the abuse—they didn't let me.

After breaking the cycle of violence in my life, through a hard and worthwhile personal journey, and with the unconditional support of my friends, family, and the community, I can truly say life is marvelous! By joining forces with powerful and kind organizations, such as My Sister's Place, I have been blessed with the opportunity to empower others on their path to a beautiful and safe life. In turn this has reinforced my belief that women can live a great, healthy, happy, and productive life, without violence. Thank you My Sister's Place, and God bless.

—Pamela Passaretta,
a domestic violence
survivor, and now MSP
Community Education
volunteer

Education

Lipstick Liberation

A lipstick drops into a handbag. An emery board slips into a side pocket of a purse. They appear to be everyday items of no consequence, not worth noticing by an abuser who tries to control all aspects of a woman's life. Yet these beauty tools can be a lifeline for a woman abused. As part of MSP's Beauty Salon Project, at salons all over Washington, nail files printed with the Hotline number are handed out. Equally innovative are the MSP lipsticks—20,000 empty lipstick casings into which tiny printed scrolls are inserted (by MSP volunteers) with information in English and Spanish about domestic violence, options for women considering leaving their abusers, and advice on how to devise a safety plan. In this way, a traditional place of women's gathering and sanctuary is used to deliver the message that help is available for women in abusive relationships. That is the MSP difference.

To prevent domestic violence, people have to know what it is. People who may be in contact with abused women—and women themselves—need to understand the destructiveness of domestic violence, recognize its signs, and know where to go for help. Making people aware is the job of the Community Education Program of My Sister's Place.

Making this education effort happen—or more properly, empowering others to make it happen—are Suzanne Marcus and Caitlin Finnegan, the two women who co-direct the program. Unless you have participated in one of Suzanne and Caitlin's domestic violence workshops, you probably haven't gotten the MSP difference. These two women personify commitment to social justice, and to changing the world, a little at a time, through education. Suzanne and Caitlin do not teach or instruct—

that's too much about power and control. No, they "facilitate"—they make learning easy by eliciting from their workshop participants the knowledge they may already have, or suspect, about domestic violence. And they, along with the dozens of Speaker's Bureau volunteers they have trained, are educating thousands of people in the Washington area about warning signs, the cycle of violence, why women stay or go, safety plans, same-sex partner domestic violence, and what women and men can do to reduce this social ill. More than 100 workshops, information sessions, and other programs were led last year by the Community Education department.

Some of this education effort is aimed at professionals who will likely see signs of domestic violence throughout their careers—police and probation officers, nurses and doctors, human resource managers, religious workers, and social service providers.

The Community Education Program, for example, most recently began a groundbreaking program with Malcolm Grow Medical Center at Andrews Air Force Base to train health-care professionals there about domestic violence. This program is a first for the Department of Defense.

But much of this education effort is aimed at women and young people who may themselves encounter domestic violence. Workshops are conducted in prisons, halfway houses, substance recovery programs, youth groups and in area high schools. Making this training hit home are those Speakers' Bureau volunteers who themselves are former shelter residents and survivors of domestic violence. They bring an unforgettable voice of experience, and pain, to the workshops. When people leave a workshop facilitated by Suzanne or Caitlin or their trained volunteers, they do not soon forget it. "It's not what we do," Suzanne explains, "it's how we do it."



Suzanne Marcus and Caitlin Finnegan, co-directors of Community Education

Volunteers

As a new volunteer at My Sister's Place, one of the things you notice in the very first encounter with members of the staff is an almost indefinable sense of welcoming and warmth, of caring. Most volunteers experience this in what is known colloquially around MSP as "DV-101" – Domestic Violence 101 – the introductory two-day workshop that all new volunteers must take so they are knowledgeable about the issue.



Ali-Sha Pemberton, Volunteer Coordinator

Because of the talents of Ali-Sha Pemberton, MSP's volunteer coordinator, and the other workshop presenters, after two days of training new volunteers leave with a solid grounding in the history and purposes of the battered women's movement, and the causes and consequences of domestic violence. But volunteers also leave with something else—feeling like they have just become a part of a whole new family of dedicated, talented people working hard to address a major societal ill.

At any one time My Sister's Place has about 75 active volunteers. And, unique to many charities, MSP volunteers tend to stay for the long term. MSP asks for a one-year commitment and most do that, and longer. The volunteers are also diverse. They are young and old, black and white, men and women, gay and straight, students and professionals, secretaries and teachers, artists and accountants. Many are themselves survivors of domestic violence, or relatives of those who did not survive. They hail from many different countries and backgrounds. In one recent training for Speaker's Bureau volunteers, the group included people born in Panama, Algeria, Iran, El Salvador and Great Britain. One MSP volunteer is a Dutch citizen working in her country's embassy here.

What the volunteers do is, well, everything. They conduct workshops for Community Education. They help staff the Hotline. They help raise money by contacting donors, planning fundraisers, and helping with research grants. So many volunteers are on board now for the Children's Program, that each child in the shelter has his or her own personal tutor. "We couldn't do half the work we do without our volunteers," Ali-Sha says.

Volunteers enjoy their time at My Sister's Place because they know, and can feel, that the staff genuinely believes and practices the philosophy of empowerment. "Our volunteers are not regarded as 'other,' they are part of 'we,'" says Ali-Sha. Volunteers see that they are allowed to learn and to grow, just as the women and children in the shelter are. Volunteers know that they are giving, but getting something too.

"I always feel good recruiting volunteers for My Sister's Place," Ali-Sha says. "Even though the training process is long and takes some time to get up to speed, volunteers always find it worthwhile and say they find it a challenging and rewarding experience that they daily cherish."

I volunteer with My Sister's Place because it is a way for me to deal with the pain and anger I have felt experiencing and witnessing domestic violence and relationship abuse. MSP nurtures its volunteers' creativity and leadership skills. It enabled me to gain the experience to speak in front of a group of people on issues about which I felt deeply passionate. I was never confident speaking in front of people, but the Speakers Bureau training helped me to find that voice. It has helped me to grow as a feminist and an activist.

—Katy

When I came to MSP, I was shocked at how little I knew about domestic violence. I also realized that I don't have to be a survivor of domestic violence to know that it is not right, or to be able to do something about it.

—Anna

Clothesline

"The Clothesline makes you want to cry, especially when you read about a baby being hurt, or someone being sexually assaulted by someone in their family. A lot of girls are being abused and are stuck in relationships that they can't get out of because of abuse."

"I have two words to describe what I saw: heart and bravery. They didn't let domestic violence hold them back from gaining something in life. Even though it was a setback, they had the bravery to endure all the hurt and pain, and they bounced back stronger than ever."

—Student comments at Eastern High School after seeing the Clothesline

Sometimes, to clean up a society, you have to air its dirty laundry. And that is the aim of the Clothesline Project of My Sister's Place. Women and children survivors of domestic violence, incest, and sexual abuse—or the family members and friends of women who did not survive—paint and decorate T-shirts with their own testimony about the effects of abuse on their lives. The shirts are then hung in public spaces on a clothesline as both art and a plea to society to notice what is all around us.

In the past year the Clothesline has been displayed in more than 20 locations around the Washington area, including hospitals, courthouses, government buildings, art galleries, high schools, and outdoor fairs. It is another way that My Sister's Place delivers a message, and makes a difference.

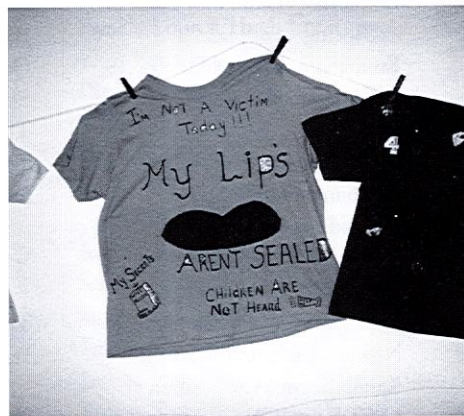
The AIDS Quilt inspired the idea for The Clothesline Project. Both projects use art to bring a personal perspective to the grave statistics of deadly epidemics. The Clothesline Project uses an aspect of what traditionally was "women's work" as a medium to get a message across. Carol A. Chichetto, one of the Clothesline Project's founders, explains: "Doing the laundry has always been considered women's work, and in the days of close-knit neighborhoods, women often exchanged

information over backyard fences while hanging their clothes out to dry. The concept of the Clothesline Project was simple: Let each woman tell her own story in her own unique way. It was, and is, a way of airing society's dirty laundry."

Members of the Cape Cod Women's Agenda founded The Clothesline Project in 1990. Across a village green, the group displayed 31 T-shirts designed by women survivors. Viewers of the display added their T-shirts to the line and the Clothesline Project expanded. There are now more than 300 Clothesline Projects worldwide, with an estimated 35,000 to 50,000 shirts.

The Clothesline Project is unique in that it provides healing opportunities for survivors of gender-based violence while serving to prevent further violence through greater awareness. The Clothesline Project is an extremely powerful display that no one walks away from unchanged.

The compelling stories and the large number of shirts make it impossible for viewers to dismiss violence against women as exaggerated or unimportant. For anyone who does not believe that violence against women is a serious problem, just 10 minutes spent reading the shirts will convince them otherwise.



Staff



*Standing: left to right, Amy Mudd, Vivian Peyton, Schwanna Cockerham-Qualls, Silvia Diaz, Angela Rude, Judith Bennett Sattler, Patricia Merrill, Suzanne Marcus, Ali-Sha Pemberton, and Caitlin Finnegan
Sitting: Betty Olmeda and Arnita Green-Williams*

Staff

Judith Bennett Sattler: *Executive Director*

Nancy Bednar: *Weekend Counselor*

Doreen Blake: *Hotline Counselor*

Karen Butler: *Weekend Counselor*

Schwanna Cockerham-Qualls: *SOS Counselor*

Toni Chavers: *Weekend Counselor*

Jonetta Dale: *Weekend Counselor*

Silvia Diaz: *Latino Outreach Coordinator*

Caitlin Finnegan: *Community Education Co-Director*

Arnita Green-Williams: *Shelter Program Director*

Joyce Henderson: *Overnight Counselor*

Deborah Madden: *Weekend Counselor*

Suzanne Marcus: *Community Education Co-Director*

Patricia Merrill: *House Manager*

Shauna Miller: *Development Associate*

Amy Mudd: *SOS Counselor*

Betty Olmeda: *Finance & Operations Manager*

Ali-Sha Pemberton: *Volunteer Coordinator*

Vivian Peyton: *Office Assistant*

Angela Rude: *Children's Program Coordinator*

Rhonda Thompson: *Weekend Counselor*

Ronelle Tutt: *Weekend Counselor*

Christina Vetter: *Children's Program Assistant*

Board of Directors

Michael Podhorzer

Amy Allina

Shelia Clark

Sarah Fogarty

Elizabeth Fowler

Erin Goldstein

Desmond Hogan

Tonya Holland

Dan Knise

Maya MacGuineas

Jean M. Robinson

JoAn Taylor

Anne Valentine

Lauren Vaughan