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The History of Vera House: Planting Seeds: Expanding Roots

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Introduction: Turning the Soil

What builds a movement? What is the root word of "movement"? Move. Where do we move? How do we move? Whom do we move? If a movement is based on motion, who are the movers? Extraverts? Introverts? Schoolteachers? Students? Pastors? Congregations? The Rich? The Poor? What causes us to move? Are movements based on good feelings such as happiness, security, and gratification? Or are they based on bad feelings such as anger, fear, shock, frustration, or sadness? Move. How long does it take to get a movement in motion? Do movements happen in the moment, or do they build until they can't remain stationary any longer? Once movements are in motion, have they moved enough to achieve their goal? And what *is* their goal? Is it change? If it is change, what indicates that change has occurred? Is change big or small? Move. Change. Does movement towards change ever stop or does change

evolve? If change evolves, what happens to the movement? Does it evolve into another movement? Move. Change. Evolve. Movements.

Looking at movements as processes and as ever-evolving makes it possible to understand the formation of the Battered Women's Movement. For example, the Women's Liberation Movement and the Anti-rape Movement functioned as the foundation of the Battered Women's Movement. Both movements brought about what Susan Schechter, in *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement*, calls, "...an atmosphere where women could understand and speak about battering."¹ Before the efforts of the women's liberation and Anti-Rape Movements, women could seldom name the violence they were experiencing in their homes.² As participants in these two movements worked to provide a voice for women, the Battered Women's Movement formed in the 1970's to reclaim the right for women to be safe in their homes.

What gave these women and service providers the strength to address issues such as battering and rape? Many argue it was the rise of feminism.³ Feminist ideology emerged in the mid-sixties when women began to argue that they should no longer be subordinate to men. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which

¹Susan Schechter. *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 33.

²Schechter, 36.

³R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash. *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against Patriarchy* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 1-13; Del Martin. *Battered Wives* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1976), 6-8; Schechter, 1-8.

named the dissatisfaction American⁴ women had with their prescribed roles in society. Friedan talked about it as "the problem with no name."⁵ She began exploring the feelings of depression, exhaustion, emptiness, and boredom that women were reporting in the early 1960's.⁶ Through her exploration, she noticed that women were having little contact with the outside world. Many women were isolated within their homes, feeling as though their lives were full of busy meaningless work.⁷ One woman called it, "Humdrum."⁸ It was the sense that they were always being something for somebody, but never themselves.⁹

Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicians or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. Some women, in their forties and fifties, still younger women no longer even thought about them. A thousand new expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from

⁴ This is in reference to Friedan's commentary on American society throughout pp. 15-32.

⁵ Betty Friedan. The Feminine Mystique (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1963), 15-32.

⁶ Friedan, 20-21.

⁷ Friedan, 17-20.

⁸ Friedan, 27.

⁹ Friedan, 28.

earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.¹⁰

Friedan concluded that, contrary to common belief, women *did* want careers and higher education and ways to step out of what she termed "occupation: housewife."¹¹ Once Friedan began identifying the "problem that had no name," she took action. In 1964, she developed the National Organization *for* Women, NOW. Friedan intentionally created the organization on behalf of women in hopes that men would be equal participants. She drafted the first purpose statement on a napkin. It stated that the organization would commit itself to "*take action* to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities therefore, in truly equal partnership with men."¹² She knew that working towards equality with men would include, "...restructur[ing] professions, marriage, the family, and the home."¹³ In terms of housework, it would mean that "child rearing would have to be more equally shared by husband, wife, and society."¹⁴ The change that Friedan envisioned was a radical shift of the gender roles in American society.

By the late 1960's or early 1970's, feminism split into two branches. The first branch focused on women's rights and was

¹⁰ Friedan, 15-16.

¹¹ Friedan, 43.

¹² Friedan, 384.

¹³ Friedan, 385.

¹⁴ Ibid.

referred to as *liberal feminism*. Liberal feminists were concerned with the individual rights of women.¹⁵ Activists within this branch were men *and* women and often members of NOW.¹⁶ They worked toward ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment in order to achieve identical status for women and men through law.¹⁷ William Chafe, the author of *The Road to Equality*, wrote of liberal feminists: "Integration, not separation, and reform, not revolution, were its goals."¹⁸

On the other end of the spectrum, *radical feminists* embraced a broader scope of female activism. Chafe described the radical feminists as, women who "wanted to change society by acting collectively to attack the *roots* of women's oppression."¹⁹ Radical feminists believed that the cause of female inferiority was patriarchy within the economic, social, and cultural institutions of society.²⁰ Chafe summarized, "If male dominated institutions and values were the problem, women must develop their own institutions—reflecting their own values—and make these the cornerstone independence." He continued, "Radical feminists thus devoted much of their energy to building woman-defined and woman-run structures."²¹

Both Chafe and Schechter argued that the development of women-run projects contributed to the formation of the anti-rape and

¹⁵ Chafe, 554.

¹⁶ Chafe, 554-556.

¹⁷ Chafe, 555.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Chafe, 556.

Battered Women's Movement.²² An example of such a project was the Rape Crisis Center, which was established to provide services for women who had been victims of sexual violence. As Rape Crisis Centers emerged throughout the United States, a movement began. By the mid-1970's, women had organized the Anti-Rape Movement and were fighting to reclaim the sexual rights they had over their bodies. Locally, the Rape Crisis Center of Syracuse, New York, was opened by a group of volunteers in 1974.²³ Schechter attributed three characteristics of the Anti-Rape Movement to the development of the Battered Women's Movement. The Anti-Rape Movement:

1. Articulated that violence is a particular form of domination based on social relationships of unequal power,
2. Clarified that violence is one mechanism of social control, and
3. Changed women's consciousness and redefined the parameters of what women would individually and collectively tolerate."²⁴

Schechter argued, "Such work handed ideological tools, collective work structures, and political resources to the Battered Women's Movement."²⁵

²² Chafe, 556. Schechter, 33.

²³ Vera House Archives. Pamphlet on the Rape Crisis Center of Syracuse, Inc.

²⁴ Schechter, 34. (Based on the author's interview with Frieda Kline.)

²⁵ Schechter, 43.

The term "battered woman" did not enter the American vocabulary until roughly 1974. That year, Erin Pizzey published *Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear*, the first work to be written on battered women.²⁶ Pizzey's book discussed the British Battered Women's Movement and the development of Chiswick Women's Aid in England. The second chapter of her book, called "A Man's Home is His Castle," introduced a "catch 22" that prevented battered women from leaving their homes: "If the women put up with violence its assumed they like it. In reality, they stay and put up with it because they have nowhere else to go. Because they stay and put up with it they are assumed to like it and so they are blocked from finding somewhere else to go."²⁷ Pizzey was among the first to name the issue of domestic violence and present a solution. As Americans read her work, they gained new insight about the cycle of abuse and lack of resources available to battered women in the United States.

By 1976, Del Martin had published *Battered Wives*, one of the first American books written on battered women. Schechter reflected that Martin's book provided information that explained and legitimized the Battered Women's Movement. She wrote, "Del Martin's *Battered Wives* became a major source of information and validation for the movement. It legitimated the view, already put forward by local feminist shelters, that violence against women was caused by

²⁶ Schechter, 16.

²⁷ Erin Pizzey. *Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear* (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), 37.

sexism."²⁸ Martin's book explored the problems with the nation's response to domestic violence. She began to critique the legal, judicial, and police response to domestic violence. Martin examined the ways sex-roles and stereotyping perpetuated male violence. In short, Martin introduced battering as a social issue that was a part of American life and that needed to be addressed through systematic change.²⁹

As the Battered Women's Movement gained momentum, a wave of activity to address domestic violence swept across the United States. Such activity included the formation of ad-hoc committees, task forces, coalitions, crisis lines, and shelters.³⁰ Each of these projects had one goal: to end domestic violence and provide refuge for women harmed by their partners.³¹

This thesis will track the history of Vera House, Inc., an agency located in Syracuse, New York, that provides a wide range of sheltering and support services to individuals affected by domestic violence. Vera House was opened in 1977 by a group of concerned community members to house women in need of emergency assistance. It was the second shelter opened in Syracuse that provided beds for women.³² Initially, Vera House was not designed

²⁸ Schechter, 79.

²⁹ Martin, 87-141,44-70.

³⁰ Martin, 197-253.

³¹ Based on readings from Schechter 29, 69-73; Martin 197-253.

³² Vera House Archives. Black Binder. Proposal for Vera House: A Temporary Shelter for Women in Syracuse, New York. 1976.

specifically for battered women; however, as women continued to seek shelter, staff noticed the prevalence of women in shelter as a result to domestic violence. Vera House Board and staff members responded programmatically, becoming an agency dedicated to serving individuals affected by domestic violence. This thesis will outline the history of Vera House from its conception in 1973, through its opening in 1977, to its programmatic development over the years 1979-2000.

I have organized my thesis into two sections to reflect the development of Vera House as both a shelter and an agency. The first section, "Planting Seeds", covers the years 1973-1979 and tracks the grass-roots steps the Vera House Board took to establish a shelter for women in Syracuse. I introduce Sr. Mary Vera Blank, who was the visionary of Vera House. I discuss the formation of the founding Board, the roots of Vera House's name, the process of locating a shelter site, and the preliminary fundraisers that were established to raise money for the project. This section highlights many of the firsts for the agency such as the first grant and project proposals and the process of becoming an incorporated organization. I close by examining shelter life once Vera House opened and discuss the landmark decision for Vera House to extend its services to women with children.

The second section, "Expanding Roots," covers Vera House's history between the years 1984-2000. This section provides an

overview of the programs that emerged, which consequently transformed Vera House from a shelter into an agency. I begin this section with a brief overview of Vera House's relocation in 1984 and track the formation of the various programs that were established post-move, such as the Volunteer Program in 1985, the Domestic Violence Coalition in 1986, the Outreach and Advocacy Program in 1988, and the Alternatives to Domestic Violence Program for batterers in 1989. In addition to discussing programs, I outline the development of Vera House North, a shelter that was opened with the assistance of the Vera House Board in the Northwestern region of Onondaga County. Finally, I conclude this section with an overview of the programs that were established by the board and staff to work with children affected by domestic violence. Unlike the first section, which provides an ongoing narrative of the history of the shelter, the second section provides individual narratives for each program and its development. Thus, parts in the second section may be read independently from one another.³³

³³ See Appendix A for information on domestic violence.

Section I:

Vera House Plants a Seed: Building a Shelter

I. Sr. Mary Vera Blank

Urban ministry was Sr. Mary Vera Blank's mission when she came to Syracuse, New York, in 1965. With a degree in Social Work from Catholic University, Sr. Vera became the school social worker at St. Lucy's, an inner-city parish located on Syracuse's West Side.³⁴ St. Lucy's was a poor parish. Many of the children attending St. Lucy's came from families that had been uprooted by the urban renewal of the 1960's. The crime rate in the parish neighborhood was steadily increasing and families were very strained. Between the years 1971-1973, Sr. Vera began counseling mothers as part of her ministry. Through her counseling sessions, she discovered a large population of women who were victims of abuse in their homes. The women told

³⁴ Vera House Archives. Black Binder. Personal Account—"Vera House," Sr. Mary Vera Blank, 1980's.

stories of physically and verbally abusive husbands. Sr. Vera learned that often their children were the scapegoats of the abuse and she was deeply concerned. As Sr. Vera worked with the women, she would try to place them into shelters but, due to insufficient shelter space, she would fail.³⁵ Women, unlike men in the 1970's, did not have access to shelter resources. In Syracuse, the Salvation Army, with a capacity of eight beds, was the only shelter open to women in crisis.³⁶ Consequently, Sr. Vera often had to send women away with no resolution and no shelter.

In 1973, Sr. Vera formed a parish group of sisters who were engaged in parish ministry. The group met monthly to discuss issues related to urban ministry and offer support to one another.³⁷ Sr. Vera describes the parish group in a personal account she wrote in the 1980's.

We would discuss problems which we encountered and give support to each other and advice for their solution. However, these meetings became boring to me, and I suggested that we have a goal or objective. One sister asked, "What would be your goal?" And I immediately responded; "A shelter or Home for battered women," because during my forty years as a Social Worker I had come in contact with women who were, "Victims of Domestic Violence" seeking a night's lodging...at time went on we began to get serious about this objective. All the sisters in the group withdrew, excepting we three C.S.J.'s...Sr. Gloria DeCotis, Sr. Mary Jo Coleman, and myself.³⁸

³⁵ Author's Interview with Sr. Gloria DeCotis, Syracuse, New York. March 7, 2005.

³⁶ Vera House Archives, Black Binder. Proposal for Vera House: A Temporary Shelter for Women in Syracuse, New York. 1976.

³⁷ Author's Interview with Sr. Mary Jo Coleman, Syracuse, New York. March 2, 2005.

³⁸ Personal Account – "Vera House", Sr. Mary Vera Blank.

Sr. Gloria recalls, "There was a feeling we had to do something...but we didn't know how to because Sr. Vera was in a poor parish."³⁹ Sr. Vera did not know the politics of how to open a shelter, but she knew that women were in desperate need of one. Therefore, the three sisters concluded that they would devote their time to establishing a shelter for transient women in Syracuse.⁴⁰

II. The Ad-Hoc Committee

Sr. Vera wanted to get more people on board with the project to build a shelter for women in crisis. She first contacted her pastor, Fr. Theodore Sizing, to see if he would be interested in helping to open a shelter. Together, they began looking at houses in their parish, but none of them was suitable. Sr. Vera knew that in order for the project to be a success, she would need to get more people involved. She began approaching people with whom she had served on various Boards to see if it was interested in joining the project. In addition, Sr. Gloria and Sr. Mary Jo asked their colleagues to see if they could generate interest.⁴¹ All three sisters had success. In September 1974, an ad-hoc committee formed to research the need for an emergency shelter for women.⁴² The ad-hoc committee consisted of community members who dealt directly with human services and were constantly

³⁹ Interview with Sr. Gloria DeCotis.

⁴⁰ Personal Account – "Vera House", Sr. Mary Vera Blank.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See Appendix B for the names and occupations of those who served the ad-hoc committee for Vera House in 1974.

attempting to resolve shelter problems.⁴³ Several of the members of the committee had often attempted to resolve women housing problems and were unsuccessful. Over a six-month period, the committee met with various private and City/County organizations who had "considerable knowledge and expertise" in the field of women's shelters. Completing the meetings, the committee concluded that, "a temporary shelter for women was undeniably a community need; and that it should pursue ways and means of obtaining whatever was needed to secure a shelter."⁴⁴

III. The First Grant

Vera House received its first grant money for its development in 1975 to hire its first staff person. The committee agreed that developing a shelter was very demanding and required "daily input on the part of one person." In order to locate a shelter site, the committee created the position of a full-time project director to:

1. Identify an appropriate shelter site,
2. Develop a program,
3. Explore sources for funding, and
4. Research health and legal aspects related to the shelter's program.⁴⁵

⁴³ Vera House Archives. Black Binder. Vera House, Inc. 1976.

⁴⁴ Proposal for Vera House, 1976.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

The committee applied for a \$4,000 grant from the Office of Human Development to fund the director's salary. Human Development was run by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse and often provided grant money for inner-city projects such as the one proposed by the committee.⁴⁶ Sr. Vera, Sr. Gloria, and Sr. Mary Jo, wrote the grant around a dining room table in the fall 1975. Neither Sr. Gloria nor Sr. Vera knew anything about writing a grant proposal. Their inexperience was like that of the numerous women of the Battered Women's Movement across the United States who were applying for their first grants, taking out their first loans, and establishing their first mortgages.⁴⁷ Fortunately, Sr. Mary Jo had applied for numerous grants through Catholic Charities. Sr. Gloria recalls, " Mary Jo, she was smart, she had all the brains, so we let her lead us in the process." In the end the proposal was a success, and the Board received money to hire Marge Meggesto as the first research/project director of the shelter.

IV. Vera House Gets its Name

The exact date when Vera House got its name is unclear. Somewhere between September and October 1975, the ad-hoc committee took on the formal title of Vera House Board of Directors. Sr. Gloria recalled the meeting in 1975 when the Board voted on the committee's title. She remembered that in reference to the shelter's

⁴⁶ Author's Interview with Sr. Gloria DeCotis.

⁴⁷ Schechter, 75-77

name, Sr. Vera asked, "What are we going to call this?" Several committee members looked at each other recognizing Sr. Vera's dedicated work to the project and responded, "Well, Vera House."⁴⁸ Sr. Vera was humble, and such an idea did not suit her, but the Board unanimously voted in support of the name.⁴⁹ Everyone who voted on the name knew that it was Sr. Vera's vision that was making the shelter a reality; therefore, no name better suited the shelter than "*Vera House.*"

V. The First Project Proposal

By 1976, the Board drafted its first project proposal, culminating all of the objectives for Vera House. Through developing the project proposal, the Board began to formalize its plan to open a shelter. The proposal included preliminary statistics supporting the need for a women's shelter, a summary of the presenting problem, and the Board's projected plan for opening Vera House. In addition, the proposal summarized the purposes of the shelter as well as general information regarding the types of women who would come into shelter.⁵⁰

The proposal outlined that the Vera House would serve up to ten women who were eighteen years of age or older. These women were required to be independent from children, and without a record of psychiatric problems or substance abuse. In addition, the shelter

⁴⁸ Author's Interview with Sr. Gloria DeCotis.

⁴⁹ Author's Interview with Sr. Mary Jo Coleman.

⁵⁰ Proposal for Vera House, 1976.

would provide meals on a temporary basis and the necessary referrals to social, legal, and psychological services. The Board stated that shelter staff would "maintain a referral file of available community services" and "work with other community agencies to coordinate the offering and delivery of those services."⁵¹

VI. Incorporation

By the spring of 1976, the Board began the long and tedious process of incorporating, which would classify Vera House as a not-for-profit organization and increase its credibility. This made it easier for the organization to apply for the grant money necessary for Vera House's growth. In order to qualify, the Board had to clearly establish a need for its services in the community. This was a difficult process because there were very few statistics available to represent the population of women in need of shelter. In the 1970's, women did not regularly report the abuse they experienced in their homes. According to a study conducted by R. Emerson and Russell Dobash in the 1970's, a population of 109 women interviewed reported nearly 32,000 assaults they had experienced throughout their marriages. Of these assaults, only 517, less than two percent, were actually reported to the police.⁵² Locally, Syracuse agencies could only identify small numbers of women who requested emergency resources. The Board worked to collect all the data it could find. The Board used information from its

⁵¹ Ibid; See Appendix C for "purposes" and "general information" about Vera House outlined in Vera House's First Project Proposal, 1976.

⁵²Dobash, 164.

project proposal in addition to other community statistics to build a case strong enough to present an application for incorporation to the State Board of Social Welfare.⁵³

By June 1976, the Board began correspondence with the State Board of Social Welfare regarding the incorporation of Vera House. Within the month, the State Board told the Vera House Board that there was sufficient housing for adults in Syracuse, and that it needed to improve the documentation of the need before it could qualify for incorporation.⁵⁴ The Board responded by gathering numerous letters of support for the establishment of a shelter in Syracuse. These letters not only stated that there was a need for a shelter but also showed strong support for the mission of the Vera House Board. Later that month, the Board forwarded a report to Albany and awaited a response.

In August, the Board received notice from Social Welfare that Vera House was not under their jurisdiction and that the Board should explore the Department of Mental Hygiene. They contacted the Department of Mental Hygiene and once again struck out. Mental Hygiene responded in the same fashion by stating that Vera House were not under their jurisdiction and that it should reconnect with the Department of Social Welfare.⁵⁵ Frustrated at being shuffled from one

⁵³See Appendix D for a summary of the statistics listed in the Vera House's First Project Proposal, 1976.

⁵⁴Vera House Board Minutes-June 11, 1976.

⁵⁵Vera House Board Minutes-September 14, 1976.

jurisdiction to the next, the Board resubmitted its proposal to the State Board of Social Welfare. However, this time they had some success. In November, the Board amended its proposal one last time, and through two additional months of correspondence, Vera House was finally granted incorporated status by the State Board of Social Welfare on January 25, 1977.⁵⁶

VII. Finding a Shelter Site

In the fall of 1975, the Board launched its search for a shelter site. By October, through the dedicated work of Marge and the board, they had located three potential sites for purchase. Site costs ranged from \$9,500 to \$12,500.⁵⁷ As a newly formed board, it needed to generate a great deal of money to secure a site. The board immediately wrote to Sr. Joan Theresa Groth of St. Joseph's Provincial House, requesting financial support for the purchase of a shelter. Sr. Joan Theresa was the Provincial Superior of the Albany Province of the Sisters of St. Joseph, which often granted money to human service projects.⁵⁸ In January 1976, Sr. Joan Theresa replied to the Board with great enthusiasm for the project and offered the necessary funds to purchase a shelter.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Vera House Archives. Black Binder. Vera House, Inc. 1977.

⁵⁷ Vera House Archives. Red Binder. (Correspondence Section). Letter to Sr. Joan Theresa Groth, C.S.J. October 2, 1975.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Vera House Archives. Red Binder. (Correspondence Section). Letter from Sr. Joan Theresa Groth, C.S.J. January 15, 1976.

The site search progressed through mid-May. The Board decided that the three potential locations it had selected were not adequate for Vera House's needs. Problems with the buildings ranged from inadequate locations to renovations that would exceed the Board's budget.⁶⁰ The decision to reject the three sites raised a new and valuable question for the Board—just what were the structural requirements for the shelter site? The members of the board had worked a lot on determining the mission of the shelter, but they had not discussed the size and layout of the shelter. The Board resolved that a potential site had to include the following: a living room, dining room, office space, living quarters for the resident director, five bedrooms, and two baths.⁶¹

At the same meeting where the requirements were established, the Board began to look at a new site that had been offered as a donation. The facility was completely dilapidated and needed elaborate renovation; however, it had the functional qualities that the board was looking for.⁶² The Board was very interested in the site, but feared that the renovation costs would surpass the available funds. Sr. Gloria proposed, as a means for bypassing the elaborate renovation costs, that the Board connect with Syracuse Model Neighborhood Corporation (SMNC), which worked at renovating buildings for use as low-income housing. Sr. Gloria knew the director of SMNC, Peter

⁶⁰ Vera House Board Minutes- May 11, 1976.

⁶¹ Vera House Board Minutes- June 1, 1976.

⁶² Ibid.

White, and strongly believed that he would be interested in working with the Board.⁶³

The Board agreed to make a proposal to SMNC. Purchasing the shelter through SMNC had a lot of advantages for the Board. By alleviating the costs of renovating the facility, the Board was left with adequate funds to furnish the interior and pay staff once the shelter opened. In addition to reducing the cost of the site, partnership with SMNC freed the Board from long-term property costs and allowed it to consider relocation without financial restrictions.⁶⁴ The only disadvantage of working with SMNC was that the opening date for the shelter would be set back significantly. The Board had set a goal to have a functional shelter by October 1977. If it worked with SMNC, it would not be able to open until the spring, or even summer of 1977.⁶⁵ However, the financial benefit outweighed the time setback, and the Board agreed to have Sr. Gloria to contact Peter White.

In May 1976, Sr. Gloria called Peter White and said, "Peter I have an offer you can't refuse." She informed White of the project and bluntly stated, "We will give you the house, if you will just renovate it."⁶⁶

In the fall of 1976, the property was officially transferred to SMNC.⁶⁷ Peter White had been working closely with the Board to

⁶³ Author's Interview with Sr. Gloria DeCotis.

⁶⁴ Vera House Board Minutes- June 1, 1976.

⁶⁵ Vera House Board Minutes-June 22, 1976.

⁶⁶ Author's Interview with Sr. Gloria DeCotis.

⁶⁷ Vera House Archives, Red Binder (Correspondence Section). "Application for a special permit."

obtain information regarding zoning, building codes, and potential architects. The Board received notification that the shelter would have to adhere to the City Housing codes for determining the necessary renovations. In addition, the site would have to be re-zoned as a supervisory home in order to house unrelated adult women in a residentially zoned area.⁶⁸ Mr. Ellis, an architect provided by SMNC, joined the project and on January 18, bids opened to construction firms.⁶⁹ By the end of the month, a construction firm was selected and renovations began.

Part VIII. Raising Funds

The Board launched its first community-wide campaign in the spring of 1976 to generate funds for building the shelter. It wrote letters to congregations, and local organizations, both large and small, stating its mission and hopes for financial support.⁷⁰ Generally, if the organization or church had money to give, they supported the efforts of the committee in whatever financial way they could. No one could turn Sr. Vera down. Once people saw Sr. Vera, they would pull out their checkbooks and ask, "how much?"⁷¹ Rosemary Sloane, President of the founding Board, reflected in 1987, "All along, the people who knew Sr. Vera also knew that whatever she had a part in had integrity. So, they contributed money to an idea, before we had a house, even

⁶⁸ Vera House Board Minutes- September 28, 1976.

⁶⁹ Vera House Board Minutes-January 11, 1977.

⁷⁰ Vera House Archives. Red Binder, Correspondence Section.

⁷¹ Author's Interview with Sr. Gloria DeCotis.

before we were incorporated."⁷² Members of the religious community were highly sympathetic and contributed substantially.⁷³ Financial resources were slowly growing, however, the Board needed to generate a significantly larger sum before it could take on the task of building and furnishing the shelter.

In August of 1976, Fr. Theodore Sizing, a member of the Vera House Board, coordinated envelope drives at St. Anthony's and St. Lucy's, two Catholic parishes in Syracuse.⁷⁴ The drive was very successful, and it generated substantial funds for Vera House. After realizing the success of the drive in the two parishes, Fr. Sizing wrote a letter to the Bishop of Syracuse, Most Rev. David F. Cunningham, requesting permission to expand this project into other congregations. The Bishop responded to Fr. Sizing's request with approval, and agreed to send a letter to all of the pastors in Onondaga County to indicate his support for the envelope drive.⁷⁵ He wrote, "Vera House does merit, and is worth our support."⁷⁶ By September, over twenty congregations requested to participate in the envelope drive and, Fr.

⁷² Vera House Archives. Vera House News- Winter 1987.

⁷³ Vera House Archives- Red Binder (Correspondence Section). Funding Application Form. Indicates that \$10,850 of \$10,950 had been received from religious communities.

⁷⁴ Vera House Archives, Red Binder (Correspondence Section). Letter to the Board- July 23, 1976.

⁷⁵ Vera House Board Minutes- August 10, 1976.

⁷⁶ Vera House Archives, Black Binder, Letter "To All Pastors of Onondaga County," The Most Rev. David F. Cunningham, date unknown.

Sizing began to send envelopes on a monthly basis to registered congregations throughout the community.⁷⁷

As the envelope drive continued to grow, Fr. Sizing began working on a new financial drive called the "Friends" of Vera House. The membership drive was different from the envelope drive because it introduced the concept of annual donations to Vera House.⁷⁸ Fr. Sizing printed membership cards that Board members would give to groups or individuals interested in supporting Vera House.⁷⁹ Any interested community member could become a Friend of Vera House by donating five dollars per year.⁸⁰ In return, donors received copies of the Vera House news and were invited to various Vera House functions such as silver teas and open houses.⁸¹

By the spring of 1977, the Board began to budget for food supplies at the shelter. A monthly budget of \$1,000 was established. On average, this meant that each woman would eat for \$3.50 per day. In order to compensate for food costs, members of the board, Fr. Sizing and Fr. Theodore Schmitz, developed food teams to organize food donations for the shelter. Food teams consisted of five captains and over fifty volunteers located in Manlius, Camillus, and Onondaga

⁷⁷ Vera House Archives, Red Binder (Correspondence Section). "List of Churches in Onondaga County Requesting "Vera House" Envelopes and Card Insert. September 9, 1976.

⁷⁸ Vera House Board Minutes-November 9, 1976.

⁷⁹ Vera House Board Minutes- September 14, 1976.

⁸⁰ Vera House Board Minutes- April 12, 1977.

⁸¹ Silver Teas were held by the Board to raise money for the shelter; Vera House Board Minutes- April 12, 1977.

Hill, as well as at St. Andrew's and St. Lucy's.⁸² Due to limited funds, the shelter was very reliant on community donations to have adequate food supply at the shelter.⁸³

Part VIII. Interior Preparations

Once the shelter was under construction in early 1977, the Board began focusing on the details related to running the shelter. It determined the shelter's layout, budget, and staffing. Sr. Theresa Goudin, who had been hired as the shelter's resident supervisor, compiled a detailed list of furnishings and equipment that had been already collected for the shelter.⁸⁴ From that preliminary list, she developed a new inventory list of the items yet to be obtained. In March, the Board worked to find the necessary items by rummaging through garage sales and collecting donations from retailers and community members. Ann Tobin, a member of the Board, agreed to coordinate the notices of secured items from the Board.⁸⁵ Since it could not afford the actual cost of all the items needed for the shelter, soliciting donations was very important. The ideal budget for furnishing the shelter was set at \$2,000 and the actual cost for furnishing the shelter was over \$9,000.⁸⁶

Over the next few months, the Board worked toward allocating all of the necessary items for the shelter. The Board stored collected

⁸² Vera House Board Minutes- March 29, 1977; Vera House Board Minutes- May 10, 1977.

⁸³ Vera House Board Minutes- April 12, 1977.

⁸⁴ Vera House Board Minutes- January 11, 1977.

⁸⁵ Vera House Board Minutes-March 29, 1977.

⁸⁶ Vera House Archives. Black Binder. Furnishings and Equipment Budget.

items at the St. Lucy's.⁸⁷ SMNC informed the Board that the shelter would be ready in mid-May.⁸⁸ But as May approached, the board members received frustrating news. The Syracuse Fire Department notified them that before they could occupy the shelter, they had to purchase a special fire alarm box that was connected to the fire department.⁸⁹ In addition, the Board install the alarm and smoke detector system for the shelter before it could open.⁹⁰

By June, installation of the fire system was finished and the Board was able to move into the shelter. One month later, the shelter preparations were complete. On July 18, 1977, the Board held its first meeting there. Rosemary Sloane, the president of the Board welcomed everyone to the meeting with a warm heart and thanked the Board and staff for all of the work they had done to make Vera House a reality.⁹¹ No sooner than she finished her welcome, the Board continued with business as usual. This moment of accomplishment was overshadowed by all of the details that remained. Creating the shelter was fast paced; the Board members knew that although this was an accomplishment to be very proud of, the greatest rewards were still ahead of them.

⁸⁷ Vera House Board Minutes-May 10, 1977.

⁸⁸ Vera House Board Minutes-April 26, 1977.

⁸⁹ Vera House Board Minutes- May 10, 1977.

⁹⁰ Vera House Board Minutes-May 24, 1977.

⁹¹ Vera House Board Minutes- July 18, 1977.

Part X. Shelter Life

Vera House received its first client on July 19, 1977, and was staffed by a director, a social worker, two residence supervisors, and a secretary. For many of the founding Board members, seeing women safe at the shelter provided them with the greatest satisfaction for the work they had done. Sr. Mary Jo Coleman recalled, "The emotional experience, was when you saw the women in the shelter." She remembered seeing a woman in shelter with a halo around her head, which the woman received after her partner threw her down the stairs. When Sr. Mary Jo saw that women in shelter, she was able to recognize the significance of the work that Sr. Vera, Sr. Gloria, and she, the three founding sisters, had done in providing safety for women in crisis.⁹²

In December, the Board reviewed the statistics of those served since the shelter opened. Five months into the shelter's opening, it had served 59 women. Of them, 23 were considered appropriate (meaning they fit the profile of women served in the Board's project proposal), 27 inappropriate, and four specifically in need of housing. Of those who were inappropriate (not congruent with the profile set by the Board), 20 were under psychiatric care, two were alcoholics, one was considered "retarded," and one a minor.⁹³ From these statistics,

⁹² Author's Interview with Mary Jo Coleman.

⁹³ Vera House Board Minutes- December 12, 1977.

the Board realized that there needed to be a stricter screening and intake process for potential residents.

By February 1978, the Board developed and implemented a stricter screening policy that improved the ability for staff to hold residents accountable for their behavior. By implementing this policy, the Board granted the weekend staff authority to ask a woman who was admitted within the same weekend, to leave if she turned out to be inappropriate for shelter. However, if the woman was admitted during the week, and became disruptive during the weekend, the weekend staff would need to gain approval from Dyson, the director, before asking the woman to leave.⁹⁴ In addition, the Board refined its screening process to allow "on-the-spot judgments" if staff believed that a resident showed signs of current substance abuse or mental problems.⁹⁵

XI. Women with Children

As the Board was amending its screening procedures, it began to discuss the feasibility of expanding Vera House's services to include women with children. In April, members of the board commented that there was a lot of new legislation advocating for the care of children. The Board resolved that it would develop a committee to research the parameters for including children at Vera House.⁹⁶ One month later, the Board began to discuss the issue. Board members had mixed feelings about serving women with children. Support for the change

⁹⁴ Vera House Board Minutes- February 14, 1978.

⁹⁵ Vera House Board Minutes- April 18, 1978.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

was split down the middle. At a Board meeting held in May 1978, four letters were submitted during a Board meeting; two were in support of admitting women with children, and two were against.⁹⁷

By September, the Board decided that it would pursue the necessary steps to admit women with children into shelter. The Board's lawyer, David Pellow, drafted a memorandum regarding the amendment of Vera House's existing Certificate of Incorporation. In the amendment, Pellow clarified that the Board would need to obtain an operating certificate from the State Department of Social Services in order to qualify as a special care home.⁹⁸ Within three months, the Board completed their application for a state license change, and they submitted it to the state for consideration by the close of January 1979.⁹⁹

The process of amending Vera House's Certificate of Incorporation continued some time. In July 1979, seven months after Vera House applied for their state license change, the Board was finally granted status to provide shelter for women with children. Once granted approval, the Board hired a day care coordinator and amended the rules and regulations for providing service to children. By August, one month after the shelter began admitting women with children, the staff noticed an increase in the number of women seeking

⁹⁷ Vera House Board Minutes- May 16, 1978.

⁹⁸ Vera House Board Minutes - September 19, 1978.

⁹⁹ Vera House Board Minutes, Executive Director's Report - January 15, 1979.

shelter as a result of domestic violence.¹⁰⁰ There seemed to be a correlation between the severity of domestic violence cases entering shelter and Vera House's newly implemented policy to serve women with children.

Sr. Gloria DeCotis recalled seeing a mother rocking her baby in a rocking chair at the shelter after it opened. In her memory, the mother looked as though she had a lot of comfort. She was in a good rocking chair, and her baby was dressed in new comfortable clothing. Sr. Gloria knew that Vera House had provided the comfort for the mother, and that moment of recollection made the process of establishing the shelter very meaningful for her.¹⁰¹

By 1979, "Vera House" had made its mark. The shelter had come to symbolize a place of comfort and safety for women and children seeking refuge. The founding Board had persevered through several obstacles to secure a site, raise adequate funds, and incorporate an organization that was devoted to sheltering women in crisis. What was striking about the founding Board was that no obstacle seemed too big to overcome. Each challenge was met with a new solution. By 1979, the seeds had been planted; Vera House staff and Board members were no longer going to remain idle about the issue of domestic violence and the solutions that lie ahead.

¹⁰⁰ Vera House Board Minutes- August 13, 1979.

¹⁰¹ Author's Interview with Sr. Gloria DeCotis.

Section II:

Expanding Roots: Vera House Develops Programs and Services

I. Vera House Relocates

During the early 1980's Vera House¹⁰² underwent significant growing pains. As the only shelter providing services for battered women, Vera House did not have adequate space to meet the needs of clients. In 1982 alone, Vera House had to turn away 279 women and 370 children, due to lack of space.¹⁰³ Not only was there a need for more beds, but there was also a need for space to hold confidential meetings with residents. Vera House staff provided very intimate services, and stressed the necessity to have space available for women to disclose information and discuss their presenting problems

¹⁰² The use of "Vera House" in this section refers to the collective work of the agency including staff, board and coalition members.

¹⁰³ Vera House Archives. Scrapbook. News Article. Jeff Shea. "Vera House Outgrowing Home Plans to buy...", 1983.

with counselors.¹⁰⁴ As a result, the Board and staff decided that it was necessary to relocate into a larger shelter that could accommodate the needs of residents and allow for programmatic growth.

Vera House was very fortunate in locating its second shelter site. In 1983, the agency purchased a 27-bed facility for the nominal fee of \$85,000.¹⁰⁵ Preparations for the second shelter were much easier than for the first. The site was already zoned for the use of unrelated women, and did not require extensive renovations.¹⁰⁶ The relocation was funded, in part, by a 30,000 dollar federal Jobs Bill grant designed to help fight nationwide unemployment. Other funding for the relocation came from state grants and contributions from community foundations.¹⁰⁷

Moving into the second shelter was extremely rushed. Just when the renovations were near complete for the second shelter, the first shelter caught fire. A television set exploded, causing enough smoke and fire damage to render the first shelter unusable. None of the residents were harmed; however, they were shook by the event. According to an article published in the *Post Standard's* local section, "The Red Cross was on the scene to help residents find alternative housing until the new house [was] ready for occupancy."¹⁰⁸ Many of

¹⁰⁴ Author's Interview with Sally Berry. March 23, 2005.

¹⁰⁵ Vera House Archives. Scrapbook. Penny Sori, "Good Neighbors Needed."

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Sally Berry.

¹⁰⁷ Vera House Archives. Scrapbook. News Article. Patricia Cappon, "Council to Vote on Fed Funds," 1983.

¹⁰⁸ Vera House Archives. Scrapbook. News Article. Johnathan Bor, "Battered Women's Shelter Hit By Fire," Post Standard, 4 March 1984.

the items in the first shelter were damaged from smoke. Those that remained unharmed were transferred to the new facility.¹⁰⁹ Fortunately for staff and residents, they were able to fully complete the move one week after the fire and before long they were up and running in their new facility.¹¹⁰

Section II. Coordinating Volunteers

Once the shelter relocated in 1984, Vera House became increasingly dependent on the work of volunteers. To address their concern that the shelter maintain its homelike and intimate feel, Vera House needed to increase the amount of help it had around the shelter. The agency had always relied heavily on volunteers as donors through the food team program and other various fundraisers; however, the role of a volunteer was often disconnected from shelter life to avoid direct contact with clients. When the Volunteer Program began in 1984, Vera House volunteers took on a new role: a role that engaged them directly with residents and children. That year, Vera House hired a Volunteer Coordinator to facilitate the Volunteer Program and train fifteen volunteers to work with victims of domestic violence.¹¹¹

Initially, the volunteers had to go through a weekend-long training session to gain information about the agency and learn the dynamics of domestic violence. "Training included information on

¹⁰⁹ Author's Interview with Sally Berry.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Vera House Archives. Vera House News. "A New Volunteer Program." Summer, 1985.

domestic violence, agency routine, and communication skills and law enforcement." ¹¹² As the number of programs provided at Vera House increased, the training process became more extensive. The new procedure for training volunteers prepared volunteers to work independently with clients. Volunteers were required to apply for participation in the Volunteer Program. There were three parts to the application process: attend an orientation session on Vera House, complete an application form, and participate in a group interview. The Volunteer Coordinator wanted to assure that the potential volunteers were free from personal crisis due to domestic violence, substance abuse, or any other critical event. ¹¹³

The responsibilities of the volunteers were broken into two categories: direct and indirect services. In direct services, volunteers came in direct contact with the residents at the shelter. They took women to court, answered crisis calls, assisted residents in getting personal belongings from their homes, participated in recreational activities, and offered residents support and encouragement. Indirect services, on the other hand, were those performed by volunteers who assisted clients without direct interaction. Such services included helping with household chores, performing building maintenance, fundraising, assisting with office duties, and cooking. ¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Author's Interview with Roxanne McMaster.

¹¹⁴ Vera House Archives. Vera House News. "Volunteering-Even a Little is A Lot." Spring/Summer, 1989.

The implementation of the Volunteer Program was essential to the agency's growth. As Vera House was working to expand its services to victims of domestic violence, it was imperative that there be an adequate number of people available to provide those services. Since, Vera House did not have extensive funding to hire new staff, the volunteers helped to meet the demand for assistance without the financial restraints of providing a salary.

Section III. Building a Coalition

By 1987, Vera House was nearing its tenth year as a vital organization in the Syracuse community. As education and outreach efforts developed, Vera House continued to challenge the community regarding its response to domestic violence. Staff had noticed a lack of effective response in the judicial, medical, and religious fields. Service providers were not educated in the dynamics of domestic violence and were unable to identify and address victims in their setting. Consequently, the Syracuse Area Domestic Violence Coalition formed in 1987 to facilitate dialogue about the community's response to domestic violence.

The Coalition formed as a result of a public hearing, sponsored by the New York State Governor's Commission on Domestic Violence. Vera House was a local sponsor for the hearing, in conjunction with the Central New York chapter of the Women's Bar Association. At the hearing, service providers affirmed that domestic violence was a

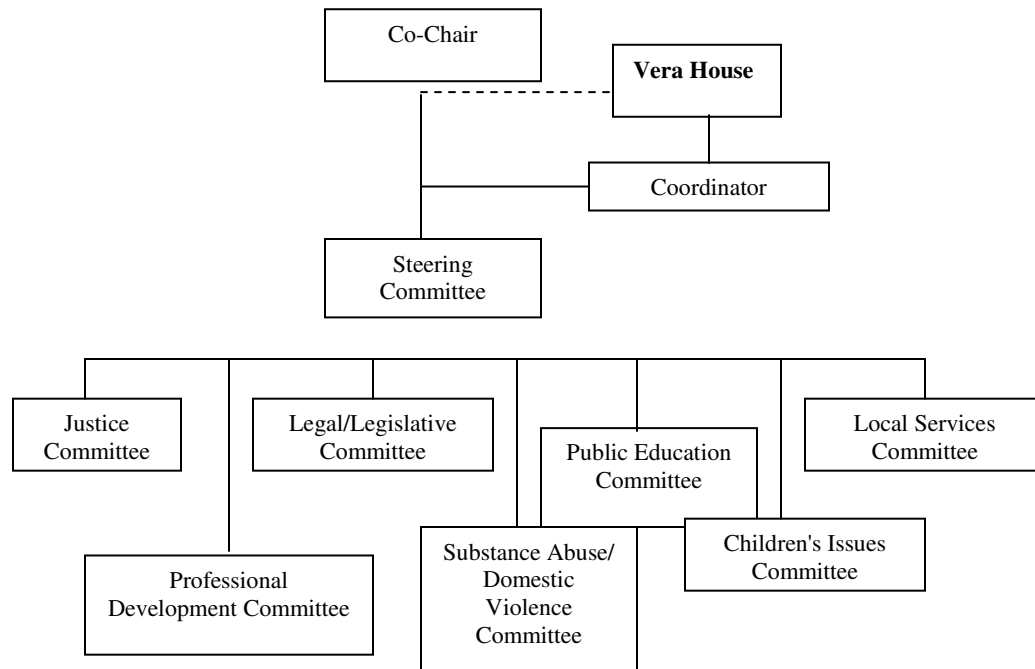
community-wide issue, revealed inappropriate responses by each aspect of the justice system, and identified gaps in services for battered women.¹¹⁵ Victims provided personal testimony at the hearing that revealed police prejudice, failed prosecutions, and the lack of systemic safety procedures. The women sharing their personal stories were the true heroes of the hearing. Many of these women had unresolved safety issues and put their lives on the line to provide testimony. They spoke of a system that had failed them, and knew once they completed their testimony they would be at risk. Nancy Lowery, a staff person who helped to coordinate the panel for the hearing reflected, "We were asking these women to really take a risk and step up to the plate and hopefully influence some change in their community that may never, ever change their situation...99% of these women really knew that it could change for someone else." She continued, "And this was often the motivation for the women, even if it didn't make a difference for them, they just didn't want any other woman or their child to go through it as they had."¹¹⁶

The Coalition officially formed in 1987 to coordinate service providers to put an end to domestic violence. During the first years, the Coalition focused on building membership. The goal was to obtain representatives from a vast number of service providers and organizations throughout the community that came in frequent contact

¹¹⁵ Coalition Archives. "History of the Coalition." Report to the Community-1999.

¹¹⁶ Author's Interview with Nancy Lowery.

with battered women. By 1989, seven committees had been developed to address domestic violence and the Coalition was organized in the following fashion:¹¹⁷



Initially, Coalition members were hesitant to become too structured. Unlike the Vera House Board, the Coalition believed that it should remain loosely structured to keep interest in the issue of domestic violence "more alive."¹¹⁸ However, the members of the Steering committee worried that loose structure would affect decision-making and the Coalition's credibility. Therefore, the Steering Committee decided to develop a mission statement, goals, and membership criteria. This decision provided minimal structure to guide the Coalition through its formative years. The Steering Committee

¹¹⁷ Coalition Archives. Steering Committee Minutes-April 23, 1989.

¹¹⁸ Coalition Archives. Steering Committee Minutes-January 19, 1989.

resolved that the Coalition's mission would be "to coordinate a comprehensive community response to domestic violence with the intent/objective of eliminating and preventing the problem." Their four main objectives were to:

1. Improve services to those involved with domestic violence,
2. Educate the community to incidence, consequence, and prevention of domestic violence,
3. To advocate, assess and enhance the legal response to domestic violence, and
4. To share information and develop resources (fiscal, programmatic) for members of the Coalition and community.¹¹⁹

Beginning in 1990, the Coalition held its first annual Report to the Community. The report was structured as a community-wide meeting designed to report the Coalition's successes and challenges. Three goals were set for the first report: to increase awareness of the Coalition, provide "front-line" reports from local agencies, and issue a challenge to the community to confront unmet needs.¹²⁰ Over eighty people including Onondaga County Executive, Nicholas Pirro; the Mayor of Syracuse, Thomas Young; and the Commissioners of Social Services, Mental Health, Health, and Probation attended the Coalition's first Report to the Community. The report publicly "detailed the impact of domestic violence locally and challenged the community to

¹¹⁹ Coalition Archives. Steering Committee Minutes-April 23, 1989.

¹²⁰ Coalition Archives. Steering Committee Minutes-May 14, 1990.

recognize the dimensions of the problems and work toward a community-wide response." All of the community representatives expressed positive feedback regarding the work of the Coalition, but each representative agreed that there was still a significant amount to accomplish.¹²¹

In order to keep the issue of domestic violence personal and real to community members, the Coalition worked to incorporate stories from survivors. In 1992, the Coalition coordinated its first panel of survivors to speak at the third annual report. Eight survivors took the podium to share their stories of "navigating the system." The panel drew a lot of publicity. Dick Case, of the Syracuse Herald Journal wrote, "They were doing something that hadn't been done in our town before, as far as anyone knew." The women shared stories of insensitive cops, inept ministers, a failed legal system, as well as frustration with the press and lawyers. They said that they did not feel as though doctors, lawyers, and police officers took them seriously. Some were discouraged from taking legal action against their partners because the abuse was viewed as simply "a spat between partners and not as a serious crime." The stories these women shared gave the audience lumps in their throats as they became aware of the devastating reality facing victims of domestic violence.¹²² Since the first panel, the Coalition has included an annual illustration from a survivor to continue

¹²¹ Coalition Archives. Report to the Community-1990.

¹²² Vera House Archives. Dick Case, "At any age women find shelter at Vera House," Syracuse Herald Journal, 19 June 1992.

to remind the community of the importance of the Coalition and its work yet to be done.

The Coalition has held annual reports that have become vital in the communities response to the issue of domestic violence. Each report has given up-to-date statistics on domestic violence in the community, highlights of new programs and accomplishments established by the Coalition, passing of legislation, and an overview of the overwhelming amount of work that still has to be done to end domestic violence in the community. One of the most significant characteristics of the Coalition was that it placed the issue of domestic violence into people's job descriptions. The Coalition has been instrumental in coordinating a community-wide response to domestic violence.¹²³

IV. Outreach and Advocacy

By the late 1980's, Vera House was booming with activity. The shelter had doubled in size through its relocation, the volunteer program had recruited and trained over fifteen volunteers, and the Coalition had begun building membership. Vera House was no longer just a shelter; it was expanding into an agency devoted to exposing and ending domestic violence. As Vera House's new image evolved, so did the type of women calling for services. These women were looking for advocacy, information, validation, and support.¹²⁴ They were women who, for many different reasons, could not leave their

¹²³ For a brief overview of the Coalition's achievements since 1990, refer to Appendix E.

¹²⁴ Author's Interview with Nancy Lowery.

homes but were in need of Vera House's services. Unfortunately, Vera House did not have programs established for women who were not in need of shelter. On a case-by-case basis, staff would accompany women to appointments with lawyers or offer follow up services to women leaving shelter; however, they did not have enough staff to fully address the needs of women outside of shelter.¹²⁵

Vera House staff responded programmatically in 1988 through the development of the Outreach and Advocacy program designed for women not residing at the shelter.¹²⁶ The program had four main components: a 24-hour crisis/support line, support and education groups, systems advocacy, and short term counseling. The 24-hour crisis/support line functioned as the first point of contact for individuals calling Vera House. The crisis/support line allowed women to process their presenting problem and create a safety plan.¹²⁷ In order to track calls, the information was filed and stored.¹²⁸ The filing system began as an informal collection of index cards. However, as the number of calls and complexity of cases increased, call takers began to create folders for each client, containing crisis call sheets, notes from staff members, and other relevant information.¹²⁹

Most women entering the Outreach Program began by taking an introductory class on domestic violence, referred to as DV101. The

¹²⁵ Author's Interview with Anne Burlingham.

¹²⁶ Vera House Archives. United Way Funding Application, 1999-2002.

¹²⁷ See Appendix F for more information on how to create a safety plan.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Author's Interview with Roxanne McMaster.

classes were very structured and covered specific topics "to offer clients the tools and information necessary for them to take charge of their lives and broaden their options."¹³⁰ Once women completed DV101, they were given the option of entering a support group designed to provide them with ongoing support while they worked with advocates.¹³¹ These women were often in the process of attending court hearings, dealing with custody issues, searching for new jobs, and looking for apartments. The support groups served to encourage confidence, create emotional safety, share experience and knowledge, and, most of all, develop a connection between survivors.¹³²

One of the most important components of the Outreach Program was its legal advocacy component. In the 1980's, lawyers, judges, and police officers were trained to handle domestic violence cases by mediating the situation. Since battering was not considered a public issue, police did not make routine reports for "domestic disputes" and judges rarely granted orders of protection for victims. Advocates often had to attend court hearings with clients to ask "educated questions" and to advocate for pro-active resolutions.¹³³ By 1993, through the development of the Family Court Program, advocates began to gain headway. That year, the Probation Department lost its funding for staff to prepare intake petitions for

¹³⁰ Vera House Archives. United Way Funding Application, 1999-2002

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Author's Interview with Nancy Lowery.

Family Court. Recognizing the gap, Vera House advocates and volunteers coordinated a program to place Vera House representatives at Family Court to fill out orders of protection and custody paperwork. This resulted in an increase of visibility and therefore credibility for the agency and its work.¹³⁴

The creation of the Outreach and Advocacy Program was a landmark for Vera House. It redefined Vera House's image transforming it from a shelter into an agency. Through implementation of the program, Vera House increased and diversified the services available to women affected by domestic violence. Consequently, the number of women served by Vera House drastically increased.

Section V. Vera House North

In the spring of 1989, the Emergency Shelter Committee of the Northwest Human Service Council conducted a needs assessment to identify which population in the community was most in need of services. From the survey, the committee concluded that the population most underserved were victims of domestic violence.¹³⁵ Most shelters for women were located in Syracuse's city region and were not accessible to women living in the Northwest region of Onondaga County. Women in this region often refrained from seeking shelter to avoid relocation problems such as leaving familiar settings, switching school districts, and losing the support of friends and

¹³⁴ Author's Interview with Anne Burlingham

¹³⁵ Vera House Archives. [Vera House News](#)-1991.

family.¹³⁶ In order to improve services for these women, the committee collaborated with Vera House to open a shelter that would serve women living in the Northwest portion of Onondaga County.¹³⁷

Vera House North opened in February 1990. It was a small nine-bed facility for families in crisis, staffed by one program coordinator and one part-time resident supervisor. The home had been vacated by a local fire chief and had extensive structural problems. It was intended to be used for a six-month pilot period; however, the shelter was used for nearly nine years. Tracy Windhausen, Vera House North's first Program Coordinator, reflected, "The building fell down around us, it was awful...how did we survive as long as we did?"¹³⁸

Unlike the main shelter, Vera House North was run almost entirely by volunteers. By 1991, the shelter had a pool of nearly twenty-five active volunteers who were responsible for childcare, crisis intervention, transportation, resident support, and advocacy.¹³⁹ Vera House North volunteers performed "on-call hours," which required them to handle the situations needing assistance in the middle of the night. Their work was viewed to be much more direct than that of volunteers at the main shelter as they were performing tasks often performed only by members of the Vera House staff.

¹³⁶ Vera House Archives. Vera House News- Spring/Summer 1989.

¹³⁷ Vera House Archives. Vera House News-1991.

¹³⁸ Author's Interview with Tracy Windhausen.

¹³⁹ Vera House Archives. Vera House News-1991.

Due to Vera House North's staffing patterns, women seeking shelter needed to indicate they were independent enough to be sheltered in an environment that did not have 24-hour coverage. Women in elevated levels of crisis were often not considered for Vera House North and were referred to the main shelter. For example, if a woman had recently been released from the emergency room or if she had needs that had to be monitored on a regular basis, she would not be a good fit for Vera House North. Vera House North was really intended for women who had a mode of transportation, had stable parenting skills, and were free from addictions. In addition, and most logically, women who were located in the Northwestern region of Onondaga County were considered for Vera House North, as it was much less disruptive to everyday life to seek shelter close to their homes.¹⁴⁰

In 1999, Vera House North finally relocated to a new shelter. They had been searching for a new location for a few years but had difficulty finding a house for purchase. A lot of money went into the development of the second facility. The site was completely torn down to its frame and rebuilt. Some thought it would have been cheaper to just build a house. The new structure had the same number of beds as the old site, as the staffing pattern did not allow for an increase in occupancy. In Windhausen's words, it was "bright and beautiful."¹⁴¹ A

¹⁴⁰ Author's Interview with Tracy Windhausen.

¹⁴¹ Author's Interview with Tracy Windhausen.

federal government McKinney Grant obtained through the assistance of the Onondaga County Community Development Office funded the purchase and renovation of Vera House North's second location.

Through the opening of Vera House North, Vera House was able to expand its sheltering services with no detriment to the agency. Because the project was staffed by volunteers and commissioned by the Northwest Human Service Council, Vera House was able to expand services at virtually no cost. In addition, they had been commissioned to facilitate with the development of Vera House North, which indicated that Vera House was perceived as an agency that had expertise in serving victims of domestic violence.

Section VI. Batterer's Intervention

As the staff, Board, and coalition members continued to expand Vera House's services through the late 1980's, one essential question arose: what should be done with the men who are being abusive?¹⁴² For a decade, Vera House had offered shelter and support to women and children who were victims of abuse; however, no action had been taken to address the individuals who were *being* abusive. In the summer of 1989, Vera House staff and Coalition members collaborated to develop a program that would hold batterers accountable for their violent behavior. Together they developed the

¹⁴² Author's Interview with Van Cleary-Hammarstedt. March 24, 2005.

Alternatives to Domestic Violence Program designed to "change"¹⁴³
the attitudes and behaviors that caused batterers to be abusive.¹⁴⁴

Significant research went into the development of the Alternatives program. In 1989, while the program was being created, three basic forms of intervention had been established for working with batterers: support-group intervention, therapy-based intervention, and education-based intervention.¹⁴⁵ The Alternatives Program was created to model the education-based form of batterer's intervention. Vera House fashioned its program after the Domestic Violence Abuse Intervention Project (DIAP) from Duluth, Minnesota. DIAP was a comprehensive educational based model that "challenged the abuser's belief that he has the right to control his partner's thoughts, feelings, or actions."¹⁴⁶

The Duluth model illustrated an effective community-wide coordination to end domestic violence that was pro-arrest, pro-education, and pro-prevention. It had identified four specific cultural "facilitators" used by batterers to justify their battering: natural order, objectification, forced submission, and control/physical force.¹⁴⁷ From this model, Vera House staff and board members developed a twenty-six week program that worked towards defining abuse, expanding

¹⁴³ Presently, Vera House has eliminated the word "change" from the mission statement of the Alternatives Program because, phrases such as, "change" or "help" are dangerous because they offer false hope to victims that may further jeopardize the safety of the victim.

¹⁴⁴ Vera House News- Spring/Summer 1989.

¹⁴⁵ Author's Interview with Van Cleary-Hammarstedt.

¹⁴⁶ Pence, Ellen, Eli Hiletich, Eli Radulovich, Burt Galaway. *A Systemic Response to Spouse Abuse*. Duluth Minnesota, 1985.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

abuser's definitions of abuse, understanding the consequences of abusive behavior, and placing the responsibility of the abuse solely on the abuser.¹⁴⁸

Batterer intervention was a very difficult process. The men in the program were often court mandated or socially mandated by their partners and were typically very hostile to the principles covered by the Alternatives program.¹⁴⁹ Van Cleary-Hammarstedt, the first staff member to facilitate Alternatives groups, recalls that the men would provide positive reinforcement to one another during class only to further legitimize the abusive behaviors of the men within the group. Male power was deeply ingrained in society, and it was as if the Alternatives program was challenging the batterer's heterosexuality and gender roles.¹⁵⁰

In addition to the problems in running the program, there were also problems in assessing its effectiveness. Victims could not be asked to report the effectiveness of the program on their partner because a bad report could put them at risk. Batterers could not be asked to report on their progress because they could lie. Unlike therapy work, there was no way of putting closure to the program in a form that offered complete resolution. In therapy, the therapist or counselor knows the individual growth of the batterer due to the personal component of counseling. With Alternatives, once the

¹⁴⁸ Author's Interview with Van Cleary-Hammarstedt.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

program was over, the man was free to go. However, if a man chose to re-offend, the courts would see that he had completed the alternatives program, and his second charge would be more severe.¹⁵¹

Support for the Alternatives Program has come in part through the White Ribbon Campaign, which originated in Canada to raise awareness about violence against women. The campaign was launched in 1989 due to a killing of fourteen female students at Montreal's Polytechnic College. To justify his actions, Mark Lepine, the man who committed the mass murder, claimed that feminists had ruined his life.¹⁵² The men of Montreal responded by wearing white ribbons that symbolized their concern about violence against women. In 1995, the campaign was brought to Syracuse to raise awareness about domestic violence. Men were asked to wear white ribbons for one week to signify their concern about domestic violence. Each ribbon sold for one dollar and the proceeds went to the funding of the Alternatives Program.

The Alternatives Program was the first of its kind to be implemented in Syracuse. Until 1990, batterers had not been routinely held accountable for their abusive behavior. The Alternatives Program indicated to abusers that abusive behavior was inappropriate and was the first of its kind to work with the justice system to hold batterer's accountable for their violence.

¹⁵¹ Panel Discussion at Syracuse University.

¹⁵² Vera House Archives. Scrapbook. Frank Brieady, "Good Guys Wear White to Combat Violence," 1995.

Section VII: Responding to Youth

Until 1985, Vera House provided limited services to children affected by domestic violence. Such services included housing and daycare coverage, which did not provide services to help children to process the violence they had witnessed in their homes. The children residing at Vera House showed the effects of living in violent environments. Such symptoms included frequent nightmares, aggressive behaviors, withdrawal, and temper tantrums. Children needed counseling and preventive services that extended far beyond playgroups and games. In 1985, the Vera House staff decided it was time to increase and improve the services available to children at shelter. Through a grant from the Syracuse Onondaga County Youth Bureau, Vera House secured funding to develop the Youth Counseling and Education Program designed to provide children counseling and education services to help them understand domestic violence.¹⁵³

The Youth Counseling Program was launched at the shelter in January 1986. That year, a Youth Counselor began working with the children and their mothers to assist them in understanding how their behavior was affected by their heightened levels of crisis.¹⁵⁴ Many of these women and children had been torn from familiar environments,

¹⁵³ Vera House Archives. Vera House News-December 1985.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

separated from friends, and had experienced feelings of guilt, hostility, fear, abandonment, and profound sadness. Children reacted to these changes through behaviors such as bed wetting, poor school performance, extreme anger, and a wide range of psychosomatic effects. Mothers often had difficulty responding to these behaviors because they were not emotionally equipped to offer their children the necessary comfort and reassurances. Therefore, the Youth Counselor worked with mothers and children to identify the shifts in each of their behaviors and improve their parent-child relationship.¹⁵⁵

In addition to the Youth Counseling Program, the Youth Awareness Program was launched to address dating violence with teens in local schools and youth groups. According to a 1984 study conducted by Vera House staff, twenty-five percent of the teens responding to the survey could identify that they had experienced violence in a dating relationship. This statistic troubled Vera House staff. They began to develop a curriculum in 1988 for high school and middle school students that would teach the facts about relationship violence and provide the necessary tools to identify and leave abusive relationships. Vera House staff believed that educating children on the dynamics of domestic violence was vital in reducing the prevalence of abusive relationships.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Vera House Archives. Vera House News- Winter 1987.

¹⁵⁶ Vera House News-December 1985.

By 1989, the curriculum was complete and the Youth Awareness Program was launched to "increase awareness and understanding of domestic violence and power dynamics in the context of dating relationships." Six goals guided the program:

1. Understand how domestic violence relates to dating violence.
2. Increase the ability to identify abusive relationships.
3. Increase understanding of the societal and cultural values that condone violence between people.
4. Increase the ability to avoid or leave abusive relationships.
5. Increase the ability to identify the health issues connected with abusive relationships.
6. Increase awareness of services in the community available to those involved in violent relationships.¹⁵⁷

Anna Walters, the coordinator of the Youth Awareness Program, had two requirements of each school before it could secure the program. First, she required that the principal, vice-principal, and team of teachers be supportive of the program; because, if even one staff person was ambivalent about her curriculum, it would undermine the presentation. Second, she required that the school set aside three days for presentation of the curriculum. The content of the program was dependant on trust between the educator and students. Such trust

¹⁵⁷ Vera House Archives. Youth Awareness Curriculum, 1989.

could only occur if the Youth Awareness Educator built a relationship with the students, which required time. If the school could not agree to both of Walter's terms, the program would not go into the school.¹⁵⁸

On the first day, she covered general information about Vera House and an overview of teen dating violence. The second day, she discussed controlling behaviors and had the students reflect on an abusive situation in their own lives. Finally, on the third day, she discussed the cultural contributors to abusive behavior, engaged the students in some role playing, and provided information on where students could go if they needed help.¹⁵⁹ Walters summarized the program in 1992: "Our goal is to generate some reflective, thought provoking discussions as well as provide concrete examples that students can evaluate and that will hopefully foster some self reflection."¹⁶⁰

Vera House decided it was crucial to continue work with at risk teens. In 1993, the agency began its Adolescent Outreach Program to provide crisis intervention, short-term counseling work and supportive group work for adolescent girls who were victims of relationship violence. That year, the *Syracuse Herald Journal* had polled 263 high school students in three local schools. They found that 40% of those polled had experienced physical abuse and 60% emotional abuse in a dating relationship. The statistics demonstrated that violence in teen

¹⁵⁸ Author's Interview with Anna Walters.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Vera House Archives. [Vera House News](#)-Summer/Fall 1992.

relationships was occurring at similar rates of domestic violence. The Adolescent program was designed to help young girls learn how to tear down some of the barriers such as peer pressure, fear, and confusion that kept them in unhealthy relationships.

At this time, the curriculum of the Youth Awareness Program was readjusted to incorporate revised content on relationship violence. Many students seemed able to identify attributes of abusive relationships but were unable to identify attributes of healthy relationships. Around 1995, dynamics and characteristics of healthy relationships was incorporated into the curriculum of the Youth Awareness Program.¹⁶¹

In 1996, Vera House launched the STARS (Safety, Trust, Awareness, Respect, and Support) program in collaboration with the Salvation Army to provide support and education for younger children who witnessing domestic violence in their homes.¹⁶² According to the National Women's Abuse Prevention Project, nearly 90 percent of children living in violent homes were aware of the violence directed at their mothers. The STARS program was designed to provide children with a safe place to talk about the abuse they had witnessed and to let them know that it was not their fault. The program used play therapy and expression through artwork to assist children to understand their experiences and identifying helping resources. Colleen O'Brien,

¹⁶¹ Author's Interview with Anna Walters.

¹⁶² Vera House Archives. [Vera House News](#). 25th Anniversary Commemorative Section-2002.

Director of the Children's Counseling Program reflects, "I know the STARS program works. I see how much the children love to come to group, and I hear from their parents how much they miss group when it is over, how much they have learned, and how much they put that knowledge to work at home and in school."¹⁶³

STARS groups consisted of roughly ten children ranging from six to twelve years in age. Some children were mandated through Child Protective Services to enter the program; others were referred to the program by the crisis line. O'Brien held an intake session with the mother and child once they were referred to the program. The intake session functioned as the first stage of intervention. At the session with O'Brien, the mother and child would have individual chances to give their perspectives of the abuse. Most mothers would be shocked by the amount of abuse the children are aware of. O'Brien comments, "This process is a wonderful intervention in and of itself, because there is the realization that mom will often severely underreport what has been happening, and that will be a lesson for the mom and the child." Colleen continues, "And it hits the mother that you can't hide things...and that the children are more attentive than expected."¹⁶⁴

Children admitted into the group met twice a week for one hour to learn the following concepts:

1. It is ok to break the secret,

¹⁶³ Vera House Archives. Vera House News-Spring/Summer 1998.

¹⁶⁴ Author's Interview with Colleen O'Brien-March 10, 2005.

2. You are not alone,
3. You are not responsible for the fighting, and
4. You have the right to be safe.

The program provided the children with information that prepared them to handle their situation at home. Many of the children entering the program had at least one identifiable "problem" that needed to be addressed i.e. bedwetting, nightmares, yelling, poor grades, etc. Often, after a child completed the program, many of their symptomatic problems would subside. O'Brien mentioned that although the content had an educational focus, it often had therapeutic effects on the child. For those children that needed ongoing support, they would be admitted into the Children's Counseling Program, which began in 2001 to provide ongoing individual support for children and their family members.¹⁶⁵

In February 1999, Vera House continued to develop its preventive service for youth. That year, the Youth Alternatives Program was launched to provide an early aged intervention for youth participating in abusive behavior. In 1998, a group of local school- and agency-based professionals who worked with youth in the Syracuse community, got together to develop a curriculum that would educate young people who have been abusive on the dynamics of domestic violence. The overarching goal of the program was to prevent teens from having further involvement with the correctional

¹⁶⁵ Author's Interview with Colleen O'Brien.

system. The program was first implemented at Hillbrook Detention Center, a secure facility for teens awaiting permanent placements from the court into long-term living situations. Most of the individuals residing at Hillbrook had committed misdemeanors or felonies.

The program consisted of ten co-ed sessions and was more than likely the first of its kind. Youth Alternatives covered the dynamics of healthy relationships, the cycle of violence, and a study of power and control. During the last few sessions, the curriculum covered a discussion of the social influences of violence and the ways they affect youth's perceptions that violence is acceptable. The overall focus was to prevent abusive behavior from reoccurring because many of these children, if redirected at a young age, stood the chance of breaking their cycle of abuse before it became unmanageable.¹⁶⁶

In 2000, with the help of a grant from the Hoyt Child and Family Trust Fund from the New York State Department of Child and Family Services, Vera House staff developed the "All About Me" Program for fourth graders. The new program focused on families, feelings, trust, and bullying. The goal of the program to educate children at a young age about the healthy dynamics of relationships. Vera House staff recognized that for children, learning about healthy relationships began with learning about healthy family relationships.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Vera House Archives. Vera House News-Spring/Summer 1999.

¹⁶⁷ Author's Interview with Anna Walters.

Vera House's development of programs for youth reflected the nation's increased awareness of the affects of abuse on children. Since, Vera House's opening in 1977, the perception of children and abuse had come full circle. Initially many programs, including Vera House's shelter services, provided very limited services for children affected by domestic violence. It was assumed that children did not need services because they were not direct recipients of the abuse. However, by the late 1980's that perception changed. From that point, services for children became an integral part of Vera House's response to domestic violence.

Conclusion: Future Growth

In 2002, Vera House celebrated its 25th anniversary since opening a small twelve-bed shelter in July of 1977. Over those twenty-five years, Vera House had flourished as an agency dedicated to providing shelter, support, and education to those affected by domestic violence. Randi Bregman, Co-Executive Director of Vera House reflected in 2002:

Only twenty-six years ago, a woman living in fear, unsafe due to her partner's violence and intimidation, had no safe place to go. There was not a 24-hour support line, nor two confidential shelter locations to provide safety to [a woman] and her children. There were no outreach and advocacy services, designed to provide crisis intervention and assistance navigating the legal system to overwhelmed victims. No one acknowledged that domestic violence in the home affected children. We had no educational programs in the schools, no community awareness campaigns, and no professional trainings on domestic violence. There wasn't a Domestic Violence Coalition with over a hundred active members working together to create a coordinated, effective community response to domestic violence...Through the outstanding efforts of Vera House staff, volunteers, and other dedicated community members, we have taken strides since our founding in

1977...Yet as far as we have come, we still have a long way to go. To many people still quiver in fear in their homes. Too many spend their whole lives being put down, told they are "stupid", 'ugly" or "worthless". Too many still die at the hands of a partner or ex-partner. Each of us must be part of the solution...We hope one day to look back and wonder how domestic violence ever existed. Until that day, we'll keep doing the work started by Sr. Mary Vera 25 years ago."¹⁶⁸

With all of Vera House's accomplishments, staff, Board, and coalition members still knew that they were nowhere near resolving the issue of domestic violence. One of the biggest concerns for the agency was that community members believed Vera House's list of accomplishments was an indicator that the work was finished. However, such a belief couldn't have been farther from the truth. Vera House staff and Board members recognized that the services for diverse populations such as the Latino, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), and elderly communities were nowhere near adequate. There was still a lot of work to do in order to put an end to domestic violence.

Looking to the future, Vera House continues to set goals and take action to address partner violence. On January 1, 2005, Vera House officially merged with Rape Crisis Center of Syracuse, New York. Both agencies saw the merger as an opportunity for two strengths to become one. Together they joined forces to provide services to individuals who are victims of sexual and domestic violence. One of the biggest challenges of the merger has been the

¹⁶⁸Vera House Archives. *Vera House News*. A Message From the Director. 2002.

need to bring sexual violence awareness and response to the same level as domestic violence awareness. Vera House has a lot left to do. The agency is presently in the process of assessing its next programmatic steps post-merger. Current projects include further implementation of the merger through restructuring programs and locating new office space.

Over the past twenty-eight years, Vera House has been an asset to the Syracuse community. Sr. Vera was a visionary. Rosemary Sloane, the founding president of the Vera House Board spoke of Sr. Mary Vera at the agency's tenth anniversary in 1987: "You will hear some wonderful things about Sr. Vera...and she deserves every one. But as I look back, her greatest gift to me and others on the committee was her unwavering belief that we could do it. She never reminded us of our inexperience—when we faltered, she held out her hand and steadied us, and when we despaired she gave us hope." The present Board and staff have demonstrated a methodology that reflects the objectives of the founding Board and Sr. Mary Vera's vision: identify, assess, and address. They have implemented this methodology through the creation of programs such as the Outreach and Advocacy Program and the Syracuse Area Domestic Violence Coalition. In both instances, staff and Board members identified a population of community members in need of services, assessed the ways the agency could respond, and addressed the need through the

development of programs. Sr. Mary Vera shared the same process; she created Vera House out of the knowledge that women needed emergency shelter, and that that it was her duty to respond to that need. Identify. Assess. Address. That is what Vera House will continue to do until domestic violence no longer exists.

Appendix A:

Information pertaining to domestic violence.

All of the information that I have included is from the Syracuse Area Domestic Violence Coalition's Resource Manual.

Myths and Reality Survey:

This can be used as a tool for assessing your present beliefs pertaining to domestic violence.

Please indicate whether you feel each statement is True or False:

1. _____ Family violence occurs most often among low-income families.
2. _____ Violence rarely occurs between dating partners.
3. _____ Alcohol is a major cause of violence in the home.
4. _____ Stress causes people to abuse their partners.
5. _____ Women are more likely to be battered when **they** are pregnant.
6. _____ Men are more likely to help a woman being attacked by a man than a man being attacked by another man.

Answers:

1. **False:** Research indicates that violence in the home occurs in all ethnic, religious, and socio-economic groups. The actual extent of violence may not differ much across social and cultural groups but the rate of official reporting and identification does.
2. **False:** One in three teenagers report that **they** have had a violent experience in a dating relationship. Victims of dating

violence report that verbal and emotional abuse occur first, followed by psychological and physical abuse. Extreme jealousy and explosives were common traits of their abusers. Offenders indicate that **they** have a "right" to do what **they** have done and use violence to control their victims. Some victims may marry an abusive dating partner to give the message that **they** are committed and there is no reason for jealousy.

There appears to be a greater incidence of mutual abuse in teen dating relationships with young women being more emotionally abusive and young men being more physically abusive. This may be related to more blurred definition of gender roles and greater insecurities and jealousies experienced by teens. Female and male teens are subject to adult authority figures, and often express desire for control in their dating relationships.

3. **False:** Alcohol and/or substance abuse do not "cause" violent behavior, though victims and offenders report high levels of alcohol and substance abuse associated with violent incidents. Current research indicates a variety of trends regarding drinking, drug abuse, and partner assaults, but no predictive pattern. Some abusers do not involve themselves with alcohol and drugs at all. Some have drinking and/or drug "problems," but are violent whether or not **they** are under the influence. Still others limit their violence to those times when **they** are under the influence of alcohol/drugs.

The alcohol drug problem, if it exists, and the abusive behavior are two separate problems, both of which must be treated. If only the alcohol or substance abuse is treated,

the abuser will simply be a sober batterer with other "triggers" for violence.

Many batterers use alcohol/drug use to explain or excuse violence and minimize their responsibility for their actions. May partner abuse victims "buy in" to such rationalizations because it enables them to see the violence being done to them as being out of the offender's control.

4. **False:** Many batterers use stress to explain or excuse violence and minimize their responsibility for their actions. A violent behavior pattern is not "caused" by stress but is rooted in the behavior patterns that an individual learns to use to respond to stress and anger.

All individuals and families experience stress and many have family members who have alcohol and substance abuse problems, but only those individuals who have learned that violence is acceptable and effective will respond with violence. Abusers batter because **they** can and because it works, not as a result of a stressful event.

5. **True:** Research has shown that battering may first occur or increase during pregnancy. It may be that the batterer is unconsciously threatened or jealous of the baby and the mother's increasing focus on the pregnancy and birth. Battering is the major cause of injury to pregnant women seeking emergency medical assistance. One of twelve pregnant women is battered. Of all women who are battered, 25-45 percent are battered during pregnancy. Pregnant women are most likely to suffer injuries to the stomach, breasts, or pelvic area (the female/reproductive areas of the victim's body seem to be the most vulnerable to attack.)

6. **False:** Men often hesitate to help a woman being attacked by a man because **they** assume that there is a relationship between the two and that "having a relationship" makes the attack a personal matter. Viewing domestic violence as a privacy issue and something to be kept "behind closed doors" has been a significant factor in perpetuating such violence. When non-stranger crimes are viewed by the criminal justice system and the rest of society according to the same standards as stranger-to-stranger crimes, those in abusive relationships will get the message that abuse is not a private matter.¹⁶⁹

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners.

Key elements of domestic violence:

- Conduct perpetrated by adults or adolescents against their intimate partners in current or former dating, married, or cohabiting relationships of heterosexuals, gay men, and lesbians.
- A pattern of behaviors including a variety of tactics—some physically injurious and some not—carried out in multiple, sometimes daily episodes.
- A combination of physical attacks, terrorist attacks, and controlling tactics used by perpetrators that result in fear as well as physical and psychological harm to victims and their children.

¹⁶⁹ Syracuse Area Domestic Violence Coalition. Resource Manual of Domestic Violence. 1999. Section 1, pp.4-6.

- A pattern of purposeful behavior, directed at achieving compliance from or control over the victim.¹⁷⁰

Why Do Victims Stay in an Abusive Relationship?

- Fear of physical danger
- Financial barriers
- Belief that things will get better if **they** stick with the relationship
- Fear of the unknown/failure
- Societal/Religious messages to keep the family intact
- **They** love the person and hope **they** will change

We should also ask why an abuser would stay in a relationship with someone **they** don't respect or value enough to keep them from harm.¹⁷¹

What Are Some Indicators of an Abusive Partner?

Does your partner...

- Hit, punch, slap, choke, or shove you?
- Destroy personal property, damage furniture or walls?
- Prevent you from seeing friends or family?
- Control all finances and/or force you to account for what you spend?
- Belittle you in public or private?
- Show extreme jealousy of others or make false accusations?
- Force you to have sex against your will?

¹⁷⁰ Syracuse Area Domestic Violence Coalition, Resource Manual, Section 1, p.3. Adapted from the publication entitled, "Improving the Health Care System's Response to Domestic Violence: A Resource manual for Health Care providers," produced by the Family Violence Prevention Fund in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Written by Carole Warshaw, M.D. and Anne L. Ganley, Ph.D., with contributions by Patricia R. Salber, M.D.

¹⁷¹ Frequently Asked Questions, verahouse.org. Viewed March 15, 2005.

These are all examples of abusive behavior. If any of these things are happening to you, call today and talk to someone about it. **Vera House** Crisis and Support Line 315-468-3260 or the New York State Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-942-6906.¹⁷²

Why Does Domestic Violence Happen?

Contrary to common belief, domestic violence is **not** caused by stress, mental illness, alcohol, or drugs. The only true cause of domestic violence is the abuser's choice to act violently.¹⁷³

However several societal beliefs contribute to the continuation of domestic violence:

- The belief that the use of violence is an acceptable way to solve problems
- The belief in traditional, rigid, and separate gender roles and traits
- The acceptance of hierarchy and oppression¹⁷⁴

Who Can Fall Victim to Domestic Violence?

ANYONE can fall victim to domestic violence. Domestic violence is not an indicator of age, sex, race, or economic status.

Who Can Be An Abuser?

ANYONE can be an abuser. The use of violence is not an indicator of age, sex, race, or economic status.

What Are Indicators of Abuse?

Any of the following might indicate battering:

The victim may show signs of:

- Repeated injuries that are difficult to account for as accidental.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Frequently Asked Questions, verahouse.org, Viewed March 15, 2005.

¹⁷⁴ Syracuse Area Domestic Violence Coalition, Resource Manual, Section 1, pp.12-14.

- Isolation of the victim—no access to money, to the car, or other forms of transportation, to family or friends, to jobs or school.
- Referring frequently to a partner's "anger" or "temper"
- Reluctance to speak or to disagree in the presence of the abuser because of fear.
- Frequent feeling from home.
- Suicide attempts or homicidal assaults.

The abuser may show signs of:

- Bullying or verbally abusive public behavior.
- Sexual or physical abuse of children.
- Jealous accusations of the victim's sexual infidelity.
- Threats or attempts to place the victim in a psychiatric hospital and convince others of her or his insanity.
- Public docility and respectability and private aggression by the batterer.
- Statements which put down their partner and/or denigrate women in general.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Resource Manual. 1999, 2-2. Reprinted with permission from Guidelines for Mental Health Practitioners in Domestic Violence Cases, Susan Schechter, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1987.

Appendix B:

Names and Occupations of those serving the Ad-Hoc Committee for
Vera House in September 1974:

Mr. Gene Mack	Northside C.Y.O.
Mrs. Ruby Leachtneauer	Social Worker, Volunteer Center
Mrs. Rosemary Sloane	Secretary, Keener Seniors
Sr. Mary Vera Blank	Social Worker, St. Lucy's
Rev. Theodore Sizing	Pastor, St. Lucy's
Sr. Gloria DeCotis	De Paul People Center
Sr. Mary Jo Coleman	Social Worker, Catholic Social Services
Miss Elizabeth A. Egan	Social Service Worker, Teacher
Ms. Barbara Walzer	Attorney
Rev. Theodore Schmitz	Social Worker
Mrs. Rosemary Ostrum	Alleghany Airlines
Mrs. Roberta Schofield	Social Worker, Salvation Army
Mrs. Angela Young	Social Worker
Mrs. James (Ann) Tobin	Community Worker

Appendix C:**Proposal for Vera House: A Temporary Shelter for Women in Syracuse, New York, 1976:****Purposes:**

- a. To provide emergency shelter and meals on a temporary basis for women eighteen years of age and over and to provide the women so served with necessary referrals to social, legal, and psychological services.
- b. To maintain a referral file of available community services, whether offered by public agency or private organization, especially social and psychological counseling and legal and medical services.
- c. To work with other community agencies to coordinate the offering and delivery of these services.
- d. To do and perform all things necessary or appropriate for the foregoing purposes.

General Information:

- a. Number of women participating in the program:
Up to ten women shall be serviced for a maximum period of two weeks each, unless the director deems it necessary to continue service beyond that period.
- b. Age Range:
Women eighteen years of age and over.
- c. Fees will be charged on a sliding scale, but women involved in the program will not be denied services because of their inability to pay.
- d. The project will be held at a facility adequate to meet New York State **Board** of Social Welfare requirements.

Appendix D:

Because many agencies have not previously kept records on requests by women for temporary shelter, the figures below are merely a guide which reflects the requests received by agencies which do keep records:

	Sept. 1975	Oct. 1975	Nov. 1975
Volunteer Center	9	7	9
Women's Information Center	20	20	27

Salvation Army actually sheltered the number of people shown below:

	Sept. 1975	Oct. 1975	Nov. 1975	Dec. 1975	Jan. 1976	Feb. 1976
Single Women	17	6	10	12	11	13
Mothers	4	4	5	2	2	5
Children	8	6	8	3	10	9

Appendix E:

Highlights of Coalition Achievements Since 1990:

1990

- Development of the "**Battering**" brochure in English/Spanish
- Distribution of **wallet-sized cards** containing information for law enforcers and advocates on legal options and local resources for victims.
- Development of a **local pro-bono representational system** for battered women eligible for legal aid, but unable to afford private attorneys.

1991

- Creation and distribution of a **Resource Manual** containing information on domestic violence. Topics pertaining to domestic violence include: definitions and dynamics, statistics, socio-historical context, assessment, intervention (including safety, law enforcement, Family Court, Criminal Court, orders of protection, medical care, and Department of Social Services programs), clinical issues, relationship to drug/alcohol abuse, children's issues, teen dating violence, elder abuse, issues of diversity, local resources, guide for family and friends, and provider-centered issues.

1992

- Presentation of the first **panel of survivors** to speak at the Report to the Community.
- Collaboration with the County Task Force to develop a groundbreaking **domestic violence policy** covering employee issues and expectations for service providers.

1993

- Adoption of a "**no-drop**" **pro-prosecution policy for domestic violence cases** in the Onondaga County District Attorney's Office.
- Established the **Religious Task Force** composed of clergy members and concerned members of the community working to inform the religious community about domestic violence issues.
- Contributed to the development of the **Family Court Volunteer Advocacy Program**.
- Created a **Legal Handbook** for victims of domestic violence, in cooperation with the Office of the Onondaga County Executive.
- Created a brochure on clients rights and responsibility when working with an attorney.

1994

- Worked through State Legislation to implement a **state-wide registry of Orders of Protection.**
- Worked successfully to **increase the level of charge for violations of orders of protection.**
- Developed training for Family and Criminal court Judges, District Attorneys, and Police Staff.
- Established a **Specialized Domestic Violence Unit** in the Syracuse City Police Department.
- Established the **Medical Issues Committee** to coordinate representatives from area hospitals and other health care providers who are making a commitment to improve implementation of existing domestic violence protocols and incorporate awareness about domestic violence in the medical community.

1995

- Medical Issues committee created and distributed a localized version of the **American Medical Association Family Violence Poster.**
- The Religious Task Force worked closely with the **Vera House Foundation** on the community's first **White Ribbon Campaign.**

1996

- Publicized the **Junior League's Silent Witness Project** designed to memorialize and honor those and all women affected by domestic violence.

1997

- Established the **Domestic Violence Education and Research Institute** to provide educational programs on the dynamics of domestic violence in various settings throughout the community.
- Developed the **Accessible Counseling Project** providing free/low cost counseling services for victims of domestic violence.

1998

- **Trained Syracuse Police Department officers** on domestic violence, sexual assault, and diversity issues.
- Established the **Gay/Lesbian/Bi-Sexual/Transgendered Relationship Violence Committee.**

1999

- Distributed "What is an Order of Protection?" flyer throughout the County.
- Established the **Diversity Task Force** and the **Elder Abuse Committee.**
- Sponsored the **FACES** of domestic violence video and developed a discussion guide.
- Created a **Media Kit on Domestic Violence**, full of resources and information on domestic violence for the media to use throughout the year.

- Developed the **Survivors Network**: a network of survivors of abuse who are willing to share their experiences, strength, and hope either privately with other survivors of abuse, or openly through a public forum or the media.

2000

- Established the **Domestic Violence Sunday Campaign** reaching twenty congregations.
- Expanded the White Ribbon Campaign to Syracuse University and LeMoyne College.

2001

- Developed a **Model for "Safe Congregations"** distributed to various local congregations.

2002

- Established "**Work to End Domestic Violence Day**," an email campaign reaching more than 1,600 employees.

2003

- Established **Replenishing Your Soul**, a healing and renewal event for service providers.
- Opened **Integrated Domestic Violence Court**.
- **Trained Syracuse University Public Safety Officers** on the dynamics of domestic violence.

2004

- Updated the Family Violence Poster.
- Coordinated a community training on the VINE System that provides crime and release information on prison inmates and paroles.
- Developed a local Elder Abuse Video.
- Trained **Vera House** staff on responding to Lesbian/Gay/Bi-Sexual/Transgendered relationship violence.

Appendix F:

Safety issues are a priority in cases of domestic violence. Planning ahead can help ensure safety.

The following suggestions may be helpful for a person living in an unsafe situation:

- Memorize local emergency numbers you may need.
- Ask your neighbors to call the police if it sounds like violence is occurring.
- If possible, keep small valuables and important papers—birth certificates, driver's license, social security cards, medical records, bank books, etc.—together in a place you can easily get to them and where your partner will not find them.
- Keep a spare set of keys and car keys handy; if you can, put aside a little money for food, telephone calls and transportation in case of emergency.
- Think ahead about different ways you might be able to get yourself and your children out of the house.
- If you have a friend or family members that would be willing to hold onto some things for you, consider packing toiletries, medications, and an extra set of clothes for yourself and your children and taking it to your friend or family member.
- If you leave your home, try to take something with you that has special meaning to your child, such as a stuffed animal or a blanket, to help in the child's adjustment to new surroundings.
- Know exactly where you could go and how to get there even if you should need to leave in the middle of the night.
- Know where the closest pay phone is located and have quarters available in an accessible place.
- Keep a record of all medical injuries in the past and the names of the treating physicians. Take photographs when possible.
- Develop a "code word" to use with your children, friends, or co-workers that will alert them to call the police.

- If appropriate, show your child safe ways to leave the house. Determine a safe place for him or her to go (a neighbor, family member) or call the police.

Safety planning does not end when the relationship ends. The following safety measures may be helpful to a person no longer involved with or living with an abusive partner:

- Change your residence's door and window locks.
- Purchase a home security system or change the security code of your current system.
- Inquire about no cost personal safety programs such as pre-programmed cellular phones and personal alarm that may be available through the District Attorney's Office.
- Obtain an Order of Protection.
 - Make multiple copies of your order. Keep a copy in your car, at your workplace, and in a safe place in your home.
 - Keep a copy of the order with you at all times.
 - Notify relevant persons about your order (e.g. babysitter, employer, neighbor).
 - Call the police immediately if the order has been violated.
- Change your telephone number or purchase an answering machine to screen your calls.
- Be aware of our surroundings at all times: while driving, shopping or working
- Talk to friends, family members, or service providers that are supportive to you. Seek support for you and your children.
- If you have to meet with your ex-partner in person, do so in a public place you are familiar with. Notify a friend, family member, or co-worker where you will be and what time you will return.

Source: Syracuse Area Domestic Violence Coalition Resource Manual. 1999, Section 4-4.

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