

Helping to help themselves

WE CAN celebrates 10 years

By Anne Garton

WE CAN is a tiny organization doing a huge job. The phone rings non-stop in the cramped Harwich office. Dedicated volunteers staff the phones and see to it that each question from an anxious, or merely curious, woman has some kind of useful response.

"I was going through a very bad time a few years ago," says Linda Bliss, now living in Dennis, "and a friend suggested I call WE CAN. They stepped right in and gave me all kinds of support and advice, even refuge. And now I'm a mentor for other women going through a crisis like mine."

"That's the way WE CAN is supposed to work," said executive director Andi Genser. "We've built a network over ten years that doesn't exist anywhere else on the Cape. WE CAN helps women help themselves, and then turn around and help other women in similar straits."

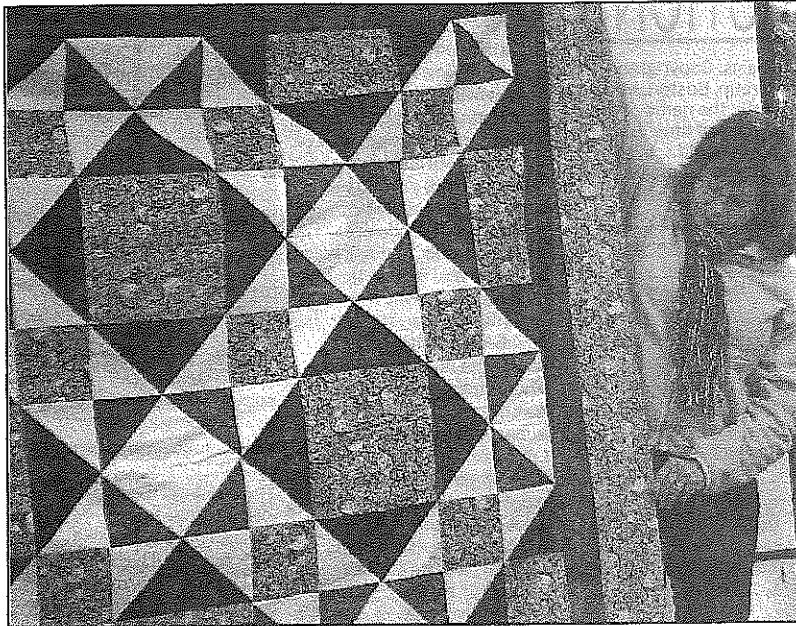
As a former director of several non-profits in the Boston area, Genser brings years of experience working with children and families.

"Many women struggle alone with major transitions in their lives, from marriage to divorce, from motherhood to ageing, from financial security to job uncertainty," said Genser.

"WE CAN listens, offers hope and gives practical help. That's it, in a nutshell."

Helping themselves

Until WE CAN transformed itself ten years ago out of an academic program at Cape Cod Community College into the full-fledged service organization it has become, there was no single source where women of limited means could turn to for concrete help — women like Sandy who needed a safe house and a restraining order as she undertook her divorce, or Karen, in her 40s, who lived with her parents all her life and needed help securing subsidized housing, or Margaret whose husband has cancer and is worried about his care and the possibility of losing their home, or Amy, married for 30 years and in the process of a divorce, who discovered her name is not on the deed to her house and



Ro Morrissey, former president of WE CAN's board of directors, holds a WE CAN quilt made by members of the Cape Cod Quilters Guild.

needed legal help.

All of these women, and hundreds more, have been "helped to help themselves" by the staff, mentors and business partners of WE CAN. And all of them will be celebrating WE CAN's 10th anniversary at their first annual meeting at the Cultural Center of Cape Cod on Dec. 1, from 5 - 7 p.m.

"Networking is the key," said Pam Kulka, WE CAN's special advisor for communications. "Think of an issue, a question, any problem that any woman of any age might come up against here on the Cape, and WE CAN will find a way to help her, either directly, or through referrals to our partners or organizations specific to her needs."

Key to the non-profit's massive growth, from 15 clients 10 years ago to thousands of women today, is its individual and group mentoring program.

"We're very proud of our unique, year-long 'Pathmakers' program," said Genser. "It zeroes in on partnering women in transition with women who are best able to help them. "Women interview several mentors, almost like speed dating, and choose one that is closest to their needs and goals."

This year's program matches 21 Pathmakers with 21 mentors who will support them throughout the year on their own schedule. WE CAN arranges group meetings for additional support.

Entrepreneurs are matched

with women who dream about starting their own businesses. Women with rusty job skills are matched with women who have achieved success in their field or recently re-entered the job market. Women with illness are matched with women who are health professionals and can guide them through the process of healing, or give them coping skills they may need.

Services

"We provide free one-on-one legal advice from our volunteer attorneys specializing mainly in family law and estate law. We give workshops such as Everything You Want to Know About Family Law But are Afraid to Ask, and we also sponsor a very successful workshop we call Divorce Boot Camp, designed to empower women who need to represent themselves in court. We've just started a new workshop, From Surviving to Thriving" given by a professional Workforce Coach.

"We're very excited about our first annual meeting," said Genser. "We're welcoming everyone, anywhere, who has ever been involved with WE CAN from the start, and that's hundreds of women, as well as our many business and organizational partners. We invite any interested folks to come and learn who we are and what we do for the community."

To highlight the event, WE CAN will debut a special quilt that has been on tour all year

gathering signed piecework from women all over the cape. As well, WE CAN is sponsoring a Ten Word Story Contest, in honor of its tenth anniversary, with prizes to be awarded during the celebration (submit your story to info@wecancenter.org no later than midnight Nov. 1). Refreshments will be served and awards and prizes distributed during this special event. "We want to acknowledge and celebrate what WE CAN has achieved over our ten years serving the Cape community."

"WE CAN is like a sisterhood," says Linda Bliss, now divorced and well-employed. "It's there for you all the way. I know."

If you go...

What: WE CAN's First Annual Meeting
Where: Cultural Center of Cape Cod, 307 Old Main St., South Yarmouth
When: Thursday, Dec. 1, 5 - 7