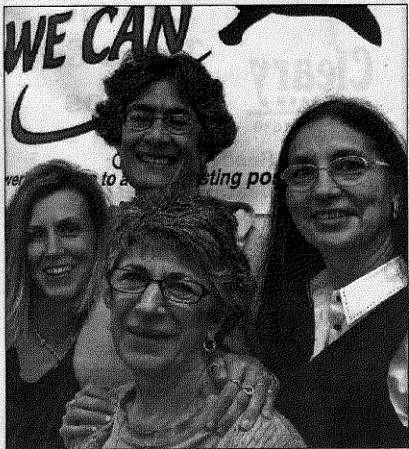


Empowering women WE CAN celebrates 10 years

By Anne Garton



WE CAN staff, from top clockwise: Andi Genser, Stephanie Boosahda, Mary Jaynes and Kara Kennedy Duff.

HARWICH PORT — WE CAN is a tiny organization doing a huge job. The phone rings nonstop in the cramped 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 10 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 nonprofits 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 aging, from financial security to job uncertainty," said Genser. "WE CAN listens, offers hope and gives practical help. That's it, in a nutshell."

Until WE CAN (which stands for Women's Empowerment through Cape Area Networking) transformed itself 10 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 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 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 what will be its first meeting Dec. 1.

"Networking is the key," said Pam Kulka, WE CAN's special adviser 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 nonprofit'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.

Services

Free one-on-one legal advice from volunteer attorneys specializing mainly in family law as well as other areas of law.

Workshops such as Everything You Want to Know About Family Law But Are Afraid to Ask; Divorce Boot Camp, designed to empower women who need to represent themselves in court; and From Surviving to Thriving given by a professional life coach.

Ten-word Story Contest

Prizes to be awarded during the celebration:
Deadline: Midnight, Nov. 1
To submit: info@wecancenter.org

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.

"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 (please cut this out: 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 individuals all over the Cape, and is sponsoring a story contest.

"We want to acknowledge and celebrate what WE CAN has achieved over our 10 years serving the Cape community and the many people who have been central to our success," said Genser.

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

If you go ...

What: WE CAN's 10th Anniversary Celebration and annual meeting

When: Thursday, Dec. 1, 5 to 7 p.m.

Where: Cultural Center of Cape Cod, 307 Old Main St., South Yarmouth

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