

# *Courage - Creativity - Cooperation*

The early years of Women's Services, Inc.



Written by Doris Foster  
Edited by Michele McCandless

## THE BEGINNING



Reflecting on those early days Ranney remembered: “Carol Overmyer had that wonderful community organizer spirit in her. She was such an asset to me in my role and to the community in helping to identify problems. When we two put our heads together during those many late-night conversations we had at her Spring Street home front parlor, the creative approaches to problems we came up with amazed both of us. It would be fair to say that WSI was born in the Spring Street front parlor.”

The year was 1977. Jimmy Carter was President and Walter Mondale was Vice President; Seattle Slew won horse racing’s Triple Crown; “Annie” was a smash musical on Broadway, and Alex Haley’s “Roots” was a TV sensation. It was the International Year of the Woman and the year Women’s Services, Incorporated was established.

During the early 1970’s, The Crawford County Drug and Alcohol Commission was charged with overseeing state and federal funds used to “wage a war on drugs,” as part of a federal Program begun in 1971. Rich Chafey was the chair of the Commission and Michael Ranney was the Executive Director. Ranney, working closely with Carol Overmyer, who was a counselor at the Crawford County Drug and Alcohol Counseling Center, had observed that women in Crawford County were often not able to take advantage of the services being offered.

Following Ranney’s recommendation, The Commission convened a Task Force to review the need for improved services to women. Doris Foster served as

Chair of the Task Force while Ranney and Overmyer provided administrative support. Task Force inquiries had shown that

no agency existed to address problems confronting women, so, at a December 14, 1976 meeting, Kathé Cairns, on behalf of the Task Force, reported to the Crawford County Commissioners that the Women's Task Force for the Drug and Alcohol Commission had decided to incorporate as an entity no longer connected to the Commission or to any other agency. The new group would be empowered to define the needs of women in the county and to search for solutions. By March 22, 1977, the Task Force had chosen the name Women's Services, Incorporated for the new organization. By July, 1977, with the help of attorney Mary Ann Kirkpatrick, the incorporation process was completed and Women's Services, Incorporated was officially launched.

## LITTLE RED HEN PHILOSOPHY



By August of 1977, the Board of Directors of Women's Services was focusing on the goal of bringing the special needs of women to the attention of the community. To that end, the group agreed to sponsor, facilitate, and/or, as a last resort, to develop programs pertaining to women—in effect to join together the resources of the community to

serve the needs of women. To assess the needs of women, Women's Services sought information from agencies serving women and from women themselves. Students from a Sociology class taught by Dr. Elizabeth Pierce Stewart at Edinboro University helped to survey the community concerning where respondents would seek shelter in an emergency; that is, where would they go for help if because of fire, weather disaster, utility outages or other circumstances, they would not be able to go home. The



In 1979, Kathé recalled those early efforts to establish a shelter: “The Greenhouse, began in the summer of 1977 with two statements. The first statement was recognition that women in distress, whether from domestic violence or any other cause, had no place to go for refuge in this northwestern Pennsylvania county seat. The second was that such a need should and could be met and we would do it. Although what followed may have seemed to be the result of a fortuitous combination of people, community mood, chance remarks and good timing, it was the personal commitment of considerable time and energy by a group of women that made it possible to tap those elements.”

startling result of the survey was that none of the agencies the women mentioned as places to seek shelter had available any type of shelter except paying the cost for someone to stay in a hotel. At that time, no existing Crawford County agency had the staff or the funding to take on such a project. After making sure that no other agency could assume the project, then, and only then, did Women’s Services begin to seek a way to meet the need for emergency shelter for women and their children. The resulting philosophy has come to be known as the “The Little Red Hen Philosophy”. When no other agency felt able to tackle the shelter project, Women’s Services said, “Well, then, we’ll do it ourselves!” And we did!

## THE GREENHOUSE

It was at a June, 1977 meeting that Kathé Cairns, the chair of the committee studying the shelter project (later known as The Greenhouse Committee), suggested Women’s Services undertake the project of providing a facility for women in distress. The message was - either sit around and talk about it, study it, try to find funds for it, worry, worry, worry - or - do

it! The group consensus was to do it.

There was a possibility that a house on Grove Street owned by the Sisters of St. Joseph might be available as a shelter location. That house on Grove Street happened to be painted green; as the shelter project took form, the shelter began to be called The Greenhouse. As it happened the Grove Street house was not available but the name The Greenhouse became a symbolic name for a place of safety and warmth imbued with a nurturing atmosphere.

In her 1979 report, Kathé Cairns described some of the guiding principles that set forth how The Greenhouse would serve the community. It was agreed the service would be kept simple and lengthy forms and explanations would not be required. The Greenhouse would be for “women in distress” offering shelter and prevention services as well. Women’s Services planned to rely on community support to sustain the shelter if at all possible and to avoid the hassles of government regulations and red tape. Guests would be charged a nominal fee, but no one would be denied service due to an inability to pay.



On that opening day, January 9, 1978, the first guest arrived in a snowstorm. The car bringing the woman couldn’t get to the shelter and she had to walk part of the way. When that first person arrived to stay at The Greenhouse, she was greeted by Helene Elko, Resident Director. Helene’s

dedication to the cause of offering shelter to women in distress and faithful service enabled The Greenhouse to survive. She lived at The Greenhouse and for the first few months of operation, received, in addition to room and board, only \$100 per month; she had one day off a week. Volunteers from the community also helped The Greenhouse

to thrive. During the first 18 months of operation, these volunteers contributed more than 1,200 hours of service. Helene served as Resident Director until May of 1980.

Kathé concluded: "These decisions have stood us in good stead. For women needing the service, The Greenhouse has been an accessible, reassuring service. To community agencies it has become a resource and option not previously available to their clients, and to Meadville and Crawford County, The Greenhouse has come to represent the community's response to its own problem - an answer that is basic, straightforward, and appropriate."

## WE GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS



As The Greenhouse Committee considered the question of funding the proposed shelter, the Reverend Father Robert C. Martin, Jr., the rector of Christ Church Episcopal in Meadville, offered to inquire about requesting funds from the Episcopal Church Executive Council of

New York on behalf of Women's Services. His efforts resulted in acquiring seed funds that made it possible to cover start-up costs such as rent, utilities, and food for the first six weeks. By this time, property located on Prospect Street in Meadville and owned by Tony Marceca, had been chosen as the location for the shelter. In an enthusiastic spirit of barn-raising, the community donated furniture, appliances, equipment, food, and all manner of household goods. These contributions made it possible for Women's Services to announce that The Greenhouse would open on January 9, 1978.



The first Greenhouse

On March 3, 1978, additional operating funds for The Greenhouse were donated by some 200 invited guests at a benefit dinner held at The Country Club. Also in the spring of 1978, Women's Services, in the spirit of working cooperatively in the community, applied for and was granted membership in the United

Way of Western Crawford County. The United Way began providing supplemental financial support. In the fall of 1978, the United Thank Offering of the Episcopal Church approved a two-year grant which assured financial stability through 1980.

Before 1978 ended, Women's Services had joined the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence; however, Women's Services turned down a grant of \$50,000 offered by PCADV.

*"After much soul-searching, and upon advice of our legal counsel, the funding was rejected as not being concurrent with the philosophies of Women's Services and the directions in which we were proceeding."*

Our standoffish attitude toward PCADV was also evident in our response to their letter of welcome. Dated December 10, 1978, the letter written by Secretary Marilyn Black began:

*"Thank you for your welcome to Women's Services. As new members of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, we intend to participate as fully and effectively as circumstances reasonably permit."*

This letter also chided PCADV:

*“Apparently, however, some of your file information regarding Women’s Services has not been updated. Please, never, never, use the street address of The Greenhouse as the mailing address for correspondence such as was used on your recent letter. The official mailing address for all programs of Women’s Services is P.O. Box 537, Meadville, PA 16335.”*

At the first fall annual meeting in September 1978, with the membership now numbering 25, the Treasurer’s report, summarized by Mary Alice Knox, indicated that the total Women’s Services’ income year-to-date was \$13,498; there was \$2,300 cash on hand. The United Way funds in the amount of \$16,000 were granted for The Greenhouse project for the year beginning on November 1, 1978. Notification had been received that the Episcopal United Thank Offering had granted The Greenhouse \$18,000 for 1979-80. At this meeting a “dream” was expressed regarding Women’s Services eventually serving as a centralized communications and service link for women and families in Crawford County - a women’s center.

## READ ALL ABOUT IT!



The intent to work closely with other community groups along with identifying needs and making sure no other agency had plans to meet those needs was a founding

principle of Women’s Services. Even before the Task Force became Women’s Services, The Prism, a Newsletter of Interest to Women and Families in Meadville, PA, was being published. The Editorial Board was headed by Marilyn Black.



The Prism became a project operated by Women's Services, beginning with the April, 1978 issue. Quoting from that issue:

*"The Prism will continue to be published monthly by volunteers. This newsletter is intended to illustrate the common concerns among women and their friends; to acknowledge their accomplishments; to consider life options; and to assist in fulfilling selected options by serving as a resource for the readers."*

Originally free, a subscription fee of \$3.00 was charged beginning in June, 1978. At that writing, the members of the Editorial Board were Marilyn Black and Dorothy Handy. Others who served on the Editorial Board through the years of publication were: Barbara Adams, Ellen Barker, Kathé Cairns, Mary Davies, Anne Jones, Nancy Stutzman, and Antonia Thomas. Publication of The Prism was discontinued in January, 1983, but until that time it was the primary means of communicating with WSI members and the community. The Prism was succeeded by a newsletter called WSI News.

The name The Prism was selected for the newsletter in the hope that, just as a tiny prism can split white light into a rainbow and then pull the rainbow back into a single stream, the newsletter would be a tool to illustrate the special interests and common concerns of its readers.

In the spring of 1978, when Helene Elko had been at The Greenhouse for several months, WSI hired two more employees. In April, Helen Cooper was hired under the auspices of C.E.T.A. Helen's job title was Projects Coordinator. Also in April, Margaret Dillen began working weekday mornings as a receptionist/clerk at The Greenhouse. Margaret and Helene Elko prepared a handbook for those who volunteered at The Greenhouse. Margaret also assisted in greeting guests, delivering messages, maintaining daily records, and typing correspondence. Margaret was employed under the auspices of the Older Workers Program, a special

C.E.T.A. project for Crawford County residents 55 years of age or older.

## LET IT RAIN

As The Greenhouse flourished, Women's Services continued to assess other community needs. Several topics were discussed at monthly membership meetings. One of the topics that no other agency was then addressing concerned helping women find employment.



Women's Services then focused on jobs and job training for women. From this pursuit, the Pre-Employment Program ("PREP") was begun in 1983. PREP was developed to assist women to move from economic dependency to self-sufficiency. Carolyn Yartz

helped to establish the program; then, for a few years, Christine Tucker was in charge. At first she worked from an office located in the YWCA, but later moved to the WSI offices. From 1987 until its close in 1993, Connie Graham oversaw the PREP program. During the ten years of the program, WSI helped women complete G.E.D. programs and life skills classes; assisted them in applying for financial aid and completing college admission forms; they were taught about budgets; advised about resume preparation and given advice concerning job interviews. Through a program evaluation process, WSI determined that PREP services were being provided by other agencies within the community. Because of the principle of not duplicating community services, the program was closed in June, 1993.

Maintaining a 24-hour-a-day hotline for The Greenhouse grew into the Information and Referral Service ("I & R"). However, The WSI Board of Directors realized that the I & R, though valuable, was taking much

time to manage and was not really a fit with our mission. This program was eventually “spun off” to the County Commissioners and relocated to the Courthouse. At this stage of its development, WSI was considered an “umbrella” agency. The agency



brochure featured a logo of a woman sheltered by a floating umbrella enclosed in a circle. The leaflet contained four sections: Women’s Services, Inc.; Pre Employment Program; The Greenhouse; and Victim Support Services.

## WORKING TOGETHER



To provide counseling and advocacy services to victims of sexual assault or abuse, Rape Crisis Services of Crawford County was begun in 1976 and was sponsored by the Meadville City

Hospital Mental Health Center. In 1980, the Mental Health Center informed Rape Crisis Services that dramatic funding and staff cutbacks would limit their ability to offer coordination and training services to rape crisis volunteers. At that time, the Victim Support Network was incorporated to become the governing body of Victim Support Services (formerly Rape Crisis Services). For the next two years, eight volunteers provided 24 –hour direct services to victims of sexual assault or abuse. They also conducted community education and prevention programming. Victim Support Services became a member of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape in 1983 and received funding from them for 1983-84. The United Way of Western Crawford County

provided the required match monies to assure the PCAR grant, but stipulated that the Victim Support Network seek a local organization to act as an umbrella agency for Victim Support Services. Women's Services was the natural choice. Victim Support Services became a program of Women's Services in 1984. By 1986, the umbrella-agency model was replaced by the current dual center one. As a dual center, WSI responds to victims of domestic violence and to victims of sexual violence.

## GROWING PAINS

By September, 1979, WSI membership had numbered as high as 80 members. Marilyn Black, Editor of the Prism and the faithful Secretary for the infant organization, became President. Her leadership combined an understanding of structure and order with an even-handed administration style. Marilyn served as President until May of 1980 when, because of the demands of her employment, she resigned. Laurie Tynan agreed to take the helm as President. Laurie led the group with great skill until September, 1980, when because of her employment, she resigned. Both Marilyn and Laurie were applauded for their work with Women's Services and their resignations were accepted with regret.

To celebrate the third anniversary of The Greenhouse, in January, 1981, Kathé Cairns presented these remarks: "We stood here three years ago and pledged to serve women in distress - and in doing so to complement, not duplicate or compete with, existing services. We said we would do it simply and without red tape and that we would operate in a fiscally responsible manner.

In the three years since then, with the help of people such as you, The Greenhouse has been able to meet that commitment. With friends like you who have given of their ideas, enthusiasm, energy and time, The Greenhouse is more than just a shelter; it is a symbol that our community

cares. For those of us who have been directly involved, The Greenhouse has been a catalyst for deep and lasting friendships, for new respect and regard for others, and for the chance to develop skills we never thought we would want.”

In May 1980, Helene Elko tendered her resignation which was accepted with sincere regret. Helene had been at The Greenhouse since the first day of operation. Following Helene’s resignation, Victoria Ziegler was hired as Resident Director of The Greenhouse.

A quote from that period explains the state of the Board at that time:

*“The late spring and early summer months saw a tired Board of Directors and staff deep in the work of renegotiating the lease for The Greenhouse and reviewing all the committees of Women’s Services.”*

“The dark side of Title XX is the uncertainty of its future because of cuts being made in all domestic programs. We have assurances that the funding is secure for now, but we are watching the situation closely and counting our pennies and our friends. We still and always will have been grateful of local support in the form of material and financial donations and volunteer help.”

The Greenhouse Committee, after reexamining its goals and purposes, merged with the Board of Directors in June to form a new, enlarged Board which was charged with responsibility for The Greenhouse. The Greenhouse Auxiliary was formed in June, 1980 with the purpose of supporting and assisting the Board to operate The Greenhouse.

In September of 1980, Kathé Cairns, the inspired leader who had led The Greenhouse

Committee with such ardor and success, brought her energy and enthusiasm to the job of Board President. She served until the 1981 Annual Meeting.

In January, 1981, to commemorate the third anniversary of The Greenhouse opening, Kathé acknowledged the tremendous community effort that had been required to open the shelter. In that same address, Kathé announced two emerging developments. The first development was that WSI had applied for and was receiving a Title XX Pennsylvania



Administrative Assistant, Lacinda Himes takes a hotline call in 1983 as Board President Marie Hamilton and Maxine Fulmer, Director of Crawford County Information and Referral Agency look on.

Coalition Against Domestic Violence (“PCADV”) grant for \$30,000 and the second was that we had been exploring the possibility of transferring The Greenhouse in its entirety to another community organization.

On July 1, 1981, Title XX funding began. Receiving this funding required quite an adjustment to statistics, records, and paperwork.

As Kathé remarked in 1981, “We have had the good fortune to have people of great patience, savvy, and grit who have confronted the myriad requirements and met them - not only The Greenhouse staff but our untiring and unflappable Treasurer, Rita Fickenscher, and our dedicated, wonderfully supportive and financially shrewd bookkeeper, Susan Kerr. I must digress and tell you that Susan is so good at what she does that even PCADV, which oversees all this funding, wrote to tell us that Susan’s work is unusually clear and precise and that our records are in perfect order. But it’s not only her expertise we are so grateful for - it’s Susan’s outspoken belief in Women’s Services. Thank you, Susan.” Since that time, PCADV has continued to be a vital funding source for Women’s Services.

In 1980 the Board of Directors of Women's Services contacted the YWCA Board of Directors to suggest the YWCA take over operation of The Greenhouse. Why did Women's Services want to give away The Greenhouse when it was a successful and necessary service in the community? The answer to that question was twofold. First of all, Women's Services was started to be an innovative force in the community to help meet the needs of women. It was always a declared goal to encourage existing agencies to operate the services found to be needed in our county. Operating a service itself was really a "last resort" according to Women's Services philosophy. The second reason was that Women's Services members had learned over the past three years that part-time, volunteer supervisors were not the best arrangement for employees or for those doing the supervising.

The YWCA Board of Directors chose not to sponsor The Greenhouse. What did change was that the members of The Greenhouse Committee merged with the members of the Women's Services Board of Directors to form a new, enlarged Board.



At the 1981 Annual Meeting, Rita Fickenscher was elected President. In true grassroots style, WSI was an organization composed of dues-paying members. In 1981, there were three levels of membership available: Voting Members-\$10, Contributing Members-\$25, and Sustaining Members-\$50. It was a firm principle that the dues fee would be waived for anyone who had given volunteer service to the organization, though a mechanism for determining the value

of the service never materialized. In addition to President Rita, other officers were: Vice President-Doris Foster, Secretary-Marie Hamilton, and Treasurer-Marge Hopkins. Board members included Kathy Brie, Sandy Byham, Nancy Frank, Ginny McClellan, and Marion McCoy. At the 1982 Annual Meeting, Rita commented, "Now that the growing pains are over, we need to reevaluate the goals of WSI." At that meeting, Marie Hamilton was elected President.

Of course, the "growing pains" were not over. Marie Hamilton's wisdom and dedication helped WSI to grow and to change. To quote from Marie's 1983 President's Report, "Every time true dedication raised its friendly head, we were able to accomplish much; as a result, a change for the better usually occurred. This happened a lot during the past year!"

One of the major changes concerned purchasing a new property to serve as WSI headquarters and The Greenhouse. The purchase was authorized on September 30, 1983. To finance improvements for the newly acquired property, the Board, led by Marie, conducted a Capital Fund Drive. Marie continued as President through the exciting months of 1984.



Another exciting change for the better was that WSI became the sponsor for the Victim Support Network and, as part of the process, the two Boards of Directors merged. On May 7, 1983 the Victim Support Network Board recorded this resolution: "Be it resolved that Victim Support Network requests Women's Service, Inc. to invite us to their Board, and give us a minimum of four seats; and that Women's





Judy Griffin, Women's Services  
first Executive Director.

Services, Inc. will add to their purpose the provision for and participation in providing victim support services to Crawford County."

By July of 1984, WSI was able, at last, to hire an Executive Director. Judy Griffin, then Director of Victim Support Services for WSI, was one of the applicants for the new position. The June 9, 1984

Personnel Committee Report reads, "The Committee read all the applications for Executive Director and interviewed three applicants. It was a unanimous decision to offer Judy Griffin the position, which she has accepted." Judy served as Executive Director until 1996 and the years of her directorship were ones during which WSI became a respected agency dedicated to fulfilling the mission "to meet the needs of women and their children in Crawford County by sponsoring, facilitating, and developing programs that meet those needs."

In the fall of 1984, when Marie Hamilton insisted on having a rest, Rita Fickenscher once again assumed the duties of President. At the end of 1984 and the beginning of 1985, the move to the new location was made. Later in 1985, Rita moved from the community and Bobbi Santora became President.



Judy is still an active part of  
Women's Services today.

*to be continued ....*

The title of this account of the founding and early years of Women's Services, Incorporated is "Courage Creativity Cooperation" because these three qualities were the watch words of those early days. The Women's Services of 2012 is very different in many ways from the original model. Yet though many changes have occurred, the mission has remained virtually the same. Challenges abound; large measures of courage, creativity, and cooperation are still needed. In his Landmark book, *Citizen Boards at Work*, Harleigh Trekker admonished:

*"One thing about the future, however, is certain - rapid, revolutionary changes will continue. Boards must meet the challenge of change with the awareness of the fact that they, as community policy makers, have a special responsibility to see to it that human needs are met to the fullest extent possible. Challenges to the system will continue. Every community service agency of today came about because someone or some group challenged the status quo and worked for change. It will be the continuing task of the Board to respond to all voices that challenge them."*

The group that banded together in the late 1970's to create a grassroots organization to meet the needs of women and their children in Crawford County, was surely challenging the status quo. The agency that is known as Women's Services, Inc. today continues that challenge. Board members and staff seek to find ways to kindle and rekindle that spark of hope for each person who receives services and to let as many people as possible know that they are there to help. They are guided by the dream of guaranteeing to each person that somewhere solace, advice, and the means to live life to the fullest can be found. A favorite quotation from Margaret Mead sums up the value of these endeavors:

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*