

A SUCCESS STORY

by Judy A. Turetsky

One night, Sandy, a woman who had been married over ten years, and had suffered beatings since the first year of her marriage, found herself driving around all night with no place to go. She was afraid that if her husband beat her one more time she would retaliate, hurting her husband badly. She had suffered injuries severe enough to require medical treatment, but the doctor had not given her any help in finding a way to alleviate the violence in her home life. She had tried pressing criminal charges against her husband, but the charges had been dropped. She was becoming desperate. Sandy was also becoming increasingly depressed. Getting out of bed in the morning was a struggle. She had no job and was worried about how she could support her children if she left her husband.

Sandy found the telephone number of WIT's hotline and decided to call. She talked to the telephone counselor about her situation, her feelings, and her needs. During the conversation, Sandy decided that she would like to come in for a crisis counseling appointment. During the counseling session, which was scheduled for the following day, Sandy made several things very clear: She had specific goals, of going to school and finding a job, of staying with her husband until she was financially able to leave, and of not being beaten again.

During the sessions that followed, Sandy worked with a counselor to discover ways in which she might meet her goals. The patterns of abuse were explored so that she was able to recognize how she fed into the dynamics of violence. Sandy was then able to discover new options for

relating to her husband and for avoiding violent confrontation.

The changes in Sandy's behavior have been dramatic. Her husband has recognized that he can no longer approach her in the same ways. This became something of a threat to him. He began to withhold money, making it difficult for Sandy to properly care for herself and their three children. Nevertheless, Sandy's new-found sense of confidence and self-worth prevailed. She found a job and is planning to attend night school. Her determination to leave the situation is still strong, and her confidence in herself and her sense of control over her life has increased. The depression has subsided and Sandy has managed to avoid any further beatings since her initial contact with WIT!

Women In Transition: The Organization, Its
Services, and Divorce Reform Advocacy

by Judy A. Turetsky

Women In Transition (WIT) is a multi-service organization for women in major life transitions. WIT was founded in 1971 and has seen much change and growth since then. The newest program at WIT is a vocational support program for re-entry female heads of household. The majority of people served, however, remain those in situations of marital crisis: separation, divorce, abuse, or widowhood. The transition from marital interdependence or dependence to a single and/or single-parenthood life-

style is one that encompasses virtually every aspect of a woman's life: emotional support systems change; social events are approached differently; friendships may vanish, shift or blossom; finances alter; even extended family relationships are often severely affected.

WHO WIT IS

The task force on Women in Transition was founded in 1971 to meet the needs of women in the process of divorce. The Women's Liberation Center had received many calls from women asking questions like: "How can I get a divorce?"; "Where can I find a lawyer? I don't have much money and I need one who won't charge a fortune."; "I'm separated and feel like I'm going crazy. Is this normal? Where can I find a therapist who will understand?" The lack of resources to help women deal with these crises was the impetus behind the formation of Women In Transition.

WIT was the first organization of its kind, and expended a great deal of energy seeking and obtaining enough support from local foundations to get started. During the early years, however, the funding was modest and erratic. There were several times when money ran out and WIT had to close down temporarily until new proposals were funded. In spite of these difficulties, the collective produced a book, Women's Survival Manual: A Feminist Handbook on Separation and Divorce (later revised for national distribution as Women in Transition: A Feminist Handbook on Separation and Divorce, published by Charles Scribner's Sons), sought and obtained additional funding, and continued to provide services to women.

In 1975, a major change occurred. WIT became affiliated with the

West Philadelphia Mental Health Consortium, one of the oldest and largest CMHC's in the country. This partnership between a traditional and an alternative agency, is unique and ongoing. As a counseling service of a mental health center, WIT was written into the ongoing budget of the Philadelphia County Office of Mental Health/Mental Retardation. WIT has retained its separate identity, serving women from all over Philadelphia and the outlying areas, and maintains programs outside the scope of mental health.

WIT continued to work on issues of importance to women, and became affiliated with several organizations. WIT is a founding member of both Womens Way, a fund-raising coalition of six women's service organizations in Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a state-wide coalition of hotlines, shelters and counseling centers serving battered women. WIT has also collaborated with other groups: The District Attorney's Project on Domestic Violence, funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Act, is a cooperative effort between the district attorney's office and three women's organizations in Philadelphia; the vocational support program for re-entry single-head-of-household women, which was funded by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Office of Human Development, has brought WIT into a cooperative work relationship with CETA.

Throughout the changes and growth, staff have maintained a feminist perspective. As a feminist organization, WIT sees a strong relationship between societal attitudes towards women and individual women's own self-perception. The traditional isolation of women from each other works to reinforce the individual's fear that her difficulties are totally

due to her own inadequacies and to obscure recognition of the societal pressures which may contribute to or cause individual problems. The institution of marriage adds to many of women's problems. The concept of a woman being "complete" only if she has a man is crippling to those who choose either never to marry, or to leave marriages. The devaluation of non-compensated work (i.e. homemaking) causes feelings of unworthiness in women who have chosen to be homemakers. Wives and mothers who hold paid jobs generally find that they are still responsible for all or most of the homemaking duties. This causes conflicts because most people are unable to juggle both roles as successfully as they feel they should. This double bind situation affects virtually all women. At WIT, women can learn from each other the ways in which they, as women, have internalized sex role expectations. They can share experiences, emotions, and problem-solving skills, thereby learning about themselves, their strengths, and their differences from and commonality with other women. The experience of sharing with other women is one that can help a woman turn a stressful, crisis period of her life into a positive experience of growth and increased self-confidence and independence.

All WIT counselors view their roles as largely facilitative in nature. Counselors do not make decisions for the client, but rather help the client come to her own decisions about what she most needs at any particular period of her life. This is important in order for women in crisis to begin to take control over their own lives, and to sense the power they can exercise, rather than the powerlessness they may have experienced in constantly responding to other people's needs, desires, and directives. Often, a woman who calls WIT's hotline is encouraged for the first time to think of herself, her needs, her desires, instead of

everyone else's. By helping women take control over their lives in this way, WIT staff works to help women to achieve independence, rather than merely to shift the focus of their dependence from their spouse to a counselor.

SERVICES

WIT provides a wide range of services from hotline counseling, information and referrals, to crisis counseling and support groups. WIT also works in the community, presenting survival skills workshops for low income women and providing training to mental health professionals.

Hotline. The WIT hotline operates five days per week, approximately seven hours per day. This is an increase from the early days when WIT was able to staff the hotline only six hours per week, and was unable to staff it at all during some of those previously mentioned shut-downs. Staffers handle approximately 250 calls per month from people needing to know anything from what divorce laws are like in Pennsylvania (more on that later), to where they can find immediate shelter from abusive situations.

The hotline at WIT is unusual in that women can obtain many services from a single resource. If a woman needs to talk to sort out her feelings, or to determine her immediate priorities, she can do that. If she needs a referral for counseling, legal help or job counseling, that is also available. This service is a tremendous help and surprise to the many women who have had to deal with systems which require personal interviews for all services. The hotline is a cost-effective service. Women do not