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## **IN PERSON; For Battered Women, An Avid Advocate 'To Save the World'**

By MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO

AT the age of 72 and financially secure with her children on their own, Evelyn Jacobs Ortner could easily choose the genteel suburban life of country clubbing and shopping.

Instead, over the last decade, Mrs. Ortner has chosen to run the Unity Group Inc., a nonprofit advocacy organization for battered women and their dependent children, which she founded. The group, a United Way member agency, has aided hundreds of battered women around the country, free of charge, without taking government funds or paying salaries.

"I don't need a salary," Mrs. Ortner said in an interview at her elegant but unpretentious home. "I live perfectly comfortably. Why should I take any money away from a project? Volunteerism is, to me, a very important thing, and everybody who is able to do it should do it."

She says volunteerism was part of her upbringing. At about age 8, she said, she organized a group of children, which she called the Charity Girls, to perform plays, sing and dance for the residents of the Daughters of Israel Home for the Aged in Newark.

She went on to attend the University of Vermont but transferred to the University of Pennsylvania when her husband began teaching there. She received a master's degree from Drew University in Madison.

Over the years she raised two children -- Peter, now 41 and a photographer, and Nicole, 39, an ice skating instructor.

In 1990, Mrs. Ortner started Unity "with three people and \$15," she recalled. Today the organization has a 10-member board and hundreds of supporters who pay an annual \$25 membership fee to help victims of domestic violence find counseling, legal, medical and other services. Its support group for battered women, run by formerly battered women, meets the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month at the Millburn Public Library.

Membership fees, income from a thrift shop in downtown Union, grants, donations from private businesses and fund-raisers like the \$60-a-person cocktail party and silent auction at the Short Hills Hilton last March helped the group purchase its own shelter recently. A spacious house in suburban Essex County, painted by volunteers and decorated in part with furnishings donated by the Short Hills Hilton, it is expected to open around Labor Day.

"From nothing we now pay rent in a shop, we purchased a house that cost over \$350,000, we have a mortgage," Mrs. Ortner said. "We meet every single need that a battered woman has. Prior to having our

shelter we would have to filter her out to the system."

The Unity Group's founding philosophy forbids members to be compensated for their work. But the organization recently hired a lawyer to direct the new shelter and to take over the referral work and myriad follow-up calls necessary to get victims the help they need -- calls that Mrs. Ortner has been handling at all hours from an office in her home.

Her husband of 52 years, Robert, a retired economist, said: "She has enormous passion for what she's doing, and I guess even a great deal of momentum into it. She has hold of something. To some extent, it may have hold of her, which is my only concern."

His wife's soft, green eyes filled with tears in response to the words of her husband, whom she has known since she was a 14-year-old high school student.

To relieve the stress of her work, she and her husband like to go dancing at the Short Hills Hilton on Saturday nights; the jitterbug, she said, is a favorite.

But frequently, she is consumed by her work. In a voice charged with emotion, Mrs. Ortner said that in this country, a woman is battered every nine seconds. "During the period of the Vietnam War, we lost about 55,000 men and women," she said. "During that same period, we lost 55,000 battered women. They're dead."

According to the New Jersey State Police, in 1997 -- the last year for which information was available -- there were 82,627 domestic violence offenses reported by the police in the state, down 3 percent from 1996, when there were 85,018. But there were 50 murders resulting from domestic violence in 1997, up 16 percent from the 43 murders committed in 1996.

Mrs. Ortner became aware of the enormity of the problem of domestic violence in the 1980's, while working as an advisor and speechwriter for Margaret Heckler, Secretary of the Federal Department of Health and Human Services in the Reagan Administration. She and her husband, then senior vice president at the Bank of New York, moved to Washington when he was asked to be under secretary for economic affairs at the Commerce Department.

"Supposedly we were only going to be down for a year, but we stayed for eight years -- for both Administrations and some of the transition to the Bush Administration," recalled Mrs. Ortner, who also represented the Department of Health and Human Services on women's issues and consumer affairs at the White House.

When she returned to New Jersey, she learned that her suburban area had virtually no centers to support victims of domestic violence. "People don't want to look at domestic violence because they don't want to admit that it exists," she said. To those who think abuse doesn't occur in exclusive neighborhoods, she replies, "Phooey."

Upscale women, she contends, often have a difficult time leaving their abusers because they're dependent on an upper-class life style. They will often say, "Where am I going to get this kind of money?" she said. "I don't want to leave the country club, I want my children to go to Harvard. How can I exist in a little garden apartment?"

She calls the domestic violence dynamic "a cult of one."

The methods that cults use to coerce submission from their members are the same ones a batterer uses in an abusive household, reasons Mrs. Ortner. "We're looking at mind control, we're looking at total isolation, we're looking at terrible punishments," she said.

The batterer, who typically has grown up in an abusive household, she said, "is intent to control another human being, and the means to it, first and foremost, is mind control." Claiming to be the only one who truly loves her, an abusive husband will often isolate his wife from friends and family members.

"She could be virtually on the same street with her family, but she never sees them again," said Mrs. Ortner. Tactics include alternating indulgences with threats and beatings, and enforcing trivial demands to develop a habit of compliance in an atmosphere of anxiety and hopelessness.

Although he may publicly compliment his wife and display affection so he is outwardly perceived as a good guy, "a batterer knows to batter between here and here," said Mrs. Ortner, motioning between her collarbone and thigh. "The point of that is no bruises should show."

The official response to domestic violence cases is often, "When she's ready, she'll leave," said Mrs. Ortner, adding, "In a casket?"

As for the batterers, she continued, they always say: "You made me do it. If you had just done what I'd asked you to do, this never would have happened. Everything is your fault."

According to Mrs. Ortner, "Customarily, when there are children and he begins to molest or abuse the children, that's when this woman will get motivated, not to save herself, but to save the children."

Although she doesn't keep statistics on her "clients," as she calls the women she helps, she estimates that "95 percent of my stories are success stories," meaning that the women have left their abusive husbands and remade a life for themselves and their children. Some women, typically 50 and older and overwhelmed by the prospect of starting over, have returned to their abusers, she admitted. "I call these my lost people," she said.

"A battered woman doesn't stay there willingly," she continued. "She has been mind-controlled and brainwashed. I can't say that emphatically enough."

Mrs. Ortner feels so strongly about the issue that she believes the courts should, in some cases, appoint guardians to victims of domestic violence, and that the state's Adult Protective Services Act, enacted to address abuse among the elderly, exploitation, and neglect, should apply to battered women. "Do you think a battered woman knows what's in her best interest?" she asked.

Her critics contend she is climbing a slippery legal slope, since appointing a guardian for a battered woman would deprive her of her constitutional rights. "I'm trying to restore her constitutional rights; somebody else has deprived her of her rights. She's no longer a free person," counters Mrs. Ortner.

Although New Jersey's Prevention of Domestic Violence Act is considered one of the strongest laws of its kind in the country, "whether or not it's operationally functioning for us at the maximum is quite another issue," said Mrs. Ortner. She has become a proponent of vertical prosecution, which she said was pioneered in San Diego, to insure that anyone involved in a domestic violence case, from the judge on down, has been specially trained in the issue. And she has little patience for government agencies that require battered women to meet certain conditions, like residency requirements, before agreeing to help them. "I will not work that way," she said. "No one is ever turned away."

A detractor once said of her within earshot, "Evelyn thinks she can save the world, and someone has to tell her that she can't." Yet, her efforts have garnered recognition from high places, including a letter of commendation from President Clinton in 1994. In March, the New Jersey Senate and General Assembly passed a joint legislative resolution saluting the Unity Group's work. More recently, Mrs. Ortner received a certificate of appreciation from the Justice Department and a Governor's Volunteer Award for Human Needs, presented at Drumthwacket.

With the sun now in her sign of Leo, Evelyn Ortner is looking forward to turning over many of her duties to the new shelter director. Yet she expects to continue to support the Unity Group as a formidable fund-raiser and outspoken spokesperson. "I don't take this casually," she said, ferociously lion-hearted to the last.

#### Whom to Notify

Following are groups that are available to assist battered women and the telephone numbers where they can be reached.

\* The Unity Group Inc., P.O. Box 333, Millburn, N.J. 07041; (973) 761-4663. The organization holds a support group for battered women the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at the Millburn Public Library. There is no charge. The Unity Group's Thrift Shop is at 1999 Morris Avenue, Union; (908) 687-7060.

\* National Domestic Violence Hotline, (800) 799-SAFE (7233).

\* New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women refers callers to domestic violence programs in their county, (609) 584-8107.

Photo: Evelyn Ortner, founder of a nonprofit advocacy organization for battered women, says she chose not to "live perfectly comfortably." (Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times)