

HISTORY: The Birth of Transitions

In 1975, a group of women in the Sunbury/Selinsgrove/Lewisburg area who were mostly single, separated or divorced got together to discuss shared problems and concerns. The meetings were held in a private home and the conversations focused on issues of divorce, childcare, custody and visitation, careers, finances and relationships. The support group met regularly for several months, but eventually the meetings became more sporadic.

Some of the core women in this group were staff at Susquehanna Legal Services (SLS) in Sunbury. They recognized the importance of this support network for women in transition and for the increasing number of women clients who were physically battered. It became clear that battered women needed not only emotional support and legal advice, but physical safety as well. This core group (including SLS staff and some of the original support group members) persisted in their vision of a comprehensive support network for victims of domestic violence.

A small grant made it possible to open an office on the Selinsgrove State Hospital grounds in 1976 and a network of volunteers and safe homes were established. The group was legally incorporated at that time under the name Susquehanna Valley Women in Transition (SVWIT). When the grant ran out, the office closed but the informal network of support continued, mostly through the efforts of SLS staff and a small core of SVWIT Volunteers.

In February 1979, the SLS/SVWIT group hosted a public meeting in Sunbury to reenergize SVWIT. An unexpectedly large turnout from social service agencies and the general community testified to the prevalence of domestic violence and the need for services for battered women. From that meeting a new Board of Directors was formed with the mission to secure non-profit corporate status and secure funding for a staff, office and shelter.

During 1979 and 1980, the Board met monthly and was the working core of the organization. Members regularly attended trainings and workshops offered by the PA Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV), networked with other women's organizations and provided some community education and outreach. The corporation also secured non-profit status, an essential step in grant applications.

In December 1980, The JPM Company made a \$500 donation to SVWIT. In January 1981, the Board leased an office on the second floor of the Donehower Building, Market Street, Lewisburg; established a telephone Hotline and began training the first group of Hotline volunteers. From January to June 1981, Julie Nazar staffed the office on a volunteer basis and worked with other Board members to prepare a proposal for Title XX funding through the PCADV. The group of volunteers handled overnight and weekend Hotline calls.

The grant proposal was funded, effective July 1, 1981 to June 30, 1982. This secured the office space and Hotline and provided funding for paid staff. Julie Nazar was named Executive Director.

Over the next several years, SVWIT continued regular day and evening support groups, crisis intervention services, transportation, advocacy, community education and trainings for local police, hospital staffs, schools and social service agencies. Classes of new volunteers were trained twice a year and a safe home network was established. Board, staff and volunteers regularly met for retreats that provided ongoing training and support.

Emily Higgins joined the staff in 1982 and when a PA Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) grant proposal was successfully funded in 1983, Emily became the coordinator of services for victims of sexual assault.

In 1983, SVWIT leased half of a double house on North Seventh Street, Lewisburg that became the first shelter. Eventually the offices were moved there from the Donehower Building. With centralized staffing, office and shelter facilities, the program continued to build and grow. A satellite office was opened in Selinsgrove and support groups moved into community settings.

1986 was a year of transitions. In the spring Julie Nazar announced plans to resign and Cheryl Hoover was named as SVWIT's second Executive Director. In August, SVWIT entered into a lease-purchase agreement and moved into a new shelter. The new shelter provided greater housing capacity and needed space for trainings and groups.

Throughout its Herstory, SVWIT pursued a consistent mission to end violence against women, knowing that women are the real experts on their own survival, simply needing the support and collective wisdom of other women to touch their own power.

Programs and staff continued to grow, with increasingly specialized services. SVWIT offered individual and group support for victims of sexual assault, their families and significant others; shelter, support and advocacy for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors and their children; drug & alcohol and co-dependency groups; empowerment workshops; trainings for volunteers and support group facilitators; and intensive trainings on domestic violence and sexual assault issues for police, social services agencies, health care workers, industries, students and educators. In 1997 Northumberland County was added to our geographic service area with the subsequent opening of our Northumberland County shelter and offices.

SVWIT's programs were recognized for their excellence in 2004 when, under the leadership of Executive Director Margaret Gates, SVWIT received the Governor's Victim Services Pathfinder Award for Agency Excellence in Victims Services. Recognizing a need for growth in a direction that would maintain grassroots efforts yet grow the agency with a more community collaborative focus, in 2008 the Board of Directors led the agency in a reorganization. As part of this reorganization, they moved from an Executive Director Leadership model to that of a Chief Executive Officer. DiAnn Baxley was hired as the new CEO in April of 2008.

From 2008 through 2012, the agency has undergone a much needed name change reflective of the diverse populations of women, men and children that we serve. After much deliberation SVWIT officially started doing business as Transitions in 2009. Under the name of Transitions, the agency began a comprehensive campaign that, combined with local municipal and federal grants, saw the complete renovation of our Union County shelter making it the only fully handicapped accessible shelter in the state of Pennsylvania. This campaign continues to ensure funding for ongoing maintenance and upkeep of the shelter as well as continued growth of the agency's education and outreach programs and crime victims services. Transitions' prevention education outreach programs have more than doubled and several programs developed internally have been recognized at a national and international level. One program that includes a video on Internet Safety was the 2008 recipient of the 14th Annual Communicator Award of Excellence, 1st place, in the category of Youth Social Issues. This prestigious award is given out by the International Academy of Arts and Transitions' video was chosen out of 8,000 entrants. Transitions' Education Director, Heather Shnyder was chosen as the recipient of the 2009 Governor's Victims Services Pathfinders Award for leadership in prevention education.