

CMEE AND THE RETREAT

Partnering to Aid Families of Abuse

Initiate programs for parent and child

BY EMILY J. WEITZ

For victims of domestic violence, regaining control of their lives can at times seem almost impossible. Women who have been stuck for long periods in abusive relationships, whether physical or emotional, often have a hard time finding a way out.

But The Retreat in East Hampton offers just that — a way out and a safe haven for women and children looking to escape domestic abuse. Beginning this month, The Retreat will team up with the Children's Museum of the East End to offer even more — the skills victims of domestic abuse need to start a new life.

The Retreat was started more than 20 years ago by citizens in East Hampton who realized that domestic violence was a huge, hidden problem in the community. What started as a non-residential counseling service has grown into a residential shelter, a free resource for prevention education and legal advocacy, a 24-hour hotline, and more.

One of the services Jeffrey Friedman, The Retreat's director, considers essential is professional development.

"Along with physical abuse, many of the women have suffered years of emotional abuse," explains Friedman. "The abusive partner is controlling over every aspect of life, including finances. Women we work with are fearful of leaving because they don't know how they'll take care of basic needs: food, clothing, and shelter. [Professional development] is teaching them basic financial skills of how to survive."

But just because the services are offered doesn't mean women are in a position to take advantage of them, especially when they are mothers. Friedman notes that more than 90 percent of the women The Retreat serves have children.

"One of the biggest barriers is it's hard for these women to attend classes because childcare is an issue," explains Friedman.

That's where the Children's Museum of the East End comes in.

Earlier this month, The Retreat and CMEE announced a partnership that will offer both vocational training for women while providing childcare services for their children, all at CMEE. While women are in the Wi-Fi-

equipped classrooms learning about computer skills, writing resumes, interviewing and job searching, Stephen Long, CMEE's executive director, explains that their children will be engaged in art classes and other educational programming.

The kids' services "won't just be baby sitting," says Long who adds that there will be "learning and therapeutic opportunities for kids to be engaged while their mothers are similarly engaged."

But he also emphasizes the importance of play.

"Kids that have faced challenges so often aren't given the opportunity to just be kids ... Play is so important in helping to build self esteem and learning what we need to grow into healthy adults. Just providing what the museum does on a regular basis is a unique opportunity for many of these kids."

"Here are these women who have been abused and so often they stay in the home because they don't have another source of income. They're trapped," says Long who adds that when Friedman approached him about partnering up he didn't hesitate. "I just wanted to know how we could help The Retreat do what it does. All it took was providing engaging programming for kids. And that should be no trouble. That's what we do, after all."

The Vocational Training Program is a 12-session course that meets weekly and is designed to teach women basic skills to help get them back into the work force and earning money so they can become financially independent. Another outcome of abuse is the loss of confidence and feelings of self-worth. By improving their skills, identifying their strengths, and finding their voices, Friedman feels these women will become empowered. Once they know they'll be able to support themselves and their children, he notes, they will be much more likely to break free from the holds of abuse.

This vocational training is a pilot program, and The Retreat is hoping to secure enough support to turn it into an ongoing offering. To learn more about the program and The Retreat, call 329-2200 or visit www.theretreatinc.org. For more information on the Children's Museum of the East End, visit www.cmee.org.