



## **The First Twenty Years** by Elizabeth Grew, November 1999

I take seriously the need that I have to be around other women, to share time and space with them, to learn from them. I have always felt that I could not survive without the support, humor and patience of the women in my life: my friends, my mother, my co-workers. I grew up in Chapel Hill and heard about The Women's Center from my mother and many of her friends who have been involved in various capacities at the Center. It sounded like the type of place where women gathered--to meet each other, to learn new skills, to get support, to celebrate. I moved back to Chapel Hill this past summer and called The Women's Center to find out about volunteer opportunities. I was immediately amazed by how much goes on there and the diversity of programs and services offered. During one of my First Response shifts, I had over twenty phone callers needing information and referral, seeking everything from lawyers to beauty supply stores. When Jenn Barr, the Volunteer Coordinator, and Julia Mack, the Executive Director, offered me an internship to write a history of The Women's Center for its twentieth anniversary, I eagerly accepted.

I realized early on in my research that a history of The Women's Center would also be a history of the women's movement in Chapel Hill, and of the neighborhoods in which The Women's Center has been housed over the years--essentially, a history of the town itself. I have attempted to knit together the various skeins of the past that make up the colorful piece that is The Women's Center today. I have interviewed many people associated with the Center, from the first director to one of the neighbors who opposed its move to the house on Henderson Street. I have read articles from *The Chapel Hill News*, *The Daily Tar Heel*, *The Durham Herald-Sun*, *The News and Observer*, and *The Independent*. I have read board minutes, annual reports, and correspondence. I have read by-laws, statements of philosophy, and funding requests. Throughout these numerous, tangled threads of information runs a consistent message of commitment, dedication, hard work, and caring. The Women's Center has seen many challenges as well as triumphs, and has survived to be one of the oldest centers of its kind in the country. There is much to celebrate during this twentieth anniversary year.

### **I. The Early Years: 1978-1982**

In 1978 in Chapel Hill, feminism was not a new concept. There were several women's organizations in existence, and three of them played an integral role in The Women's Center's establishment. Miriam Slifkin, a longtime Chapel Hill resident and feminist activist, started the first NOW (National Organization for Women) chapter in North Carolina. NOW grew out of the 1966 Commission on the Status of Women, a program of President Lyndon Johnson's, but was slow to take hold, particularly in the South. Miriam remembers that starting a NOW chapter in the Triangle area in the early 1970's was not



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an easy task. One needed at least 10 members to create an official NOW chapter, and despite some outreach efforts at UNC and Duke, Miriam and four of her friends from Chapel Hill and Durham were the only people to join. They enlisted the help of their husbands, who also became members, and finally had ten people--enough to form a chapter. They threw a party in Chapel Hill to generate interest in NOW, and Miriam sent invitations to all of the women at UNC-Chapel Hill: professors, students and staff. She also invited Paquita Shafer, who then wrote for the "Women's Pages" section of *The Chapel Hill News*, to attend, and to write an article publicizing NOW. Miriam was mortified when Paquita arrived at her house and not a single woman from UNC had come to the party.

"I think they were scared," Miriam told me. "The bias against women at UNC was so thick you could cut it" (interview, 10/2/98). However, Paquita wrote a glowing article about their efforts, never mentioning that no one had come. Thus began the slow process of building a vital North Carolina NOW chapter in Chapel Hill.

Rape was the issue around which UNC women were finally galvanized to act. As President of the Chapel Hill NOW chapter, Miriam received literature from the national NOW office in Washington, D.C., about political issues important to women. Their big issue in the early 1970's was rape and the establishment of rape crisis centers and hotlines. This was a radical idea for most of the country, since rape had not been acknowledged as a traumatic psychological event by the psychiatric community nor by the public at large until the Women's Movement brought it to national attention. At the time, Miriam didn't believe that rape was a common enough crime in a small university town like Chapel Hill to warrant starting a rape crisis center. Soon, however, she would change her mind.

In 1973, Miriam got a call from a UNC student who asked, "Are you the woman who will listen to other women?" The student told Miriam that she had been raped on campus by another student, and had reported it to the college authorities, who didn't want her to tell the local police or her own parents what had happened. Miriam helped her to come to terms with the rape and to navigate UNC's system. Through word of mouth, Miriam gained a reputation as an advocate for rape survivors. She got several more calls from students who had been raped. Later that year, three elderly women were raped in separate incidents as they entered their own homes. Miriam decided she didn't need any more evidence that rape happened, and happened often, in Chapel Hill. She founded the Rape Crisis Center in 1974, which was the first women's agency in Chapel Hill.

Miriam recalls the challenges associated with establishing the Rape Crisis Center. It was entirely volunteer staffed at the outset, and they had no space in which to counsel women or to set up a hotline. Two other women's organizations, the Coalition for Battered Women and the Women's Health Counseling Service, also founded in the mid-1970's, needed space and other resources. Miriam bemoaned the lack of space for women to



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Milton Carothers, a Presbyterian minister who ran the UNC Presbyterian Student Center. He offered her a tiny room at the University Presbyterian Church's Student Center, which became known as "A Woman's Place", and was used by all three organizations. The room was soon outgrown and Bill Baxter, the head of Orange-Person-Chatham Mental Health (OPC), called Miriam to offer her a room at OPC. He also offered photocopying and other services. "All he wanted was for women to be served," Miriam says. It was a tiny space with a desk and two chairs, and issues of confidentiality were a huge challenge, since all three organizations were dealing with highly sensitive subjects: rape, domestic violence, and access to abortion and other reproductive health services.

Elaine Barney, Associate Director for Clinical Programs at The Women's Center, was the director of the Women's Health Counseling Service in the late 1970's. "We provided pregnancy tests at cost, and told women about options if they had an unplanned pregnancy, including abortion services, prenatal care, and adoption. We also did a survey of local OB-GYN's, and had a women's health library. But because we provided access to abortion, we were the least favored child of the three women's organizations." (interview, 9/21/98). She recalls that obtaining funding from the Town of Chapel Hill, the United Way, and the Orange County Commissioners was difficult for all three organizations. They were desperate for space and money when, in November of 1978, Miriam Slifkin called to let Elaine know that an anonymous donor wanted to give \$30,000 worth of Pepsi-Cola stock for the sole purpose of establishing a women's center in Chapel Hill. Swanna Cameron, who is no longer anonymous, was the generous benefactor who donated the money. She had inherited the stock from her father and she felt strongly that there should be a women's center in Chapel Hill. There was a women's resource room and meeting place in Raleigh, also known as "A Woman's Place", directed by Debbie Lee. Swanna called Debbie to find out who was active in women's issues in Chapel Hill, and Debbie connected her with Miriam Slifkin (interview with Carol Holcomb, 9/16/98).

Monies from the fund shall be expended exclusively for charitable and educational purpose, and expenditures shall be limited to establishing, founding, and operating a center to be called The Women's Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The purposes of The Women's Center shall be exclusively charitable and educational and shall include but shall not be limited to, the following:

1. Providing a facility where non-profit women's organizations may be located to carry on their work. Such non-profit organizations may include, but shall not be limited to, the Chapel Hill/Carrboro Rape Crisis Center, Inc., the Women's Health Counseling Service, Inc., and the Orange/Durham YWCA Coalition for Battered Women.
2. Sponsoring seminars, workshops, and discussion groups for the purpose of educating the public on issues affecting women and the community at large.
3. Rendering general assistance and support to the positive forces for women in Chapel



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Hill.

(from "Stock Transfer" between Swanna Cameron, "Grantor", and the Women's Health Counseling Service, "Grantee", 1978.)

Elaine Barney; Miriam Slifkin; Connie Renz, director of the Coalition for Battered Women; Janet Colm, director of the Rape Crisis Center; and Nancy Park of the Commission for Women met to discuss the gift, and clarified that The Women's Center would provide an umbrella for the three agencies, but would not be limited to those three, and most importantly, that office space could now be obtained and that the donation would absorb the rent. On November 29, 1978, the first organizational meeting of interested persons was held; on September 21, 1979, Articles of Incorporation of The Women's Center were signed; and in October 1979 the first set of by-laws was established.

Miriam Slifkin says that The Women's Center and the organizations it housed definitely identified themselves not only as women's organizations but as feminist projects. However, there was still discomfort with the word on the part of many Chapel Hill residents, both men and women. Miriam recalls that "the first time I heard a man say, 'I'm a feminist', I threw my arms around him and said, 'I love you.'" (interview, 10/2/98). Elaine Barney says that the original board and staff of The Women's Center were extremely idealistic and strove to be inclusive of all women, including lesbians and women of color, as well as poor women. However, the majority of those involved with the Center were white and upper-middle class. Elaine says "we were trying to be all things to all women, but in whatever way *they* envisioned it" (interview, 9/21/98). Carol Holcomb, who was on the original board of The Women's Center and currently serves as a board member, told me that "at the beginning, there was more of a felt need for a women's center...we were in a transitional, chaotic place...waking up to having a life of our own...it gave women a place to be together...there was never a more exciting time than the 1970's and early 1980's, fighting for the ERA...we were a sisterhood" (interview, 9/16/98). The Women's Center coordinated the first "Take Back the Night" rally in Chapel Hill in 1979, bringing survivors of rape and sexual assault together and providing a forum for them to express their feelings about what had happened to them. The early Women's Center was politically involved and idealistic, but there were serious challenges ahead in terms of finding space, membership, and funding.

The first task for all three women's organizations was to "get organized". The Women's Health Counseling Service was the only agency that had 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in 1978, so their address, PO Box 1057, was the original mailing address for The Women's Center, and remains so today. The Women's Center applied for its own nonprofit designation, which would not come through until April 10, 1981. The directors of the three women's agencies sought out interested women to be on the first board of The Women's Center through publicity and word-of-mouth. One non-voting representative



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each from Rape Crisis, the Coalition for Battered Women, and the Women's Health Counseling Service served on the original board. Maye Hardin, the first part-time, paid director of The Women's Center, remembers the diversity and challenge of the first board: "There was an unusual mixture on the Board...professionals with a 'civic Christian duty' to do something for the community, and radical lesbians. It was a marked contrast" (interview, 10/30/98).

The board and the directors of the three organizations began searching for a new space for The Women's Center. Location was extremely important; they wanted to be in an accessible location, with enough room for all three agencies, and in a place that felt welcoming and comfortable without being too expensive. Originally they rented space on North Columbia Street, in a building owned by Richie Bell of the North Carolina Botanical Gardens; however, the space was too small and the utility bills were high. Then they located a house at 406 West Rosemary Street, which seemed ideal: it had office space for each director, a small living room for groups to meet in, and a hallway suitable for a library. There was also a small room which the Women's Health Counseling Service used to give pregnancy tests and conduct confidential meetings. Additionally, the house was on the bus line and located near the predominantly African-American Northside neighborhood, which, they believed, boded well for outreach efforts to minority communities. The house was directly across the street from Mama Dip's Kitchen, a local, black-owned and operated restaurant, which served as a gathering place for Northside residents. The Rape Crisis Center, the Coalition for Battered Women, and the Women's Health Counseling Service moved in to the house in October of 1980. Elaine Barney remembers that "we were overjoyed to find the house at 406 Rosemary Street" (interview, 9/21/98). In the future, however, The Women's Center's proximity to Northside would become a point of contention.

"Our first major purchases [after moving into the house at 406 W. Rosemary Street] were two two-drawer file cabinets. I put an old door across them to make a desk" (interview, 9/21/98). All of the other furniture at 406 W. Rosemary was donated, and many of the women I interviewed remembered it as a comfortable, if second-hand, place. "People used to just come in and stand around and read," Carol Holcomb told me. "It was very relaxed" (interview, 9/16/98). That is how Maye Hardin, the first part-time paid director of the Center, remembers it. She moved to Chapel Hill from Michigan in August of 1980, where she had been the director of a small, nonprofit youth services organization. She had also helped to establish a women's center in Michigan, writing grants and helping to select a staff and a board. She began volunteering at The Women's Center in September of 1980. She "hung around the house on Rosemary Street a lot", and got to know Janet Colm, then the director of the Rape Crisis Center, who currently directs Planned Parenthood of Orange and Durham Counties. Janet eventually invited Maye to serve on the board of the Rape Crisis Center, and Maye was hired in the summer of 1981 to be the first paid director of The Women's Center. She remembers asking the board to write a contract for her, which they had never done before; Maye says she "needed structure and



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accountability". Fundraising had been lacking at The Women's Center, so Maye arranged the first community fundraising event that the Center ever had. She asked the owners of Pyewacket, a local vegetarian restaurant, if she could use their space for free, and they agreed. Maye recalls that "a woman named Ginny Noop played guitar and sang, and the Pyewacket staff tended bar for free. Most of the people there were from the 'blue jeans crowd'; there were still lots of old hippies around then." (interview, 10/30/98). She asked everyone on the board to invite five other people to the fund-raiser, and people wrote checks to The Women's Center all evening. It was a success, and Maye continued to work on establishing a formal fundraising program for the Center. She worked hard to make The Women's Center and the agencies it housed more visible, through publications such as the newsletter and programs such as information and referral. Maye remembers the first time an African-American woman walked in to The Women's Center, desperate for help. She was in danger of losing custody of her children and had no idea how to navigate the social service network in Orange County. Her situation mobilized Maye to develop a training program for volunteers in crisis intervention skills and referral to other agencies in the community. She put together a comprehensive brochure on all women's services in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, foreshadowing the development of the Triangle Women's Resource List poster. When she left the center in early 1982, she felt that she had accomplished important goals for the Center. She had established a good relationship with local newspapers, done a lot of community fundraising and written several important grants. The Women's Center was on the verge of offering its first series of workshops when she left.

However, during the course of 1981 The Women's Center's financial resources had been steadily dwindling. It was still very difficult for women's organizations to raise money from the community and to receive substantial grants from foundations and local government. As well, while many involved with the early Center had vision and political commitment, they lacked concrete knowledge of fundraising and publicity, and did not have social or political ties with influential community members who could galvanize others to give money and volunteer time to The Women's Center. On May 3, 1982, The Women's Center Board resolved to terminate all operations unless sufficient funds could be raised by June 31, 1982. Swanna Cameron, who had given the original \$30,000 to start the Center, was advised by her mother to contact Betty Kenan, a longtime Durham resident and the owner of Fine Feathers, an upscale women's clothing store in Chapel Hill. Swanna and Margaret Skinner, a board member, met with Betty and asked her to help them raise money to save The Women's Center. Betty got in touch with her friend Ida Friday--"a real Chapel Hill person" (interview with Betty Kenan, 9/14/98)--, who was trained in community development and was the co-founder of the Chapel Hill Preservation Society, as well as the wife of the president of the University of North Carolina, William (Bill) Friday.

On May 27, 1982, Ida hosted a luncheon at her house and invited civic leaders, business owners, and members of the UNC faculty and staff to attend. Fifty people came to the



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event, including members of the Raleigh Women's Center, who "told of similar financial problems during the organization's formative years and subsequent reorganization" (The Chapel Hill News, 1982). Everyone who attended agreed that there remained a definite need for a women's center in Chapel Hill, and several committees were formed to address issues such as finances, services, housing needs and fundraising. On June 13, 1982, the Board authorized an Ad Hoc Steering Committee to attempt a successful continuation of The Women's Center. At that point, the total cash on hand was only \$1,921.00. Members of the Board then offered to resign so that a new board could be formed. The new Board of Trustees, which included some of the original board members, consisted of: Anne Oliver (chair), Dr. Gertrude Willis, Doris Betts, Eunice Grossman, Coolie Monroe, Ellen Hamner, Georgann Eubanks, Olga Eyre, Mary Harris, Debbie Hill, Carol Holcomb, Ellen Ironside, Katie Morris, Kay Norris, Esther Shelton and Margaret Skinner. An advisory council was also formed, whose members included Marilyn Boulton, Gordon Dragt, David Frankstone, Verla Insko, Marjorie Land, Swanna Saltiel, Robert G. Shafer, Betty Kenan and Ida Friday (The Chapel Hill News, 1982).

During the summer of 1982, The Women's Center operated with volunteer staffing only, but by August the Board had hired a part-time interim director, Nikki Vangsnes. On August 3, 1982, a new set of by-laws for the Center was created, and in October of 1982 an anonymous member of the community announced a \$20,000 challenge grant, giving the Board until January 1, 1983, to raise the money. By January 31, 1983, the Board had raised \$21,752.50 from the community, and had received \$3,450 from two local organizations. The Women's Center had also applied for two \$50,000 foundation grants. By June of 1983, the Board hoped to have raised \$120,000 so that funding for the next two years could be secure and attention could be focused on programs and services (CHN, 1982).

In the autumn of 1982, the Center offered its first workshops. One was called "Single Again" and provided support to recently separated and divorced women. Another was a "personal growth" support group, and a series of career planning workshops was also offered. All of the workshops filled and had waiting lists, reinforcing the Board's feeling that the salvation of The Women's Center was essential for Orange County women. In early October 1982, the Center began accepting resumes for a full-time director. The Board received over 100 resumes, and a woman named Toni Anzalone Zirker was hired. She became the second part-time director as of January 1, 1983. Toni received her master's in counseling and human systems from Florida State University. She moved to Chapel Hill from Texas, where she coordinated intervention programs for the Texas Commission on Alcohol. She also volunteered as a consultant to a women's center in Austin, Texas, as well as to the Women's Support Group at the Austin Child Guidance and Evaluation Center. She said in an article in The Chapel Hill News that the Center "wants to do more outreach work. We're drawn to the need of the individual woman, in support and education" (CHN, 2/13/83).



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Many advances were made at The Women's Center during Toni's short tenure as director. In March of 1983, distribution of the bimonthly newsletter called "Woman Aware" resumed, and new brochures were printed in April. On April 9, 1983, the Center held its first symposium, "Women and Personal Finances." One hundred and twenty people attended and it brought in good revenue for the Center. Toni left her position as director in October of 1983. In the 1983 annual report of The Women's Center, board chair Anne Oliver stated that one hundred and two women had been served through twelve support groups and educational programs, and one hundred and twenty women had attended the symposium, for a total of two hundred and twenty-two women served by the Center during that fiscal year. The numbers would continue to rise over the next seventeen years.

## **II. The Women's Center Grows: 1983-1987**

By mid-1983, The Women's Center had truly become a hub for women in Chapel Hill. Between July 1983 and March 1984, 471 clients were served, more than double the number served during the 1983 fiscal year. There were 49 programs offered, as well as a symposium on "Women and North Carolina Law" in December of 1983; an event aimed at senior citizens; and an information session on anorexia and bulimia, co-sponsored with the Mental Health Association. There were over 70 callers and walk-in clients per week during this time, which number does not reflect the number of calls referred to the Rape Crisis Center, the Coalition for Battered Women, and the Women's Health Counseling Service. While the majority of women using the Center came from Chapel Hill, increasing numbers ventured from Carrboro, Durham, Hillsborough, Pittsboro, and as far away as Efland and Burlington to use The Women's Center's services and attend workshops. By spring of 1984 a Community Resource Bulletin Board was up, a Resource Library had been developed, there were extensive Attorney and Therapist Files, and even a Women's Center softball team.

Much of this growth can be attributed to Darlene Wells, The Women's Center's first full-time paid director. She was hired on October 24, 1983, bringing many years of experience in both feminist action and social service to her position. She received her MSW from UNC-Chapel Hill and had focused on women's issues during graduate school. Darlene had also been involved in feminist activity since the early 1970's, when she helped to start women's programs at the YWCA in Durham. Her first job after receiving her MSW involved work with displaced homemakers in Roxboro. Most of the women she worked with were low-income and lived in rural areas around Roxboro, and she worked with them to start a Council on Women. After funding for the project ran out, she came to Duke to do career counseling with students, and heard about The Women's Center through friends who served on the Board. At the time she was hired, the only other staff was a part-time administrative assistant, but Darlene remembers it as a very exciting time for The Women's Center.

"My role was to solidify things and to get facts and figures about the Center out to the public, as well as developing consistently available programming through workshops and



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symposia" (interview, 10/16/98). There was only minimal funding from the Town of Chapel Hill and Orange County when she arrived, and none from the United Way. "I spent a lot of time fundraising," she recalled (interview, 10/16/98). During the first month of her tenure at The Women's Center in October 1983, Darlene became aware of some confusion over the role of OCWC as a landlord for the Rape Crisis Center, the Coalition for Battered Women, and the Women's Health Counseling Service, and its status as a separate organization with unique services for women. The house at 406 West Rosemary Street was referred to as the "Orange County Women's Center", although it actually housed four separate and distinct agencies. OCWC (as it was then known) and RCC, CBW, and WHCS resolved to change the name of the house from OCWC to the Women's Resource Center in an attempt to clarify the distinction between the OCWC as landlord and as a separate organization which provided specific services and programs distinct from the Rape Crisis Center, the Women's Health Counseling Service, and the Coalition for Battered Women.

During Darlene's tenure as director, she worked on improving information and referral services beyond the attorney and therapist files, as well as building coalitions with other Orange County agencies. She helped to create a legal rights program in Hillsborough, as well as offering collaborative workshops such as "Parenting After Divorce" with the UNC Psychiatry Outpatient Clinic. Darlene recalls that "programs focusing on divorce and separation were a fairly new phenomenon. There were very few resources for women at the time, and divorce was a major source of phone calls for information and referral" (interview, 10/16/98). Volunteers from the Family Support Enforcement Court Watch held free sessions at The Women's Center to help women deal with nonpayment of child support and alimony. In December of 1983, the "Women and North Carolina Law" symposium drew nearly one hundred women, and most of the workshops during that event focused on divorce and separation.

Many women came to the Center just "needing to talk", Darlene remembers. She became interested in starting a peer counseling program at the Center, a confidential, short-term counseling service that would be available both over the phone and in person. The Women's Center in Raleigh had such a program, as did several local high schools, and she got information about training peer counselors from them. In December of 1984, Darlene trained the first group of peer counselors.

Also in that month, Ida Friday first identified the house at 210 Henderson Street as a potential site for The Women's Center's permanent home. Darlene was on the Housing Committee at the time and recalls the difficulty in locating a house that would be large enough to house all of the agencies, yet remain as accessible as the house at 406 West Rosemary. Darlene says that she believes the house on Rosemary Street was "less intimidating" to low-income and minority women than the house on Henderson Street, but acknowledges that the Center was in grave need of space during her tenure as director.



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1985 heralded many exciting events for The Women's Center. On April 26, 1985, a management development seminar for executive women entitled "The Workplace and Personal Issues" combined programming and fundraising for the first time. It brought in a good amount of money for the Center. On June 9, the first Art Show, "Through Women's Eyes, By Women's Hands" was held at the Center. The Art Show was founded by a small group of women artists and art supporters, who had trouble obtaining gallery space and wanted to create their own vehicle for exhibition. The women artists approached The Women's Center and proposed a joint effort--the Center would coordinate the logistics of the show and the artists would give back a percentage of what was sold. That agreement brought in thousands of dollars for the Center and proved to be a strong foundation for what would become the largest juried women's art show in North Carolina.

In February of 1986, The Women's Center received its first funding from the United Way. Several new programs were offered in 1986, including once-a-week financial counseling, offered in conjunction with Orange Congregations in Mission (OCIM) of Hillsborough, and career counseling. 1986 was also Darlene Wells' last year as Executive Director; she resigned in October. Other big changes were also in the making that autumn. The Center moved from the house on Rosemary Street to a space in The Courtyard, an upscale office complex on Franklin Street. Some members of The Women's Center supported the move, believing that The Courtyard was in a safer area than the house on West Rosemary Street, so that more women would feel comfortable using its services. As well, the space was much larger than the office at Rosemary Street; there were six offices rather than just one small room. The annual report from 1986-87 fiscal year states that "walk-ins at The Courtyard have been higher than those at Rosemary Street for the previous quarter; peer counselors have private space, the library and information center has browsing space; most programs can now be held at the Center, and staff has more work space." However, others saw the move as a mistake. For one thing, moving to The Courtyard made it impossible for The Women's Center to continue providing space for the other three organizations it had housed. The move increased tension among the agencies, since Swanna Cameron's original gift had stipulated that all three organizations were to be provided for, at least in terms of space. Some members of the Center also felt that moving away from the Northside area would decrease the Center's accessibility and appeal for low-income women and women of color. Elaine Barney remembers the space at The Courtyard as "formal and unwelcoming, and not a nonprofit scene" (interview, 9/21/98).

The move to The Courtyard, while controversial, galvanized the Housing Committee to continue its search for a permanent home. The Housing Committee was composed of Coolie Monroe (chair), Cynthia Hermans, Olga Eyre, Beverly Kawalec, Ida Friday, and Debbie Hill. In 1984, Ida Friday had first noticed that the house at 210 Henderson Street was for sale. The house was then owned by the heirs of the M.A. (Vernon) Hill estate, and the price was \$225,000. Mrs. Friday looked for someone in the community who would buy the house and hold it until the Women's Center could raise enough money to



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pay for it. She and her husband, Bill, contacted Mr. and Mrs. Paul Johnston, who agreed to buy the house and hold it until a Special Use Permit could be obtained from the Town of Chapel Hill to allow an institutional use in the residential neighborhood of Cobb Terrace.

For about two years, the Johnstons rented the house to students and paid property taxes and insurance. In 1986, Mr. Johnston died and the house became the property of his wife, Margaret. She died a few weeks before the house could be transferred to The Women's Center. Mrs. Johnston's heirs were faced with an inheritance tax of almost \$170,000 on the property, which was then assessed at \$250,000. The heirs agreed to transfer the property to The Women's Center upon payment of the \$170,000 inheritance tax. The Housing Committee decided to sell the property and use the \$80,000 profit as seed money for another location. At that point, another benefactor agreed to sign a note that allowed The Women's Center to borrow \$170,000 from Central Carolina Bank (CCB) at the current rate of interest. The payment to Mrs. Johnston's heirs was made in 1986 and the title of the property was then transferred to The Women's Center. During the summer of 1987, the Board created a Trust to own and operate the house at 210 Henderson, which was made up of \$40,000 worth of stock in Comtrex Systems, as well as donations in the amount of \$5000 each from Ida and Bill Friday, Mrs. Oscar (Heidi) Ewing, and an anonymous donor. The loan from CCB would be used until the Trust received tax-exempt status from the IRS. Preparations to move into the house at 210 Henderson Street were underway.

On May 11, 1987, Carol Burnett was hired as director. Carol was a Methodist minister and had been one of the first female ministers in the Mississippi Methodist Conference. "This raised a lot of issues that were very adversarial...because I was female...there was a lot of resistance to the idea that women could be ministers...and I was progressive politically...I came to the Women's Center worn out from being constantly embattled, from a position in which I got no support. I experienced the Center as healing" (interview, 10/19/98). Carol was responsible for starting the Legal Information Service in January of 1988. The service, which still exists at The Women's Center today, began as a hotline staffed by volunteers from the legal clinic at the UNC law school. Most of the questions they received from clients centered around domestic issues, particularly divorce, and Carol began a support group for women who were having problems retaining custody of their children. "They had terrible guilt and anger. It was a very emotional group. I have them ideas about how to improve their situations in the court system" (interview, 10/19/98). She also worked to build partnerships with other state efforts that were fighting for women's rights, getting involved with the Women's Legislative Agenda and NC Equity. Financial counseling was still offered one night per week in conjunction with Orange Congregations in Mission, a Hillsborough agency which served low-income people, and career counseling was also offered one afternoon per week.



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • [www.womenspace.org](http://www.womenspace.org)

Behind this progress in programming was one of the most challenging conflicts the Center has faced during its first twenty years. The Women's Center's move to the offices at The Courtyard had always been considered temporary, and the Center was awaiting the decision of the Chapel Hill Town Council on their request for a Special Use Permit to operate the house at 210 Henderson Street as a nonresidential, nonprofit organization. In the summer of 1987, the Board had voted to create a trust to own and operate the house until the Special Use Permit was granted. Everyone believed that there was a good chance the Town Council would vote to allow the Center to move into the house. However, in early 1987, residents of the Cobb Terrace neighborhood, which is situated at the end of Henderson Street, expressed concern about the pending move. Their main concern, according to Joe Herzenberg, a resident of Cobb Terrace who objected to the Center's re-location to 210 Henderson, was "creeping commercial use" (interview, 9/25/98). In a letter to the editor published in *The Chapel Hill News* on February 27, 1987, Marcia Herman-Giddens and 22 other Cobb Terrace residents addressed Ralph Wileman, the president of the Chapel Hill Preservation Society:

The threat to the concept of a historic district has come up once again. This time it is in the form of two requests filed at Town Hall, one for the Special Use Permit and the other for a zoning map amendment from R-3 to OI-1-S. The property in question is zoned R-3, residential, and is in the Historic District. If the requests were granted, the property would be sued as a low-density office and institutional development...We remain opposed to the former and new proposals of the Women's Center. They run contrary to the development ordinance, the land-use plan, and common sense with regard to the protection of a residential neighborhood... (CHN, 2/27/87).

In April of 1987, the Chapel Hill Planning Board voted to send plans to move The Women's Center in the house at 210 Henderson to the Town Council for approval of the Special Use Permit. The permit would be "office-institutional, a designation that fits the work of the center...[which] operates a number of programs for women" (CHN, 4/8/87). Several residents of Cobb Terrace spoke against approval of the permit, arguing that "their opposition to the center was not in the work it does but the changes it would bring to the mostly residential neighborhood...Lightning Brown argued that parking is already limited in the area and the center's clients would only add to the shortage...Rosalie Massengale said...the large center might compromise 'the integrity of the historic district'" (CHN, 4/8/87). On June 17, 1987, residents of Cobb Terrace filed suit against The Women's Center and the Town of Chapel Hill to block the Town Council's ability to rezone the house for institutional use.

In July of 1987, Andy Sachs and Claire Millar of the Dispute Settlement Center were contacted by Verla Insko, Women's Center board chair, to facilitate a mediation between the two sides in an attempt to avoid going to court. It was Andy Sachs' first year at the Dispute Settlement Center and he recalls that the conflict was somewhat unusual in that both sides "were from the progressive end of the political spectrum...feminists and



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • [www.womenspace.org](http://www.womenspace.org)

neighborhood activists" (interview, 9/10/98). He remembers that the Cobb Terrace neighbors weren't ready to compromise about the house at 210 Henderson; they came to the meeting with a list of other spaces they believed were more appropriate for the Center. The Women's Center was just as firm in its conviction that the house was the ideal location, and offered ways to make the Center less intrusive to the residents. However, no settlement was reached during the mediation, although many points of the disagreement were clarified. On November 9, 1987, the Chapel Hill Town Council voted 7-2 to approve the Special Use Permit, allowing the Center to operate the property at 210 Henderson Street as a nonresidential, nonprofit organization. In February of 1988, the Special Use Permit was signed into effect; Cobb Terrace neighbors objected and sued the Center and the Town of Chapel Hill. In March of 1988, The Women's Center officially opened its doors at 210 Henderson Street; however, the lawsuit with the neighbors dragged on until October of that year, when the North Carolina Superior Court upheld the Town of Chapel Hill's decision to grant the Women's Center a Special Use Permit. The court order restricted the use of the house to one organization only. Other organizations would not even be permitted to meet at the house. The Cobb Terrace neighbors decided to drop the suit against the Center, and lawyers for both sides negotiated a private settlement (CHN, 10/25/1988).

### **III. Conflict and Change at The Women's Center: 1988-1991**

Despite the difficulties surrounding the move into the house at 210 Henderson Street, programming and other services continued at a strong pace at The Women's Center. Under director Carol Burnett's tutelage, the Good-Bye Cinderella program was initiated in April of 1988. The program, aimed at "at-risk" girls ages 12 to 17, lasted for twelve weeks and provided support, information, assistance and encouragement to the girls, with a focus on self-esteem, wellness, career options, relationships and life planning. The program also involved a mentoring component, in which volunteer mentors were matched one-on-one with the girls to provide support and to serve as role models. The Shared Housing Program was also begun, which helped women who were looking for a place to live get connected with other women with space to share. Short-term programming on a wide variety of topics was offered, thanks to the large number of Chapel Hill professional women who were willing to facilitate groups and workshops for free. The Legal Information Service, organized by two UNC Women's Studies interns, continued to thrive. Carol Burnett, who was deeply committed to economic as well as personal empowerment for women, determined that the Center needed to balance its provision of support services to individual women with advocacy work on equity issues facing women collectively. The Board made a renewed commitment to broaden the membership of the Center, and to contribute to women's economic independence by developing programs which addressed women's employment issues. A feasibility study, termed the Women's Economic Empowerment Project, was undertaken to determine how the Center could best serve economically underprivileged and underemployed women.



### ***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • [www.womenspace.org](http://www.womenspace.org)

In January of 1989, Spring Brooks of the Women's Book Exchange (WBE) first contacted Carol about the possibility of moving the WBE's library into the house at 210 Henderson Street. The Women's Book Exchange was a "volunteer-operated membership library, dedicated to making books and information by, for, and about women more readily available" (WBE brochure). The Women's Book Exchange was first opened on April 9, 1983, and as of 1986 it had a collection of 2500 books, a small collection of periodicals and bibliographies and an active membership of 200. The WBE sponsored discussion groups, classes, film showings, political rallies and marches, and parties. It also provided information about local women's political, service, and social organizations, and assisted members in locating hard-to-find materials. The book collection contained a wide range of authors and genres, including: fiction; poetry; biography and letters; juvenile fiction and health books; and nonfiction, which included women in history; fine arts; literary criticism; women's issues; lesbians; spirituality; race, class and culture; health and sexuality; sports; childbirth and childrearing; nonfiction by women; a small group of books by and about men; and several periodicals (WBE brochure).

When the WBE contacted Carol Burnett about moving the library into The Women's Center, their landlord was raising the rent (they were in a room at the old Internationalist Books on Rosemary Street), and they could not afford to remain. Carol Burnett contacted Board Chair Verla Insko, who reported WBE's interest to the Executive Committee. Nyra Hill, Betty Cloutier, and Verla met with Spring Brooks and Melody Ivins, founder of the WBE, who described the collection and the purpose of the WBE. Carol Burnett announced her resignation as director effective March 1, 1989; a Search Committee was appointed and began looking for a new director. During February 1989, several meetings were held to discuss a possible merger of The Women's Center and WBE.

The Search Committee nominated and approved Frances Henderson as new director in March of 1989. Frances, who had gone to law school at UNC-Chapel Hill, had been hired on a contracted basis in 1989 by Carol Burnett to write some grants, including one for the Shared Housing Referral Service. Frances wanted to get more involved with nonprofits and saw the directorship of The Women's Center as a great opportunity. She recalls that the Center had recently moved into the house at 210 Henderson Street and that there was no air conditioning, no paint on the walls, and she shared one 286 computer with volunteers and student interns. She was the only professional staff person. "The summer was very hot", she recalls. Frances was committed to "looking at the community and figuring out what was needed...I wanted the Center to be a place where women could come and get oriented to the community" (interview, 9/18/98). She worked to improve the Legal Information Service; to develop the Shared Housing Referral Service, which Mary Linker was hired to coordinate in November 1989; and published the first edition of the Guide to Family Law in North Carolina in January of 1990. "A booklet recently released by the Orange County Women's Center spells out some basic protections the legal system can offer in the state. 'Family Law in North Carolina', by Lisa Aldred, walks



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • [www.womenspace.org](http://www.womenspace.org)

the reader through various steps of filing domestic violence charges, filling out separation agreements and filing for divorce" (*The News and Observer*, 1990). The Women's Center newsletter was also established as a bimonthly publication and sent out to all members.

The merger agreement between the WBE and The Women's Center was approved by the Board, and it was decided that in order to comply with the provisions of the Special Use Permit, the WBE would need to become an official program of The Women's Center. The Henderson Street House Foundation was particularly concerned about the legality of sharing Women's Center space with the WBE. The merger was reviewed by Chapel Hill Town Attorney Ralph Karpinos, who stated that in his opinion it was legal. There was a great deal of excitement initially about the receipt of the WBE library; Frances Henderson recalls that "we thought, how terrific!...a wonderful new program being handed to us...At the Annual Meeting of members in 1990, the books were showcased as the Center's newest program" (interview, 9/18/98). This excitement was to be short-lived.

In June of 1989, a complaint was made to a member of the Henderson Street House Foundation by an acquaintance who had visited The Women's Center and perused the WBE library. A few other complaints from prospective donors who had toured the house also arose, questioning the nature and intent of some postcards and a few of the books in the WBE collection. The complaints centered around the tone expressed in some of the postcards for sale and some explicit depictions of sex in a few of the books. These complaints were referred to Verla Insko, Board Chair, who approached Spring Brooks, Chair of the Library Committee. Brooks noted that all of the complaints were made about books (four in total) dealing with lesbian sex and sexuality. Later, another complaint referred to Dr. Alex Comfort's "The Joy of Sex", which specifically addresses heterosexual love-making.

During the summer of 1989, the Henderson Street House Foundation also raised concerns about the structural integrity of the house, given the weight of the 5,000-volume collection, which was then housed on the second floor. Frances Henderson decided that the books should be moved to the first floor to make the collection more accessible to clients. In August of 1989, a workman inspecting the library walls found a crack. In September the basement was renovated and shelves were installed to accommodate the collection, and in October the books were packed to be moved downstairs. Betty Cloutier, newly elected Board Chair, and Verla Insko were still worried about the five books which had triggered complaints, and they informed Spring Brooks that the issue had to be resolved before the books were re-shelved in the basement. A new Library Committee had also been appointed, including Fran Weaver, a retired UNC librarian. She met with two members of the House Foundation in March 1990, who expressed anxiety about the availability of continued funding for the house if the controversial material remained in the library. Weaver cautioned against removing any books from the collection, which would amount to censorship.



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • [www.womenspace.org](http://www.womenspace.org)

The WBE had removed postcards and buttons that had originally been for sale and which had triggered one of the complaints, but the WBE posters remained on the library walls downstairs. Betty Cloutier asked that they be removed and that the WBE change its name to reflect its status as a Women's Center program. When the posters were not removed, Cloutier took them down herself, and the WBE objected, saying that they had been removed without their permission. The WBE changed its name to the Orange County Women's Center Book Exchange (OCWCBE), and the Library Committee developed a statement of purpose, guidelines for book selection, and established a second Review Committee which would make recommendations to the Board regarding complaints:

In selecting books and other library materials for the OCWCBE, care is given to provide books and other library material reflecting all the concerns of the diverse community of women the OCWC serves. This material is selected without bias or prejudice and provides the broadest possible range of information for women. Because of the diversity of interests in the community, the Book Exchange contains books that reflect ideas and attitudes not shared by all. The presence of a book in the Book Exchange does not indicate that the officers and Board of Trustees of the OCWC share the beliefs and attitudes expressed in the book, but it does indicate that the OCWC officers and Board acknowledge the right of an individual woman's access to that information (from "Purpose and Philosophy" section of Women's Center Book Exchange guidelines).

The Library Committee's review policy was adopted unanimously in June 1990. In July 1990, five new board members were seated and a new Executive Committee took over, with Diane Waters as Chair. Spring Brooks also moved sexually explicit books to a high shelf in the library and labeled the section prominently. In August 1990, Frances Henderson received six "requests for consideration" about the sexually explicit books, which were filed by Board members and House Foundation members on behalf of community members who had ceased visiting or supporting the Women's Center since the books had not been removed. Frances sent the requests to Diane Waters, who discussed them with Spring Brooks; while Spring felt confident that the Review Committee would vote to retain the books in question, Waters reminded her that even if the Review Committee did vote to keep them, the Board still had final authority over keeping or rejecting the books. Spring expressed dismay that the books could potentially be removed, and Diane suggested that perhaps a new Chair of the Library Committee should be appointed, given a perceived conflict of interest.

Diane then wrote a letter to Spring to clarify the Board's position:

Ideally, the Book Exchange Committee would be comprised of members whose primary allegiance would be to the Women's Center because they would share the philosophy and goals of the Women's Center. In reality, however, we know many book exchange committee members share a philosophy that is at times incompatible with the Women's Center's philosophy and goals. This conflict must be resolved because the court order



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • [www.womenspace.org](http://www.womenspace.org)

governing the use of the Henderson Street house dictates that only one organization is permitted to occupy the premises. Even the perception of two organizations operating in conflict ultimately jeopardizes our lease agreement and court order...The second problem is the issue of public complaints about books in the collection, particularly sexually explicit books. In one case, a long-time and significant funder who was touring the house pointed out that such materials would be regarded as sensitive in nature by many people in the community...When we obtained a court order to occupy the house, we made a commitment to comply with the court order and to be sensitive to community objections about our use of the house... (from letter to Spring Brooks from N. Diane Waters, 8/14/90).

Melody Ivins responded on behalf of the WBE:

You state that 'many book exchange members share a philosophy that is at times in conflict with the Women's Center philosophy and goals'. We would like to know how you arrived at this conclusion. A comparison of our charters...reveals that our shared purpose is to serve the needs of all women of Orange County, regardless of race, class, age, sexual orientation, concerns or situation. The only difference I can find in our stated philosophy or goals is that WBE has been more outspoken in its inclusiveness than OCWC...We cannot be responsible for reactionary responses to the presence of informative, non-exploitive representations of human sexuality as part of the OCWCBE collection, nor for rumors and fears on the part of ignorant people that OCWC has become a "Lesbian House". We respectfully suggest that if the Housing Committee or other fund-raisers for OCWC do not know how to respond to homophobic or anti-feminist statements from their constituency, that they learn. They could begin by reading books from OCWCBE...neither the OCWCBE, nor its supporters can quite credit that the furor over these books...is not a debate about openly lesbian materials in general at OCWC...We'd especially like to know whether they [the Board] feel strongly enough about the five books in question to override a decision of the Review Committee. If so, then of course no self-respecting library could submit to their authority, and we will remove the collection with regret for the damage its removal will do to OCWC's reputation, as well as for our wasted efforts...

(from letter from Melody Ivins to Diane Waters, 9/15/90).

Diane Waters believed at this point that the controversy was no longer simply about the presence of the five books which had offended potential donors. It seemed that the question now centered around who had the final authority to make decisions regarding the WBE library and its contents. If the WBE retained authority despite The Women's Center's review policy, it could be considered a separate organization not functioning under The Women's Center's authority, violating the 1987 Special Use Permit. A special Board meeting was set up to clarify this issue in October of 1990, again mediated by staff from the Dispute Settlement Center. Diane Waters stated that the "WBE's primary concern is to keep the collection intact...the [Henderson Street House] Foundation's



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • www.womenspace.org

primary concern is use of the house and community perceptions about the use of the house and their inability to raise funds until the Board has responded to complaints. [Spring] Brooks said WBE had already decided to leave. She later stated that they did not want to leave but felt that The Women's Center no longer wanted them" (from "Chronology of Events between the Women's Book Exchange and the Orange County Women's Center"). Many board members expressed frustration and confusion, and more than two hours of discussion ensued, during which the Board expressed concerns such as "we have not tried to work out a compromise...we have let this go on too long...we have tried everything we could to solve the problem...we have to be pragmatic...we do not know who we are or what our mission is...we have to respond to charges of homophobia...we are supposed to be serving all women" (from "Chronology of Events..."). The motion to rescind the merger with the WBE was voted upon and it passed, with six Board members voting to rescind the merger, three voting to keep the WBE library, and three abstaining.

Verla Insko, who was present at the special meeting, attributes much of the communication breakdown to "generational and ideological differences...there was tension...how can we be inclusive if we have lesbian sex books in the library, and some people won't feel safe or welcome...but will lesbians feel safe here without the books?...there was also an economic reality, I don't know if homophobia was the issue...we couldn't afford to lose the financial backing of more conservative women" (interview, 10/2/98). However, Frances Henderson, in a letter to the Board announcing her resignation as director of The Women's Center, raised several issues, including homophobia:

The poor communication and poorly defined boundaries between the Foundation and the Center Board impair the work of staff and Board. At our Special Board meeting, the problems with this relationship were identified in terms of the Board lacking sufficient information about the concerns of the Foundation, and the status of its fundraising efforts. Representatives from the Foundation identified a lack of information about the early negotiations with the Women's Book Exchange as a problem...

The Women's Center, housed in its gracious and inviting home, is a warm and welcoming place. Women come for services and programs day and night...

We all would like this to continue. My concern is this: the removal of the book collection could be (and is likely to be) interpreted by members of the community who are feminist, lesbian, bisexual, on a non-traditional spiritual path, or those concerned with respect for community diversity, as an affront...

My understanding is that the Center has had a long struggle with the issue of diversity. By diversity...I mean ethnicity, age, class, income, sexual orientation, religion, and disability. Diversity is difficult because it a threat to our comfort level. Diversity takes



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • [www.womenspace.org](http://www.womenspace.org)

concerted and deliberate effort. If the Center is not committed to the struggle for respect for diversity, it cannot be true to its mission of "serving all women"  
( from letter from Frances Henderson to Women's Center Board, 10/11/90).

Frances Henderson's prediction that many women and others would find the removal of the WBE library from The Women's Center offensive came true. Along with Frances, the administrative assistant and three board members resigned as a result of the Board's decision. Several local newspapers and magazines printed articles and editorials criticizing the Center for censorship and homophobia. Many members of The Women's Center sent letters to the Board, expressing their dismay, shock, and disbelief at what had happened. Several women asked to be removed from the Center's membership and mailing lists. In November of 1990, the Women's Book Exchange moved to "Our Own Place" in Durham. The collection is currently housed in the Women's Studies Department at Duke University.

The Women's Center struggled to respond to charges of censorship and homophobia, and to mend both internal rifts and broken ties with many local feminists, lesbians, bisexuals and others. The Board held several special meetings to discuss the decision to rescind the merger with the WBE, and hosted three membership forums to both inform and to hear from the general membership on the issue. The Board integrated specific recommendations from the forums into its charter, committing itself to addressing the communication and policy issues which arose during the WBE controversy.

#### **IV. The Women's Center Becomes a Success: 1991-Present**

Mary Linker, coordinator of the Shared Housing Referral Service, was hired as interim director in December 1990. In February of 1991, Catherine Dickman was hired as the next permanent full-time director. Catherine had moved to Chapel Hill from Cleveland in 1983. She had worked a lot with nonprofits in the past, and had her MA in Urban Studies. She recalls that "I came in right after the Book Exchange issue...I actually applied for the job because I had heard about it. I had led an organization in Cleveland through a similar controversy, and I thought I could help The Women's Center heal from the experience" (interview, 10/5/98). While working towards her Master's degree, Catherine had taken lots of management courses in the MBA program, as well as computer and accounting classes. This would serve her well at the Center, where things were in disarray after the WBE issue. The house was somewhat of a mess, with desks propped up on bricks and peeling paint on the walls. Catherine asked the Henderson Street House Foundation to complete the renovations of the upstairs offices that they had begun prior to the WBE controversy, when they had ceased any fundraising activity. The Village Companies, a local business, designated a decorator named Susan Elkins to help the Foundation improve the house. She put in industrial carpet, mini-blinds, and shutters. The Foundation traveled to Hickory where Coolie Monroe's brother owned a furniture store and bought desks and chairs for the house. There were also problems with the computer, which nearly lost the Center's entire membership list. Fortunately, at the end of 1993 Glaxo



#### ***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • [www.womenspace.org](http://www.womenspace.org)

Wellcome donated four computers and laser printers to the Center.

Catherine continued to strengthen both membership and programming. In May of 1991, grief and loss counseling were offered, and in August 1991, the annual Art Show moved from La Residence, a local restaurant, to The Women's Center itself. "We needed to build the Art Show", Catherine says. "We were not even breaking even and we needed to fundraise. We weren't going to make enough money on the art itself; we had to build events around it. We had a cocktail party and a luncheon in 1991, and there were 345 people at the luncheon! The Art Show raised \$2,500 for the Center that year. By the time I left in 1996, the Art Show was bringing in \$35,000" (interview, 10/5/98).

There were 200 members of the Center when Catherine came in 1991; by the time she left there were nearly 2000.

Catherine also hired many new staff during her tenure as director. In January 1993 she hired a career counselor. In January 1994 an evening office manager was hired and the Center began to stay open until 7:30pm on weekdays. Also in January 1994, a coordinator for the "Goodbye, Cinderella" program and a program assistant were hired. During 1992 and 1993, extensive programming was offered in Hillsborough and Northern Orange County as part of an outreach effort to rural and minority women. "...the Orange County Women's Center will begin offering free programs in Hillsborough...possible program topics could include time management skills, dressing for success, child care options, parenting workshops and assertiveness training. The Center will offer programs that are of interest to the community...(The News of Orange County, 5/20/92). The Peer Counseling program also continued to thrive:

"From the moment I walked in the door I felt the whole place was just really friendly', Carolyn Ogburn said. 'It's not just a place to go and complain, there were real conversations and dialogue'....'This town is full of therapists who charge \$70-\$90 an hour but there are a lot of people who can't afford that...It's a really valuable resource for those who can't pay or who are new to the community and don't know where to turn'" (The News and Observer, 10/24/91).

In November of 1993, The Women's Center received its first state grant. The grant provided funding for a single parent/displaced homemaker career guidance program, facilitated by the career counselor. The response was overwhelming. "Women who have come to the Center range from women with PhD's who have stayed home for ten years and can't find a job in a highly specialized field to women on welfare with associate's degrees who can no longer survive on part-time incomes...The program aims to 'counsel, assist, and help displaced homemakers in the job-seeking process'... She [Carole Yardley, career counselor] tailors the program to each woman's needs and offers it in a comfortable, safe environment in which to explore the world of work" (The Chapel Hill Herald, 1/19/94).



**Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years**

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-968-4610 • www.womenspace.org

In March of 1994, Family Law in North Carolina was re-edited and published in its second edition. In June of 1995, The Women's Center applied for membership in the National Foundation for Consumer Credit in order to become a free-standing, full-service consumer credit counseling service (CCCS), rather than a satellite CCCS of Orange Congregations in Mission, through which the Center had been offering financial counseling. In September of 1995, the Community Financial Counseling program was formed within The Women's Center as a separate entity. It focused on assisting clients in creating household budgets which realistically fit their annual sources of income; CFC was open to anyone, both men and women, who wanted to gain more control and understanding of financial affairs. Its mission statement is as follows:

Community Financial Counseling is a non-judgmental counseling service designed to assist individuals and families with budgeting, debt management and financial planning, and to provide community outreach on topics of financial and debt management through speakers and moderators. One of the primary goals of The Women's Center is to help stabilize women and families. As financial stress is often at the root of family instability, Community Financial Counseling is an integral component of The Women's Center's holistic service model--providing structure and intervention to those in need.

Catherine Dickman focused on building membership and hiring new staff during her tenure as director. She and Verla Insko collaborated on fundraising letters, and Board member Tina Bell thought up the idea of the "\$100 membership". Before Catherine retired in January of 1996, after five years as Women's Center director, there was a staff of eight--there had been two when she arrived in 1991--and membership was bringing in \$25,000 for the Center.

On January 5, 1996, Diane Ranes was hired to replace Catherine. She was from California and had a PhD in psychology, as well as a Master's degree in social work. She dedicated herself to improving the Center's financial situation, particularly around fundraising, and to professionalizing the Center, improving existing services and working on new program development. Grant revenues increased dramatically during Diane's year and a half at the Center. Particularly exciting was the largest single grant in the history of The Women's Center, received to expand the "Good-Bye, Cinderella" program to a year-round, co-ed after school program. The state's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) five-year grant provided similar services to at-risk youth, ages 10-14, living in public housing that "Good-Bye, Cinderella" had, but expanded the program to include boys and enabled it to operate year-round rather than only during the school term. According to Diane Ranes' 1996 Annual Report to the Board, "This [grant] will generate State funds of over \$285,000 for services to the poorest teens in Chapel Hill-Carrboro. The grant also provides for a dedicated, year-round staff. The new program name is "Teens Climb High" and the first year of funding from the State is \$75,000. These Grants were awarded to only 3 of 87 completed applications in a highly competitive and extended review process state wide and brought us to the Governor's attention". As well,



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

The Women's Center • 210 Henderson Street • P.O. Box 1057  
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for the first time in Center history the "Women's Center has the required full 3 months of operating reserve in the bank...For the first time the Center has begun a separate "Endowment" Account..." (from D. Ranes' Annual Report, 3/17/97).

Programming also improved during Diane's tenure as director. "Women @ Work", the Center's core employment program, received glowing evaluations from clients and showed "remarkable impacts on women's psycho-social functioning, employability and quality of life". Computer education and services were upgraded and improved; grants from the Triangle Community Foundation enabled the Center to go "on line" and to integrate Internet use into employment programs. In the autumn of 1996, the Community Legal Project, staffed by volunteers from the UNC-Chapel Hill Law School, began. The Project enabled women to present a legal question or concern to a law student; the student would then research the issue fully, prepare a written response reviewed by a law professor, and then meet with the client a second time to disseminate the information gathered. After almost two years of directing the Center, Diane Ranes returned to private practice.

In July 1997, Julia Mack was hired as director. She has her Master's in Public Administration from UNC-Chapel Hill, as well as a Master's degree in Communications, and has been involved in the local community since moving to Chapel Hill in 1985. Her first job in town was with Planned Parenthood of Orange County. Later, she supported the creation of the Chapel-Hill Carrboro Residents' Council while working for the Town of Chapel Hill as Human Services Coordinator. She was trained in mediation and group facilitation at the Dispute Settlement Center where she eventually served as Treasurer of the Board of Directors. She is dedicated to improving financial management as well as the management of the Center's staff. Julia has supported steady increases for Women's Center employees; in her first two years, salary increases averaged 10% per year. Under Julia's leadership, the Center has implemented several new programs, including the Woman-to-Woman peer support program, overseen by Elaine Barney, C.C.S.W., and Teens Climb High, directed by Rebecca Margolis. Woman-to-Woman grew out of the Peer Counseling program and provides free, one-on-one empathic listening and referral to both the Center's and other agencies' services. It is staffed entirely by trained volunteers. Sales from the 1997 Art Show, "Through Women's Eyes, By Women's Hands", raised more than \$49,000 for the Center, topping all previous years' income. Community Financial Counseling, led by Hannah Shepard, received its national accreditation in 1998 and has recently begun to provide appointments and workshops in Chatham County. CFC workshops are now available in both Spanish and English. A Spanish translation of Family Law in North Carolina is nearly completed; Julia and other staff at the Center plan to work on greater outreach to the growing Hispanic community in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro area. Jenn Barr, Associate Director for Community Education at the Center, Shuly Cawood, Career Services Coordinator, and Ruth Newnam, Membership, Development and Special Events Coordinator, are all proficient in Spanish. Barr and Cawood serve on the Orange County Task Force on Hispanic Issues.



***Herstory: The Women's Center's First Twenty Years***

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Membership now exceeds 2000 and the Center has been gearing up for this twentieth anniversary year. Many events are planned, including an anniversary dinner at Crook's Corner and the annual "Gathering of Women" at the Forest Theatre. Membership Development and Special Events Coordinator Ruth Newnam is busily compiling a scrapbook of photographs, news articles, brochures and other Women's Center memorabilia from the past twenty years. Local artist Nikki Schumann, well-known nationally for her calendars, has generously created an original silk-screen print for The Women's Center to commemorate its twentieth birthday. The print has been reprinted onto T-shirts and tote bags. The mood at the Center during this twentieth year is one of pride, enthusiasm and celebration.

As I think back on the time I have spent researching and writing this history, I am most struck by the overwhelming commitment and affection that directors, staff, board members and volunteers have to and for The Women's Center. The strides the Center has made, the lives it has improved, and the challenges it has risen to and overcome combine to make it a unique and marvelous organization. I feel very honored to have been a part of the twentieth anniversary celebration and I am deeply grateful to everyone who allowed me to interview them, who helped me gather material, who provided support and encouragement during this process, and who read the many drafts of this history.

My last interview was with Margaret Adams, who grew up in Chapel Hill and was a neighbor of the original owners of the house at 210 Henderson Street, Vernon and Mabel Hill. As we walked through the house, she marveled at all the changes inside, then stopped and pointed out the old radio that remains set into a cabinet in the Resource Room. "This was the Hill's sitting room...there was a rocking chair in the corner that Mrs. Hill always sat in and I used to bring my baby daughter over after church on Christmas Eve. Mrs. Hill would rock her in the chair and she'd fall asleep" (interview). Many generations of women have lived and worked in the house, and as Margaret spoke I remembered my fantasy of sitting around a fire knitting or quilting with other women. I realized that my fantasy had been realized at The Women's Center, as I collected the bright scraps of other women's memories, piecing them together into the patchwork of this herstory, feeling the safety and comfort that only comes in a community of women. I asked Margaret Adams what the Hills would have thought of a women's center in their house. "They never would have thought of a women's center," she replied. "There was no need for it then...but I know they would be happy to see the house used for such a public good". Come by The Women's Center and find out for yourself.

### **Special Thanks and Acknowledgment to:**

Margaret Adams  
Elaine Barney  
Carol Burnett



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Mary Jane Burns  
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