



Roberta Kanter, Helping Women Help Women

In 1993 U.S. statistics reported that 79% of all women suffered from partner abuse. That meant that 8 out of 10 families were living as victims of abuse. In 1995 Roberta Kanter moved to south county California from Huntington Beach with a new husband looking for a new life. Sixteen years earlier, her first husband had walked out on her and their four daughters, ages two to eleven when he decided he wanted to be with another woman. Unexpectedly a single mother at 34, Roberta was a mess, but only for two months. She dried her tears and was determined to make a good life for herself and her girls...and she did. Sixteen years later with her youngest in college, and looking to help make a difference, Roberta answered a tiny ad in the paper that said *Looking for volunteers to help start a women's organization.*

"I had always been a volunteer and I had always done charity work, even when I was single." Roberta recalled. "So I called them and said, can I come in, and they said yes." In 1993, Francis and Marilyn, who both had come from abusive marriages, had incorporated "Women Helping Women," wanting to start an organization that would help women who had survived bad marriages and domestic violence get a fresh start with free clothing for work. But it was not until Roberta and another volunteer, AJ answered the ad in 1995 that the idea was really put into action. All four women were in their 50's and all four had been divorced.

"We felt like when you come out of a divorce, no matter what your situation, it is traumatic needless to say and you don't always have the right clothes to go to work. And what's the first thing you have to do when you come out of a divorce if you haven't been working? You have to get a job and you have to have clothes to wear to that job. So it all started because we could relate. We wanted to provide women with free professional clothes and to help their self esteem so that they would feel good about putting on a nice outfit and going to work."

Although all the ladies had full time jobs, WHW became a passion. They rented a multipurpose room in a local elementary school and hired a part time Director. "We paid her very little, because we had no money and she ran the agency, such that it was." Roberta recounted. Roberta was put in charge of getting clothing donations. "We ran ads in the paper asking for donations, asked our neighbors, friends, anyone we knew at our temples, our churches and businesses. We even held clothing drives...all of us had some kind of connection." Eventually the group outgrew the little rented space and made it a mission to find a place of their own and that's when they found the suites in Costa Mesa, California, where WHW still operates a retail shop today.

In the early days, the two biggest challenges were money and maintaining a well functioning and working board of directors. To raise money they wrote lots of letters, which they copied and mailed out. One day they found out that the Orange County Register, a local newspaper, was giving grants to local charities, so they wrote their first grant and when they got the \$2500, they were all so excited. They started writing grants and getting funding. Then a board member introduced them to Curtis and Associates, who contracted and paid WHW to provide professional clothing to their welfare to work

clients. Because the organization was so new, so small and lacked funding, board members needed to be committed worker bees. “We had a very small board to start with, and a lot of people didn’t want to make a commitment” said Roberta who was the board’s treasurer. At the time there was no financial requirement to be a board member, which opened it up to a lot of potential members, but also meant there was a lack of ownership.

But women needing clothing and other employment support services kept coming. “And their stories were sad...very sad.” Roberta recalled. “Some people are capable of pulling themselves up by their bootstraps and some people aren’t. The least we could do was give them some nice clothes to wear.” In the beginning, it was just about the clothes. But even back then the WHW realized they needed to offer the whole package. So they started doing some workshops and computer training and partnering with beauty schools to offer free haircuts and with an employment agencies to provide more comprehensive services.

For 10 years, Women Helping Women was Roberta’s life. The biggest lesson Robert learned was that abuse and other life challenges happen in all walks of life, every nationality and every color. “There is such a need, even here in Orange County. We were just people who had a vision and wanted to do something to help.” Today Roberta is a part time office administrator and her four daughters, all college educated live in Connecticut, San Diego and London.

In 2013 WHW celebrates 20 years of providing employment support services to disadvantaged men, women and teens, empowering them to become economically self sufficient through employment success. Thanks to commitment and hard work of four ladies who just wanted to do something to help, over 30,000 lives have been touched and impacted by women helping women.



Roberta Kanter at WHW in 2000.



Roberta Kanter and her husband at a recent WHW event in 2012.

About WHW. WHW is a 501(c)(3) whose mission is to provide comprehensive employment support services to empower disadvantaged men, women and teens to achieve economic self sufficiency through employment success and who has served over 30,000 clients for 20 years, since 1993. WHW’s 20 year Employment Success Program includes resume and interviewing skills, workshops, computer classes, job placement, image consulting, professional clothing appropriate for interviews and transportation services. Supported by United Way, WHW’s services are always at no charge or obligation to clients and referring non-profit partners. For more information on WHW and its Employment Success Program, go to www.whw.org.

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