

A Brief History of Caring Unlimited

By Audrey Beach*

Caring Unlimited was birthed in 1977 by a group of women who had been attending a group at York County Counseling Services. The purpose of the group was to help women deal with living or having lived with alcoholic spouses. Most of these women were now single, working mothers, trying to cope.

Through their discussions it became apparent that there was another common factor in their relationships with their husbands. They were all survivors of abuse. The group's counselor knew of a shelter for battered women in New Hampshire. She contacted the shelter and invited a staff person to come and speak with the group.

With inspiration and encouragement from their counselor the women began meeting regularly at each other's homes. These meetings were primarily to discuss how they could start a shelter program in York County. Although the women wanted the shelter to operate independently of York County Counseling Services, they received a great deal of advice, information and support from the agency, including meeting space. They met many evenings for six months. They learned how to write by-laws, how to incorporate and become a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization and how to apply for grant funds. They applied for a Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) grant and to their surprise it was accepted. CETA was a federal law enacted in 1973 to train workers and provide them with jobs in the public service. The women were ecstatic over their success but none of them had any training in social services. Job descriptions were written for an administrative director, a head counselor, and 4-5 women's advocates. Some members of the group were hired for advocate positions; they attended workshops and received training at York County Counseling Services. The staff at Portland Family Crisis Shelter also provided shelter training. *"We met, and met and met. Most of us primarily did an empathy kind of thing."*

Caring Unlimited's first offices were above the Plaza Restaurant on Main Street in Saco. During the first six months of the grant, various motel rooms were used for sheltering women and their children. A friend donated a camp in Camp Ellis which was used for shelter instead of motels.

In 1979 the CETA funds ran out and most of the staff positions were eliminated. Soon after Caring Unlimited was approved for an annual contract with Maine's Department of Human Services and for a year the organization functioned with a board of directors, one full time and one part time advocate and a corps of volunteers. The following year it became clear that a director was needed but money was still a problem. One of the advocates became the director and the part time position was eliminated. Though many people were involved with Caring at this point either as board members or as volunteers, the one paid employee had to keep the agency functioning.

More board members were recruited. The shelter moved from a two bedroom apartment with no phone to a house which accommodated office space as well. Once the director started speaking to community groups, donations from \$25 to \$1,000 were received, especially from women's groups. Those who heard about Caring Unlimited recognized the need and responded. Another advocate was hired along with a part time secretary. The shelter moved to a larger space in Sanford. Municipal funds were now sought as well as United Way funding. Financially and organizationally the agency gained more stability. In 1983 the staff grew to six positions and the shelter relocated to a large house with a garage and a yard in Saco.

In 1985 Caring Unlimited received a low interest loan from the Maine State Housing Authority to purchase the 18 bed shelter which it now occupies. The staff had grown to include 7 full time positions, 1 part time position and a work-study student. The services reached beyond shelter to include the hotline, court advocacy, individual advocacy, community education, children's self esteem groups, women's support groups and a walk-in outreach office in Biddeford.

In 1990, Caring Unlimited sheltered 38 women and their 59 children for a total of 749 shelter days. In 1991, 103 women and their 132 children received shelter for a total of 2,795 shelter days.

In 1997, Caring Unlimited began providing supportive housing services for up to 24 months for families reorganizing their lives after leaving an abusive relationship through its new Transitional Housing and Services Program at a new 4-unit site in Biddeford. Since that time the Transitional Program has grown to 15 transitional apartments in Sanford, Springvale and Biddeford.

In 2009, Caring Unlimited's staff and volunteers provided direct safety planning and support services through the 24-Hour Hotline, Emergency Shelter, Transitional Housing, Outreach Services (individual and group services), Legal Services and Children's Services Programs to a total of 2,259 unduplicated individuals including 1,955 women, 235 children and 69 men and provided domestic violence education programs to another 8,619 individuals throughout our York County communities.

Now in our 34th year serving York County we operate with an annual budget of \$1.5 million with 6 service sites in Sanford, Biddeford, Kittery and Limerick and 24 paid staff members as well as 193 volunteers who contributed over 8,079 hours in support of our mission in 2009.

Caring Unlimited enjoys tremendous support from a very generous York County community and is the organization it is today because of the tremendous support of our volunteers without whom we couldn't possibly continue to provide the same level of high quality support services which the community has come to expect.

**Audrey Beach currently serves as CU's Transitional Housing Program Co-Coordinator. For the past 23 years Audrey has provided safety planning and support services in a number of roles at Caring Unlimited. She is our most veteran staff member and honorary historian.*

May 2010

**Caring Unlimited's First Board of Directors
Signatories to Articles of Incorporation
October 15, 1977**

Lucille Smith

Aurore Adams

Avangeline Wade

Adelaide Carkhuff

Suzanne Paul

Marjorie Myers

Barbara Corbeil

Nancy Abd el Guelil

**Our First Volunteers*