

# Women's Center faces brighter future

By KEITH TAYLOR  
Staff Writer

Things are looking better for the Orange County Women's Center.

After nearly a year of organizational disarray and financial trouble — the center's checking account was down to \$16 at one point last summer — the center now has more than \$40,000 in the bank and has hired a full-time director, something the center has done without since last March.

The new director is Toni A. Zirker, a native of Texas who has been actively involved in working with women for the past 10 years. Zirker was selected for the job by the Women's Center board of trustees from a pool of more than 100 applicants.

After completing studies and work in Texas, Zirker moved with her husband to Chapel Hill and joined the House Staff Women's Organization and established a support group for doctors' wives. She was spending her time working, getting to know Chapel Hill and trying to decide what she wanted to do here.

One day last fall, Zirker said, she saw an advertisement announcing that the Women's Center was looking for a new director and said to herself, "That's it; that's exactly what I want to do. That's me."

She began working at the center part-time in December 1982 and started full-time on Jan. 1.

Zirker said she found herself running an organization surrounded with confusion.

"People had all kinds of funny ideas about who we are and what we do," she said. But the reason the public's perception of the Women's Center was confused was because the center itself was out of focus, she said.

Part of that problem was money. The Orange County Women's Center was established with a donation of \$30,000 in 1979 as a non-profit, non-political organization to provide educational and support services for women. However, contributions did not keep up with operating expenses. The money began to run out last year.

The turning point was when an anonymous local donor offered the Women's Center a \$20,000 challenge grant, provided that the center raised another \$20,000 by Dec. 1, 1982.

The center got busy, asking businesses and individuals for contributions. The center was getting "tons" of checks every day, Zirker said. But when the deadline arrived, she said, the center was "almost but not quite there."

Zirker said it was somehow communicated to the donor that the fundraising was very close to its goal, and the center was given an extension to Jan. 31. By that time the center exceeded the goal, resulting in the present fund of more than \$40,000.

Zirker said she still did not know who presented the challenge grant. Even members of the center's board of trustees did not know who donated the \$20,000.

Zirker said she saw the number of donations and the "overwhelming" response of the public as evidence that the Women's Center provided necessary services. The center's services include educational and support groups, as well as information and referral services.

The difference between support groups and educational programs is in their emphasis, Zirker said. The main focus of support groups is on emotional support; educational programs are primarily an information resource.

Support groups scheduled for this spring include

groups for new mothers, separated and divorced women, women over 40, widows, women out of work and homemakers. Some of the planned educational programs include workshops on careers, effective parenting, legal issues for women and depression. These groups are led by professionals with background in the subject matter.

"They're not just rap sessions," Zirker said.

The programs vary in length depending on their subject matter. There is a \$3 fee per session for support groups and \$5 per session for the educational programs. However, Zirker said, money is not an obstacle if a woman cannot pay.

"No woman is ever turned away from our programs because she can't afford the fee," Zirker said. Nevertheless, she said, there is hardly ever a case when a woman takes advantage of that flexibility. Even those with little income seem to want to support the center if they can, Zirker said.

Zirker said the center gets requests for help from women of all races, ages and income levels. In 1982, 53 percent of the center's requests were related to issues of separation and divorce, which Zirker said demonstrated "an incredible need."

Another 31 percent of the requests were regarding job and career concerns; 21 percent were for legal concerns; and the rest varied among child care, money, housing, alcohol and other problems.

For now, Zirker is spending most of her time trying to improve the quality of the center's programs and to clear up some of the public's confusion regarding the center.

Part of that confusion is simply due to the name of the building. The Orange County Women's Center is only one of three agencies housed in a building at 406 W. Rosemary St.; the others are the Rape Crisis Center and the Women's Health Coun-



DTW/Jamie Francis

Toni Zirker (right), executive director of the Women's Center ... center's services include educational and support groups for women

seling Service.

Although separate agencies, the three were housed together for convenience; one agency often has to refer women to one of the other two. However, the building itself is also known as The Women's Center. Zirker said a name change for the building is in the works.

Another common misconception is that the

center itself provides counseling. Instead, Zirker said, the center serves as an information and referral link.

Will the Women's Center be able to keep its own money problems under control now? "I feel really confident that the Women's Center will do nothing but continue to get stronger from here on out," Zirker said.

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