



Women's Center & Shelter  
of Greater Pittsburgh

SPRING 2022

## Reaching Out and Finding Hope Within

*"I started to realize something was wrong when I saw a WC&S flyer at a doctor's office. It asked 'Does your partner check your social media and ask for your passwords?'" said Ruthie, a self-employed artist. "And it hit me. I was going to take a picture, but then realized I couldn't because my husband would see it in my phone."*

Although this was the beginning of the journey for Ruthie, she was still in denial. She had been married to her husband, Jim, for nearly two decades and always thought he was a kind, caring person. "My brain couldn't make sense of it," she explained.

Two months later, Jim told Ruthie he had been reading her journals and then took her phone, isolating her.

"I Googled a friend's number, hid in the basement, and called her. She said 'Ruthie, that's abuse. What do you need?' But I couldn't hear it. It was too soon. But I was one step closer."

Jim continued to check Ruthie's phone and repeatedly accused her of having affairs. She changed the passcode, but when Jim noticed, he demanded she change it back.

"When I told him no, he took my phone away for four days, like I was a teenager or something," remembered Ruthie. "I recently found a piece of paper from this incident. I wrote down essential phone numbers and hid the list in case I needed it."

Jim's abusive behaviors escalated. He woke Ruthie up at night and harassed her with questions — Who was she seeing? Where was she going? "I told him this wasn't okay and he said, 'Well then, I hope you don't make me do it again.' He was always blaming me for his actions."

Jim made it difficult for Ruthie to do her work as an independent artist. He picked fights with her before client appointments. He refused to watch their children and she would have to spend money on babysitters. "He made it hard for me to get my finances together," said Ruthie.

Ruthie knew this wasn't right but didn't know what to call it. "Jim would endlessly ask me questions I had already answered, trying to get into my head and make me admit something. He wanted to keep me off balance," said Ruthie. "I didn't realize this was abuse. He wasn't hitting me. I just didn't know what to do."

A friend recommended Ruthie call WC&S. "The DV advocate told me it wasn't my job to figure out what was wrong with Jim. I used to think if I could get him to change, we could get through it. But this wasn't on me."

Ruthie began coming to WC&S for individual therapy. "I was surprised the first time. I was certain I would be going downstairs into a dark, underground space. But it was so bright and beautiful. The safety awareness made me feel comfortable enough to open up."

She brought her youngest child to the Children's Advocacy Program during her sessions. "They fed him, he did art projects, and he made friends. It was reassuring to have my child be comfortable there too," Ruthie smiled.

***"I used to worry someone was going to say 'This isn't what we're here for. We're here for real abuse.' But no one at WC&S ever said that to me."***

Ruthie read a list of all the things that Jim had done or said to her and then started speaking about her own perceived flaws. "I was saying 'I know I avoid conflict...' and my therapist said 'Stop. Avoiding conflict doesn't mean you deserve abuse.' This is the first time I wasn't blamed. She understood me," said Ruthie.

Now, she also participates in a support group centered around healing from trauma.

Ruthie's story of survival  
continued on next page...



continued from page 1

## Ruthie's Story: Reaching Out and Finding Hope Within

"It was the first time I was in a space where people really talked about what happened. I mentioned I had a list of things I could safely talk to my husband about. Another participant said 'I have that list too. What's on yours?' In the support group, we're free to talk about anything."

Ruthie's husband used to tell her what to do, and when she first started coming to WC&S, she wanted her therapist to give her instructions, too. "Now that I'm further along, I realize that I'm in charge of myself. My therapist tells me 'You will know what to do.'"

Recently, Ruthie and Jim tried going to a marriage counselor – something that is not recommended because the abuser will often find opportunities to use power and control. Ruthie said couple's therapy was a failure, but she learned an important lesson. "Coming from a religious background, divorce was discouraged. I thought if I tried this, I could say I tried everything. And I did," Ruthie declared.

Ruthie and Jim are safely cohabiting and coparenting their four children. "Right now, it isn't feasible for me to leave and give my children what they deserve. But it feels like a separation of sorts. It's over. I don't engage with any of the things that he does. I don't feel scared all the time."

Ruthie is working on financial independence so she can someday separate from Jim completely. "I'm constantly evaluating and safety planning with my therapist. I will leave when I am able. But, we will always be in each other's lives to some capacity because we have children together."

"I used to think that in order to feel relief from the pain I was in, I needed him to do something," said Ruthie. "I thought I needed him to fix it. Now, I know I can't change him, I can only influence my life. I'll forever be grateful to WC&S."

*This story has been shared with permission of the survivor. All identifying details have been changed.*

save the date

# Celebrating Survivors

SPONSORED BY:

UPMC HEALTH PLAN

*We are delighted to announce that the Celebrating Survivors event will return in person on Friday, May 6, 2022, at 6:00 p.m. to The Circuit Center and Ballroom!*

We are looking forward to a fantastic evening as we gather to celebrate survivors of domestic violence, remember those who have lost their lives to DV, and honor deserving members of the community with the **Sherley and Ted Craig Humanitarian Award**. The Craig family is thrilled to announce that the recipient of this year's award is the **Staff of Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh** for their hard work and unrelenting spirit during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In a video message on behalf of her sisters Lucy Szklinski and Cindy Johnson and the Craig Family, Karen Craig Brubaker said to the WC&S staff, "For those of you who remember our sweet mother, we know that she would be so pleased that you're all receiving the award in recognition of your dedication, devotion, and all of your hard work, especially after this year's past events. Everything you do and have done is so very important. And so, we thank you."

WC&S President/CEO, Nicole Molinaro, is overjoyed about the WC&S staff receiving this honor. "Words cannot express how proud I am of this incredible team and their ability to forge ahead, even during the most difficult times. They stand beside survivors and their children each and every day, helping to empower them towards safety and a brighter future."

We are equally as thrilled to present the **SUCCESS Award** to former board chairs **Sara Davis Buss and Mary Anne Papale** for their leadership and embodiment of the WC&S values (Safety, Uplifting Others, Compassion, Courage, Equity, Survivor-Centered Advocacy, and Stewardship). During their respective terms, Sara and Mary Anne led the agency through robust strategic plans, a \$12 million capital campaign, the 40th Anniversary, enhancements to our internal systems and infrastructure, expansion of our network of community supporters, and much more. Most importantly, every decision was made keeping in mind the safety and well-being of survivors and their children alongside the sustainability and health of the organization.

"Both Sara and Mary Anne made the work of WC&S part of their lived values," said Erin Gibson Allen, current WC&S Board Chair. "They both showed courage to think boldly about the work of WC&S including not only where it was when they took the reigns as board chair but also where it might go in the future to continue to evolve to serve the needs of our community. They both understand that no organization, no matter how strong, can survive on past success alone. Sara and Mary Anne are the caliber of leaders who swing for the fences with courage and purpose. We are all better for their heart, smarts, dedication, and vision."

We hope you will consider joining us for this incredibly special evening or supporting the event in any way you are able. Learn more at: [CelebrateSurvivors.org](https://CelebrateSurvivors.org).

### COVID-19 related safety measures

The Circuit Center and Ballroom is equipped with MERV Level 13 air filters, as recommended by ASHRAE and the CDC, to help reduce the transmission of airborne pathogens. The venue also includes outdoor space to enjoy, and other measures such as proof of vaccination will be put into place to create the safest environment possible.



Women's Center & Shelter  
of Greater Pittsburgh



## A letter from...

*Over the past several years, Women's Center & Shelter has experienced tremendous growth. We have nearly doubled full-time staffing positions over the past five years, growing from a small but mighty team to a vibrant, large staff of empathetic, skilled team members.*

This has been no accident, but rather a conscious, strategic decision to pursue funding to serve more survivors — with specialized services to address their unique needs. So, we created teams and positions like RIL Team (Refugee, Immigrant, and Limited-English Speakers), LGBTQIA+ Outreach Advocate, Education Facilitators, Rapid Rehousing Coordinator, and more. With this significant level of growth, it was clear we needed to bolster our leadership and administrative functions as well.

So, to further our mission and support our staff, we created two new Chief positions and promoted two talented individuals into these positions: Rhonda Fleming and Maggie Prescott. Rhonda is the new Chief of Prevention, Intervention, & Outreach. She has been with WC&S for an amazing 31 years, most recently serving as the Director of Education and Outreach. Most survivors served by WC&S utilize more than three services, so each department is interconnected. We needed a leader who could represent all services and understand how they interact. Rhonda is a skilled supervisor, a big-picture thinker, and an amazing teacher — there is no one more perfect for the job.

Maggie Prescott is the Chief of Mission Integration. Maggie has been with WC&S for 8 years and was previously the Senior Staff Attorney in WC&S' Civil Law Project. Maggie's role is a new one for the agency. At WC&S, we are guided by 4 pillars: Safety; Women's Center Business System; Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI); and the Sanctuary Model. These initiatives require an ongoing effort to weave them into the fabric of WC&S and Maggie is the ideal person to integrate our mission and pillars into our daily work. Maggie can tackle big issues and break them down into manageable bites. She already has done — and will continue to do — great things.

Although I happily speak on behalf of the WC&S team and our Board of Directors, typically this letter includes just my voice. This time, though, I am proud to hand it over to Rhonda and Maggie to discuss their motivations and plans for the future. **To both of these women — you are smart, you are capable, you are passionate, and you have the perfect hearts and souls for the job.**

*Nicole*

Nicole Molinaro, President/CEO

Keep reading...

*As the Chief of Prevention, Intervention, & Outreach, I am responsible for oversight of programs including: the Medical Advocacy, Outreach Advocacy, MENS Group (Men Embracing Non-Violence & Safety), and the Schools Program. I am also responsible for the services offered through our residential programs, with additional leadership support.*

During my 31 years at WC&S, I have been a part of many changes within the field of domestic violence. The amazing work of dedicated advocates continues to inspire me. Being a part of that work is nothing short of invigorating, and at times, very challenging.

I am honored to lead this awesome team and to recognize current achievements and daily routine accomplishments:

- The Medical Advocacy Coordinator has served in her position for 15+ years and has established relationships with many local hospitals and medical centers by providing training to doctors, nurses, students, and more.
- The LGBTQIA+ Advocacy program is in its second year. LGBTQIA+ folks experience domestic violence at higher rates than cisgender heterosexual individuals, and many struggle to break through systematic barriers to get help. Our LGBTQIA+ Advocate conducts one-on-one meetings, weekly group sessions, and professional training to support victims and to increase awareness.
- Under my leadership, the MENS Group (our Battering Intervention Program, or “BIP”) was the first to receive full certification in Allegheny County. The MENS Group works with male perpetrators of IPV who voluntarily commit to understanding and improving their behavioral choices within intimate relationships.

- Since 1987, WC&S has provided school-based teen dating violence programs to Pittsburgh Public Schools via virtual or in-person presentations to 6th through 12th grades. Notably, we have had a greater number of requests for middle school intervention this year.
- The Prevention & Outreach department developed a Pre-K through 12th grade curriculum, “Hands Are Not for Hurting,” which we recently combined with the national “Expect Respect” school-based curriculum. In 2008 and 2010, I traveled to Moscow to train teachers, counselors, and school personnel and they have translated and implemented portions of the lessons.

My team and I are driven to continue to deliver high-quality educational programming on multiple levels. We will anticipate the need for prevention and intervention services to alleviate the increase of IPV throughout Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. We will stay on top of ever-changing needs to help survivors reach safety for themselves and their children. We will continue to create safe spaces for survivors to find help, healing, and hope.

#### **Rhonda**

*Chief of Prevention, Intervention & Outreach*

*I have witnessed tremendous growth in Women's Center & Shelter's programs and infrastructure in my eight years with the agency.*

From the Immediate Needs Coordination program to the Refugee, Immigrant, and Limited-English Speaking (RIL) interdepartmental team to LGBTQIA+ Outreach, I am awed by WC&S' dedication to creating a community of safety, healing, and empowerment to anyone affected by domestic violence.

I am privileged to work for WC&S because we are an organization invested in the growth and development of our staff. As Chief of Mission Integration, I will weave WC&S' Mission, Vision, and Values into our daily work and practices, particularly as it relates to Safety, Diversity/Equity/Inclusion (DEI), Sanctuary, and the Women's Center Business Model.

One example of a new DEI initiative is our participation in the Vibrant Pittsburgh Diagnostic Index. The Vibrant Index analyzes how WC&S addresses DEI in our policies and workplace practices and identifies our existing strengths as well as opportunities for improvement. This is our first year participating in the Index and

I am looking forward to implementing the recommended changes to build a stronger culture of equity and inclusion.

I am also very excited to serve as the facilitator for WC&S' own Equity and Action Collaborative (EAC), which began in June 2020 and is comprised of both staff and Board. EAC was created to proactively address racism and social justice and to ensure that we uphold our anti-oppression values at every level of the organization. We are grounded in anti-oppression; taking action against systemic discrimination and racism is vital to our vision of ending domestic violence and creating safe spaces for help, healing, and hope.

With my background of direct client work, I have an acute understanding of the challenges faced by our staff and the systemic roadblocks faced by our clients. I look forward to utilizing this knowledge when I work on WC&S' new strategic plan and special initiatives.

#### **Maggie**

*Chief of Mission Integration*

# Creating Sanctuary for Survivors and Staff

*Sanctuary — a sacred place of refuge & protection;  
a shelter from danger & harm*

“When it comes to trauma work, slower is faster,” said Paula Kelly-Keller, LCSW, Clinical Supervisor at WC&S. She has been with WC&S for 25 years, works with survivors as a therapist, and trains staff using the Sanctuary Model.

**The Sanctuary Model is a blueprint for organizational change which, at its core, promotes safety and recovery from adversity through the active creation of a trauma-informed community.** According to their website, the Sanctuary Model was created by Dr. Sandra Bloom in the early 1980s and since then, the Sanctuary Institute has trained nearly 300 organizations, most commonly residential treatment facilities.

Since WC&S implemented the Sanctuary Model 10 years ago, it has been the lens we see all of our work through — both with survivors and with our fellow team members. “Trauma affects all of us, whether we are conscious of it or not,” explained Paula. “If we as service providers don’t address and understand our trauma, we could inadvertently further traumatize our clients.”

Trauma has been a focus in the mental health field for approximately the past decade, and trauma-informed practices encourage providers to flip the script from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?” Without feeling blamed or shamed, survivors have the opportunity to reflect upon their feelings and behaviors along their journey. Healing from trauma is often a long process and it can also be very rewarding and life changing.

One of the main components of healing trauma through Sanctuary is the concept of managing your S.E.L.F — Safety, Emotions, Loss, and Future.

**Safety** — creating a space safe from physical, emotional, and moral abuse

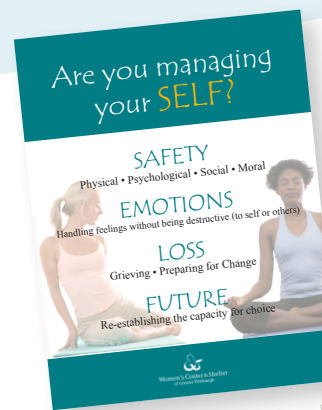
**Emotions** — how feelings such as fear, sadness, and anger teach us about ourselves, as well as how to manage feelings in a healthy way

**Loss** — resolving underlying grief as it relates to domestic violence and trauma

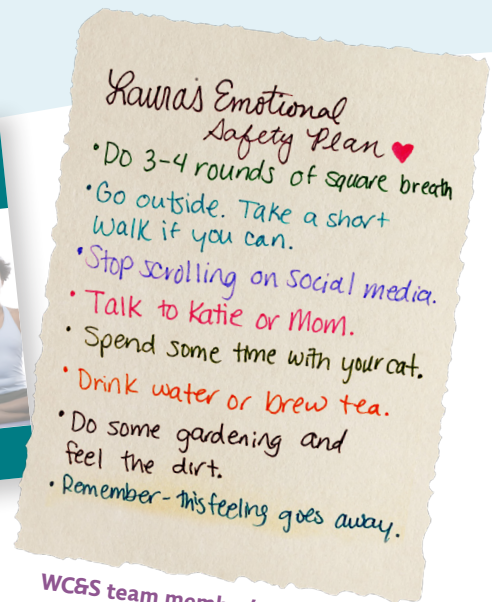
**Future** — exploring what life might look like after a personal history of abuse and trauma and empowering each survivor to create and rewrite the rest of their story

With Sanctuary as a guide, WC&S team members strive to cover at least one aspect of S.E.L.F. during each interaction with a survivor. This often isn’t obvious, but rather feels natural; for instance, any time a Hotline advocate staff does a safety plan with a survivor, that covers safety. Each time a support group member talks about their hopes and plans, that’s emotions and future. The framework of S.E.L.F. easily fits into the work DV advocates do each and every day.

Sanctuary is practiced by every team member at WC&S, regardless of position or whether they are in direct service. It’s a way to approach work with clients and our work with one another. WC&S staff



**S.E.L.F flyer displayed in community spaces at WC&S**



**WC&S team member's emotional safety plan**

participate in Sanctuary trainings during monthly full staff meetings. Sometimes, that looks like learning how to help survivors through these principles, but other times, team members explore their own emotions through various activities, like singing, dancing, art, and group discussions. “We know trauma is stored in the body. When we move, create, and make connections, we address that trauma and begin to heal,” said Paula.

The guidance of Sanctuary has been essential throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Many support groups and individual therapy sessions have switched to a virtual format, and because this removes barriers such as childcare and transportation needs, participation increased. Survivors collectively received 28,035 counseling hours last year. “Survivors have phoned in from bed when they weren’t feeling well. One group has a couple of participants that moved out of the area and call in from other states,” said Paula. “Going virtual has brought back so many survivors who were previously unable to participate and they have said having this support system is so essential to their healing process.”

**“ We’re not perfect, we’re all struggling, and we’re all able to lean on each other for love and laughs. ”**

For staff, Sanctuary during the pandemic has involved lots of open communication throughout the agency. “Nicole and the rest of the leadership team model humanness,” said Paula. “We’re not perfect, we’re all struggling, and we’re all able to lean on each other for love and laughs.” By actively soliciting feedback, checking in with team members in groups and one-on-one, providing employee assistance programs/therapy, encouraging the use of benefit time, and showing an unconditional positive regard for one another, WC&S works to prevent burnout among team members.

Sanctuary allows us to see each survivor and team member more wholly. It encourages us to ask, “How are you?”, to receive an honest answer, and to engage with what feeling comes next, whether it’s tough, or joyful, or bittersweet. As an agency-cherished quote says, “We heal, not in isolation, but in togetherness.”



Women's Center & Shelter  
of Greater Pittsburgh

P.O. Box 9024 • Pittsburgh, PA 15224

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
PITTSBURGH, PA  
PERMIT NO. 2024



Board Chair Erin Gibson  
Allen with SUCCESS Award  
Recipients Sara Davis Buss &  
Mary Anne Papale



*Celebrating Survivors  
information inside*

## Creating A Legacy

*Would you like to help ensure for the long-term sustainability  
of Women's Center & Shelter while also enhancing your own  
financial health?*

It is possible through a planned gift, which can be customized to meet your individual goals while working alongside a professional financial planner and/or attorney. Many generous and kind donors have made thoughtful planned gifts to WC&S which have assisted in enriching and supporting our many life-changing programs and services throughout our nearly 50 years in existence.

If you have included WC&S in your estate plans or would like to learn more, please reach out to Kristin, Chief Development Officer, at [brownk@wcpittsburgh.org](mailto:brownk@wcpittsburgh.org) or by phone at 412-687-8017 ext. 350.



**Our mission is to strengthen our ability to meet the individual and evolving needs of those affected by domestic violence by investing in the growth of our people, deepening community engagement, and amplifying the voices of all survivors.**

Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization — donations to which are tax-deductible to the fullest extent permitted by law. The official registration and financial information of Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.