

Pictured (l to r): Betty Della Corte, Cori Burke, and Robin Burke



Stepping Stones and the
Women Behind It

By Sandy Moss

October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, a time when one cannot ignore the problem or a possible solution. One powerful solution is a pillar of anti-domestic violence in our communities: the Stepping Stones Agencies (SSA). Its prototype was founded 40 years ago by a formerly abused woman, Betty Della Corte, who continues SSA today with her daughter and granddaughter, Robin and Cori Burke.

Betty had been in abusive marriages for decades, where she was beaten and threatened by her husbands.

"It was a generational given, passed down from father to son as an Italian heritage of 'discipline,'" Betty said.

It was also a way of life she finally realized was not a birthright, but abuse. With no place to turn and no help from authorities, including police, hospitals, judges or clergy, Betty decided to take back her own life. She did something else no woman in her family had done before -- through help from Alcoholics Anonymous she said, "no more."

"That family history had to change," Betty said. "It had to stop with me."

She gathered up her children and left her husband.

In 1971, Betty did something else unprecedented: she established the first national shelter for women victims of domestic violence, Faith House, in Phoenix.

"I started it to give women what I had learned -- a way to get out (of the cycle)," Betty said.

She also wrote a book, "Changing What I Can: A Personal Story."

For the past 40 years, Betty has continued to share her story, her philosophy, and work for the growth and self-sufficiency of women and children who are faced with the challenges of getting safely away from abuse.

In 1980, Betty's eldest daughter, Robin Burke, moved to Prescott and began another branch of Faith House. It was the first shelter to go into a

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In the past 30 years, Faith House, now Stepping Stones Agencies, and its three pioneering women, has helped more than 6,000 women change their lives and those of their children, breaking a deadly cycle.



rural community of 100,000 people or less, Robin said, which continued Betty's work of empowering women and children of domestic violence, and other difficult situations, to start a new life.

"We uphold victim rights and validate the horrible experiences they've been through, but at the same time we expect them to take responsibility and change," Robin says.

Eleven years ago, Robin separated from Faith House and began an independent not-for-profit women's shelter at 3343 N. Windsong Drive, Suite 9, in Prescott Valley -- Stepping Stones -- an obvious reference to the steps women must take to break out of their debilitating circumstances.

In 2010, SSA provided more than 4,500 nights of safe shelter to 107 women and children in its 16 single beds and five cribs available to them free of charge for as many as 120 days.

Along with four two-bedroom transitional housing apartments, the Stepping Stones program also offers meals, warm beds, counseling, one-on-one advocacy, training for self-sufficiency and safety planning.

Stepping Stones Agencies also expanded in the past decade to include other enterprises, such as a coffee shop, a bookstore, and three thrift stores located throughout the tri-cities communities.

"They provide funding streams beyond government support and also allow the women from the shelter a place to learn a variety of job skills," Robin said, "including getting experience in retail sales and merchandising, library science, food handling and barista skills -- all the while being paid for their work."

As well, for the past 30 years the program has also had a live Hotline to help women 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Since 1980, the Hotline has taken more than 110,000 calls for help, Betty notes. "We have never not answered that phone."

Recently, Betty and Robin were joined in their efforts by Robin's daughter, Cori Burke, bringing the three generations

together in a concerted effort to make a difference in women and children's lives.

A graduate in international diplomacy, Cori traveled and worked around the world before deciding to make a difference at Stepping Stones.

"I wanted to save the world," Cori said, but after a few months at Stepping Stones, "I was taken hostage," she jokes.

Seven years later, she is still there.

Cori oversees SSA's day-to-day operations, as well as designing SSA publications, including the website at www.steppingstones.org.

"I am so lucky to be a part of women and children's lives and see their incredible transformations," Cori says.

Those transformations now number in the multiple thousands. In the past 30 years, Faith House, now Stepping Stones Agencies, and its three pioneering women, has helped more than 6,000 women change their lives and those of their children, breaking a deadly cycle.

Betty Della Corte will sign copies of her book from 9 to 11 a.m., Tuesday, October 11, at the Step One Coffee House at 3343 N. Windsong Drive in Prescott Valley, and 6 to 8 p.m. Friday, October 14, at the Step One Hosting Room (next to the Coffee House).

(Many thanks to Sally Jackson of Stepping Stones Agencies for her valuable contributions for this article).