

BY MARY GOW ✱ PHOTOS BY JIM MAUCHLY/MOUNTAIN GRAPHICS

A Milestone FOR **WISE**

SERVING THE UPPER VALLEY
FOR 50 YEARS

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, if a victim of sexual or domestic violence in 21 towns in the Upper Valley calls the WISE crisis line, help is there. Trained advocates answer, listen, and provide information and support, including accompanying them at the police station or hospital.

Students build understanding and skills to end gender-based violence in 32 Upper Valley schools, working with WISE curricula. With empathetic trained educators, students learn prevention techniques, how to recognize and counteract rape culture, how to get help, and more.



Right, top: WISE Executive Director Peggy O'Neil in the Program Center living room.

Center: The Program Center kitchen serves as a gathering spot for staff and people visiting WISE.

Bottom: One of the safe spaces available for meeting advocates.



The WISE Program Center at 38 Bank Street, Lebanon, the permanent home of WISE since 2006.

Safe shelter, law enforcement training in trauma investigations, and working with resident immigrant survivors of domestic and sexual violence are among WISE's myriad services. As WISE supports survivors and takes on gender-based violence, it engages the community in its commitment to helping make the Upper Valley a safer place.

This year, WISE, whose home base is in Lebanon, celebrates its first half century. WISE's vital programs responding to and combating gender-based and domestic violence serve thousands of people in the Upper Valley every year. With its vision of "A world of freedom, justice, equality, and dignity where all thrive," WISE's mission is leading "the Upper Valley to end gender-based violence through survivor-centered advocacy, prevention, education, and mobilization for social change."

"Over the last 50 years, WISE has been building our capacity to support victims in as many ways as we can as an organization and also to bring the Upper Valley community into our work, because as good as the work is that the organization is doing, this truly is a community issue," says Peggy O'Neil, WISE executive director.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

Survivor-centered support and advocacy have been a cornerstone of WISE's work since its early years. Free and confidential, WISE's services increase victims' safety, help them build secure futures, and can break cycles of violence. "WISE responds to what the community and survivors want and what we have learned from survivors about what is needed," says Peggy. WISE serves about 1,200 to 1,400 people each year through its advocacy program.

WISE's prevention and violence eradication efforts include its school programs in place in nine New Hampshire and Vermont school



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WISE TIMELINE

For 50 years, WISE has supported survivors in times in stress and crisis. From their original goal of creating social services for women in the Upper Valley to their current mission to create social change and end gender-based violence, WISE continues its commitment to survivors and offers assistance every hour of every day.

FIRST DECADE

1971: Women's Information Service, known from the beginning as WISE, was founded to provide much-

needed social services for women in the Upper Valley. A 1974 article in *Ms. Magazine* noted that WISE served over 400 clients that first year. The initial focus on employment and job training soon expanded to include services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

SECOND DECADE

1981: Joined the New Hampshire and Vermont Coalitions Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and established a 24-hour crisis line, (866) 348-WISE. Within a decade, calls to the crisis line topped 1,000 per year.

THIRD DECADE

1994: Hired a Youth Violence Prevention and Community Outreach Coordinator, expanding the mission to not only respond to crises, but to advocate for social justice through education. Today WISE outreach programs reach an average of more than 5,000 people annually.

FOURTH DECADE

2001: Rented first apartment to serve as a confidential emergency shelter for women fleeing violence.

2006: Bought the Program Center



Opposite: Peggy O'Neil has been the executive director since 2003.

Top left: WISE annual meeting, 1991. WISE board with founders Elaine Selle Babcock and Lois Aaron.

Bottom left: Retirement party for Shirley Barrett Rivard, office manager from 1985 to 2016.

Above: WISE staff, 1994.

at 38 Bank Street in Lebanon, New Hampshire, a permanent home and safe space for WISE clients and the community.

FIFTH DECADE

2013: Purchased a Safe Home, WISE's own warm, nurturing, and holistic space where victims can be safe and begin their journey toward healing and self-sufficiency.

2015: Formed a partnership with Dartmouth College to provide a dedicated campus advocate and a co-location site on campus.

2018: Opened a co-location site in Windsor, Vermont, and partnered with Upper Valley Haven, Good Neighbor Health Clinic, and LISTEN to provide a coordinated community response. Welcoming All Nationalities Network (WANN) became a WISE program to provide legal assistance and comprehensive support to immigrant survivors of gender-based violence.

DAWN OF SIXTH DECADE

2020: In September, WISE became the proud owners of the five-unit property at 34 Bank Street, next

to the WISE Program Center. The building, already constructed as apartments with easy access to public transportation, shopping, and schools, presented as a truly ideal location to establish WISE's vision for a transitional housing program.

2021: Looking ahead with Strategic Planning for sustainable WISE, with programs to do with survivor-centered support and mobilization for social change to end gender-based violence.

DEFINITIONS

Domestic violence – a type of gender-based violence. Domestic violence, dating violence, relationship violence, and intimate partner violence are different terms that describe the same thing: a pattern of behaviors that one partner uses to gain power and control over the other. Abusers are often not violent with anyone other than their partner and/or their children.

Gender-based violence – any harm perpetrated against a person based on power inequalities resulting from gender roles. It includes all identities who are so often impacted by violence: women, children, LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual), people of color, immigrants, refugees, and people with disabilities, among others. The term recognizes how people with these identities are connected by oppression, which means that they all experience some form of inequality in society.



Program Operations Coordinator Stacey Glazer and Executive Director Peggy O'Neil outside the Program Center.

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districts. "We made a commitment a long time ago that we wanted to be in schools to do prevention work with the next generation of young people. They get it," says Peggy. In WISE's research-based school curricula, kindergarten through high school students build personal skills for healthy, safe lives and also an understanding of cultural factors underlying sexual violence.

In schools, community workshops, and forums and in training volunteers to be involved with WISE, part of WISE's effort is "to help people get language around issues of domestic and gender-based violence," explains Peggy. Helping people talk about these challenging and complex subjects raises awareness and understanding, opening paths to change. Peggy notes that the "Me Too" movement and recent high-profile gender-based violence and abuse are also raising awareness.

CREATING A RESOURCE FOR WOMEN

When WISE was founded in 1971, activism for women's rights was surging across the country. In the United States in 1971, a married woman could not get a credit card in her own name (Equal Credit Opportunity Act 1974), legally get an abortion (Supreme Court Decision Roe v. Wade 1973), or study in a United States military academy (1976). A woman had never been acquitted for using deadly force to resist sexual assault or prevailed in legal action against workplace sexual harassment.

Thinking globally and acting locally, women in the Upper Valley recognized the dearth of social services for women in the region. Hanover residents Elaine Selle Babcock and Lois Aaron took action. Rustling up grants and with support from the University of New Hampshire counseling department, they and nearly 40 other women came together in a weeklong training workshop. The goal, Elaine Selle Babcock recounted in a 1994 article in *Ms. Magazine* about WISE (an acronym

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for Women's Information Service), was to establish "a counseling service by and for women." From this initiative, offices staffed by volunteers opened in several New Hampshire towns and assisted more than 400 women in their first year.

When WISE launched, employment and job training were early foci. An acute need to address violence against women soon became clear. WISE evolved. Decade by decade, WISE has recognized need and responded with action. "We are always asking ourselves and getting feedback from survivors and our partners. What can we do more of? What can we do better? What can we do differently? How can we adapt to what is needed and wanted?" says Peggy.

LOOKING AHEAD

Building on its solid foundation of experience and expertise, WISE moves into its next years with its recently developed strategic plan. The plan positions WISE to continue to expand its advocacy and services for survivors, including working with systems and institutions such as law enforcement and legal services. Innovative leadership to end gender-based violence is a priority. To effectively move forward and bring about social change, WISE seeks to involve more of the community and especially young people.

WISE is also looking ahead at its organizational sustainability and growth and its continued stewardship of the two Victorian buildings it owns—its Program Center and Safe Home.

Moving forward, Peggy says, "We are here and we will be around to engage in action to reduce and hopefully eliminate what creates violence in people's lives." 

WISE Program Center
 38 Bank Street
 Lebanon, NH
 (603) 448-5922
 Crisis Line: (866) 348-WISE (9573)
www.wiseuv.org

WISE PROGRAMS

WISE touches thousands of lives every year. Over the last decade, WISE supported more than 10,000 victims, provided trauma support training to over 5,000 first-responder professionals, taught healthy relationship skills to more than 18,000 students, and reached more than 11,000 community members with customized workshops. Five programs are the cornerstones of WISE's work:

Crisis Services and Advocacy

Support to victims and survivors of gender-based violence within 21 New Hampshire and Vermont communities, including through the 24-hour crisis line (866) 348-9473, with emergency shelter, transitional housing assistance, legal aid, safety planning, support groups, and in-person advocacy including at police stations, courts, and hospitals.

The primary goals for the Crisis Services and Advocacy program are to increase the safety of victims of domestic and sexual violence, provide support as survivors gain access to better options, and collaborate with others in the community to provide effective responses to victims.

Shelter and Housing Program

The WISE Safe Home and emergency shelter and housing are available to survivors and their children who are fleeing violence and in need of safe, confidential living arrangements. Victims have support from WISE advocates. Safe housing provides respite and opens opportunities to determine sustainable next steps.

WISE reduces barriers to accessing housing services through partnerships with other services and community providers and advocacy within publicly and privately funded housing systems.

Youth Violence Prevention and Community Education

Gender-based violence exists because of cultural values, customs, and traditions that promote and

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sustain gender inequality. Understanding and changing these conditions can reduce forms of violence. WISE works with students, schools, and communities to build skills for healthy, safe, and fulfilling relationships. WISE's curricula are informed by research and best practices and are consistent with state and federal education guidelines.

Elementary school lessons focus on social and emotional skill building, identifying safe and trusted adults, and asking for help. Middle and high school objectives include deconstructing myths regarding dating and sexual violence, building empathy for survivors, and increasing bystander awareness and response. Workshops and professional development and consultation educate the community.

Immigration Legal Services and Community Education

Essential immigration legal services and culturally relevant community education to immigrant survivors of gender-based violence include consultations to assess an individual's eligibility for humanitarian immigration status or for other benefits under United States immigration law.

Goals include orienting new immigrant residents to life in the Upper Valley, educating non-US citizens and US citizens about their rights and responsibilities in respect to federal immigration actions, and raise awareness of warning signs that signal vulnerability specific to immigration status, such as victimization through human trafficking.

Multidisciplinary Interview and Training Center

Collaboration with Windsor County State's Attorney's office, Windsor County Unit for Special Investigations, and local police departments responds to aggravated domestic assault through Forensic Experiential Trauma Interviews (FETI) for victims. It provides outreach and training to law enforcement in trauma-informed investigative processes. Victims can more accurately share their experience of the traumatic victimization, and the criminal legal system is able to secure much more useful information for investigative and prosecution work.

How you prepare for your season determines your success.



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