

Protesters brave weather to fight domestic violence

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By DONNA LANE KAUDER
STAFF WRITER

WEST MILFORD — Nearly 100 supporters braved the cold weather and marched to protest domestic violence on what would have been murder victim Valerie Van Dunk's 31st birthday.

On Oct. 24, Van Dunk was murdered in front of her two daughters, aged 11 and 13, by her abusive ex-boyfriend, Donald DeFreese. After shooting Van Dunk, De Freese fatally shot himself in the kitchen of her Lambert Road home.

Police said that De Freese had a history of threatening and abusing Van Dunk, and in the past the victim filed 11 separate complaints against him, but failed to press charges.

Director of Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS) Sandra Ramos helped Van Dunk get an order of protection against De Freese and also found her housing.

"She was petrified of him. And at the time, the onus was on Valerie to file charges. Now the system is changing," Ramos said.

Yesterday, the Domestic Violence Protection Act went into ef-

fect. The new law is a breakthrough for battered women, because the police actually file the charges, deeming domestic abuse a crime against the state.

And now, authorities have more power to take action when there is probable cause that violence has occurred and police can pursue a case involving domestic abuse, regardless if the woman is reluctant.

"Many of the women, like Valerie, are afraid to press charges against their batterer, because they fear they or their children will be in danger," Ramos said.

On Monday, Van Dunk's friends and relatives met in front of police headquarters and marched down Union Valley Road to the site of the new Valerie Van Dunk Advocacy Centre, located at 2019 Greenwood Lake Turnpike.

The center was started by Van Dunk's family and Strengthen Our Sisters. The victim's mother, Doris, officiated during the ribbon cutting ceremony.

The center will be a haven for women in crisis. There, women can speak to counselors and obtain advocacy services. Counselors will be

assigned to women and accompany them to court, help them file papers, obtain housing, education and employment. If such a center was in place when Van Dunk needed it, Ramos said, maybe her tragic situation could have been avoided.

"The more services we have to offer battered women, the better their chances for survival," Ramos said.

At the center, the marchers crowded together, drinking hot soup, coffee and tea to warm up after their two-mile walk. Several community organizations, including the Lioness Club, were on hand to offer their support.

Women who have been helped by services provided by SOS read poems dedicated to Van Dunk and several community leaders, including the Chairperson of the Upcounty Human Services Coalition Yetta Daugherty, spoke in support of the center.

The Valerie Van Dunk Advocacy Centre is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and can be reached by calling 728-8650. A 24-hour hotline is also available, at 728-0007.



SHOW OF SUPPORT — Marching in memory of Valerie Van Dunk were from left, Audie Gammon of the West Milford Lioness Club, Van Dunk's sister and mother, Rhonda and Doris Luke and Director of Strengthen Our Sisters, Sandra Ramos.