

Young moms find helping hand in Zoe's Place

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OF PASCACK PRESS

WESTWOOD

There's a movement afoot. A movement that reads like a social call to provide greater opportunities for young and disadvantaged mothers in Bergen County. A visible leader behind this crusade is Judy Forman. A Westwood resident, Forman serves as the executive director of support services of Zoe's Place Inc., a nonprofit group that has incorporated this

fight to assist young (sometimes teenage) moms as the sole objective. The work may seem challenging, but Forman believes it's one of tremendous significance.

"I have two daughters and I know how lucky they've been to have had the love and support of parents," said Forman. "Many of the girls I work with have not had that support or positive role modeling. These are wonderful girls - good moms who want the same things my own daughters want - to be happy, to raise healthy children, to be successful, to feel

good about their lives, and to be responsible members of the community. They have dreams and hopes like we all have, and they need help and guidance to realize those dreams," she said.

To help these young moms, Zoe's Place provides an assortment of individualized services that range from securing a safe housing environment to helping them attain their education goals and at times learn essential job skills. The funding they receive in order to provide these types of services comes from private

donations, grants and contributions from area foundations.

The difference that the group makes in the lives of these women is remarkable, according to Forman. In fact, she says, sometimes the biggest help she can give them is to simply be there.

"One of the girls had gotten into a little trouble and she was telling me how well she's

doing, that she's getting her G.E.D, is involved in great programs now and that she wants a good life for herself and for her baby," Forman recalled fondly. "I congratulated her, and she told me I was the only person who said that, out of all the people in her life. In this case the way I was able to help was to just listen and help someone to be proud of herself."

Founded in 2003, Zoe's Place has found alternative and creative ways to provide its offered services. Not only is there a helpline (973-458-1007) that provides information and advocacy to those in need, but there's also a teen mom support group as well as a mentorship program that creates a platform in which moms could share their concerns while learning important family planning strategies.

What's more, the group has established its own business, Zoe's Cupcake Cafe, as a means of providing employment and training opportunities to girls affiliated with the group. The cupcake cafe, located at 740 Chestnut Ave. in Teaneck, overlaps with the organization's mission as its profits benefit the group and the girls learn different aspects of the busi-

ness such as food preparation, sales, marketing, bookkeeping and customer service.

Looking to expand even more, the group hopes to open its first home in Garfield that will house five teen moms and their children. Zoe's Place partnered with Bergen County's Habitat for Humanity to make the home a reality and is looking to open its door sometime in the fall, says Forman.

Still, the multitude of services isn't the only factor that sets the organization apart from others of its kind. That glowing difference, according to Forman, rests with the group's overall philosophy.

"I think what makes us different is that every decision we make is guided by the question: 'Is this what we would want for our own children?' The girls know we really care about them. We are not judging them, and we believe in them," said Forman.

As a 501(c)3 organization, Zoe's Place relies on the generous donations of others to help continue its mission. Donations are tax deductible and can be made by contacting Forman at (973) 458-1007 or at jforman@zoesplaceinc.org.

The name "Zoe," of Greek origin, means "life." That's just what donations promise to provide young mothers of Bergen County. Acceptable donations include cribs and car seats, diapers, baby wipes, unexpired formula or new baby clothes, just to name a few. To help out with Zoe's Cupcake Cafe, contact Jane Fiedler or Miriam Bloom at (201) 655-0212.

