

USDA helps Monroe County's unique organization make a difference



Story and Photos by Kevin Tuttle
USDA Rural Development

Brighter Tomorrows' new location is a recently constructed building paid for through a \$740,000 Community Facility Loan with USDA Rural Development.

Three ladies give their hearts and souls to their work. Work that can be life-changing for people who choose to accept their help. Work that can also be completely disheartening.

Brighter Tomorrows, located in Sparta, Wis., with an outreach office in Tomah, Wis., is a domestic violence and sexual assault support organization whose mission is to reduce domestic violence and sexual assault in Monroe County and the surrounding areas. They provide crisis intervention, legal advocacy, personal advocacy, public awareness and other services to victims of these crimes.

The organization is a subsidiary of *Monroe County Sheltercare*, which services the needs of the community by providing support services to children, families and adults with emphasis in delinquency/protective services, mental health and housing for individuals with disabilities, among other services. Recently, USDA Rural Development funded a new facility for *Sheltercare* through a \$740,000 Community Facility Loan, which allowed *Brighter Tomorrows* to move from their outdated offices to the new facility.

Carin White, Cecelia Poe and Jan Bruder make up *Brighter Tomorrows*. They are on call 24/7 and truly love their work because of the difference they can make in someone's life.

White, the Program Director, sees this new facility as a drastic improvement over their previous office, which was in a basement downtown with only one entrance and exit, making it difficult to keep their clients safe.

"We were unsafe. A police officer came down and was amazed at how unsafe we were. We did the best we

could, but we were vulnerable. We were lucky because only once did we have a yelling, screaming person. We were very fortunate," White said.

Now the organization enjoys the safety and security of a new facility where everyone has to be buzzed in to get inside, which provides clients protection. The offices are friendlier, livelier, and more welcoming. It's a very important facet in making a victim feel at ease and comforted upon their arrival.

"The clients that come in feel so much safer because of the security. We didn't have any security at our last place. They seem more at ease," said Poe.

Each day one of the ladies goes to court to get information on the previous night's happenings. Sometimes they go more than once a day as cases present themselves. Oftentimes, one of the ladies (or their Nighttime On-Call Volunteer Advocates who volunteer to receive calls) is called during an incident and they try to talk to the victim over the phone, helping them calm down and hoping they will take refuge in the safety of the organization's headquarters or its transitional housing, which are located at a separate, private location. Some calls have lasted five hours before the victim chose what road they would venture down.

"We hear about every domestic violence or sexual assault case as it's occurring," said Jan Bruder, Community Educator. "We intervene if the victim needs a safe place. Priority is to keep the victim safe."

There are always many factors that determine how the victim, who is most likely a woman, will react.

"A lot of factors that have to do with the practicality

of life,” White said. “She works from 3-11 p.m. and he babysits. There are many factors in the onion of violence,” which have layer upon layer of issues and motivations for how a person reacts.

Domestic violence has increasingly gotten worse, White said, and part of the blame is the economy. The economy has also caused fewer victims to leave their abuser out of fear of not having any financial support once they leave.

“We’ve had a lot less victims leaving because of the economy – it’s very disconcerting. This is after we get their first month’s rent and deposit,” White said.

Victims who choose the help of *Brighter Tomorrows* can utilize the agency’s temporary quarters while they get on their feet. The staff helps them fill out forms, gives them job leads, guides them to apply for food stamps, and utilize a variety of resources throughout the community that best suit the client,

Poe said. “We want them to set goals for themselves, but they have to decide what those are,” she added.

Brighter Tomorrows is the only agency in Monroe County that aids both sexual assault and domestic violence victims. Last year, 477 domestic violence cases presented themselves, with 98 percent female victims, White said. However, there are more numbers of male victims than they’ve previously had.

“More males than we’ve had before,” White said. “More women batterers. We’ve also had more attempted strangulations without the involvement of alcohol, which is scary.”

The agency’s philosophy is that there won’t be a change in behavior without the necessary education. Although education is for everyone, starting with the children is a priority.

Enter Jan Bruder.

Bruder leads the High Point Teen

Action Group – a collection of middle school through high school student volunteers who act out skits for students of all ages on subjects of respect, peer-pressure, how to be a good friend, bullying, acceptance and others. For older students, skits cover subjects such as dating violence and domestic violence.

There are various educational programs, such as “Kindness Counts,” “Bully-Free Zone,” “Healthy Relationships” and “Safe Dating” that can help students learn about non-violent interaction and respect for one another.

The way Bruder described her organization’s work at a performance to fourth graders at Sparta Meadowview Intermediate School summed it up simply: “We get to help families that are having a hard time.”

Bruder, who has her Associates Degree in Health Administration and is still deciding where to get her Bachelor’s degree, has the kind of



From Left: Carin White, Cecelia Poe and Jan Bruder make up the staff of *Brighter Tomorrows*. The organization is run on grants and accepts donations.

voice one would want to hear when their heart is broken. A caring, calming, soothing voice that facilitates a shoulder to cry on and guarantees trust. But even such qualities don't always reach every victim.

"Every person that we meet we form a bond with," Bruder said. "They're crying, they want help, they think they're ready to come in, but sometimes the contact abruptly ends. Honestly, the hardest is seeing the woman with the man again. Sometimes you just wonder because they call, but never come by or you never hear from them again."

Sometimes those victims don't leave because of threats, White said.

"I'm taking your children,' 'leaving you,' 'no one will believe you.' A lot of negative support," White said. "There's layer upon layer upon layer in that onion. Family violence affects everybody."

USDA Rural Development is one of the pieces to the puzzle that allow *Brighter Tomorrows* to do their jobs, White added. With 39 sexual assaults last year, the violence has increased from 18 (reported to the organization) the year before, she said. That's why it's so vital that organizations such as *Brighter Tomorrows* are there to help educate and to be there for victims.

But there are many examples of women who found the strength to leave their abusive situations and start

a new life. It's those moments that make the *Brighter Tomorrows* staff so proud of what they're doing.

"A woman called saying she was listening to her own choice of music, which is a choice she wasn't previously allowed to make. Sometimes it's the simple things that matter," Bruder said. "Sometimes it's not nearly what you expect that would make someone happy, which is amazing."

Run completely on grant money, *Brighter Tomorrows* knows not what is in store for them in the future, but they are funded for an additional two years.

"If we lose a grant, we lose a position," White said. She added that any money helps and they take both monetary donations and also toiletries or other items that victims can utilize when they stay at their transitional apartments or other shelters. Additionally, *Brighter Tomorrows* hosts fundraising events and other organizations have fundraisers for them.

"It's making a difference. Giving Goodwill certificates or some shampoo; seeing students want to make a change and creating awareness – if the younger generations don't know about preventing domestic violence, then what good is it? You'll never have the chance to have a world free of these things," Bruder said.

For more information on *Brighter Tomorrows*, call 608-269-7853 in Sparta or 608-374-6975 in Tomah.

USDA Rural Development's mission is to deliver programs in a way that will support increasing economic opportunity and improve the quality of life of rural residents. This past year, USDA Rural Development returned over \$547 million to rural Wisconsin communities. The funding supports a wide variety of loan, guaranteed loan and grant programs to rural residents in the areas of housing, community facilities, business development, infrastructure, and other development needs. Further information on USDA Rural Development programs is available by visiting USDA's website at <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/>. USDA Rural Development is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.



Jan Bruder speaks to a fourth-grade class at Sparta Meadowview Intermediate School.