

## IN BUSINESS



Debbi Morello for The New York Times

Mara Weissmann, a lawyer and the founder of Second Shift, with her sons, Noah, 4, left, and Gabriel, 7. The group offers support to professional women who are raising children.

## Support for Working Mothers

A Group Called Second Shift Allows Professional Women to Share Experiences and Advice

By SUSAN HODARA

**S**OME leave offices in law firms, banks, Fortune 500 companies and television studios. Others finish their day's work as doctors, editors, fashion designers or business owners.

Then they come together for an evening that combines a social forum, educational resources, professional networking and personal support.

They are members of Second Shift, a Chappaqua-based group of professional women who are also raising children.

"Our purpose is to meet the needs of women who have made the choice to continue their careers outside the home as well as to care for their families," said the group's founder, Mara Weissmann, a lawyer at White & Case in Manhattan and the mother of two sons, 7 and 4.

"My motivation for starting the group was to bring together the mothers in our community who deal with the particular needs, the added pressures and the shared experiences of balancing family and work."

The seeds of Second Shift were planted when Ms. Weissmann was a first-time mother on maternity leave, living in New York City. "I felt like the first and only person who was doing this job," she said.

Then she joined a new mothers' group, where, she said, "I was overwhelmed by how comforting it was to share experiences and emotions about my new role."

When she moved to Chappaqua in 1995, she met many mothers who expressed feelings of isolation at working outside the

home. "They felt like I had felt," she said. "I remembered the tremendous satisfaction I'd gotten from my group in the city, and was determined to duplicate it for the women here."

It was in the fall of 1998, on the train from Grand Central to Chappaqua, that Second Shift was born. Ms. Weissmann said, inspired by "the incredibly accomplished, intelligent, talented, spirited and versatile women" she had met while commuting.

She rallied a few friends to talk to other women, and fliers announcing the first "rendezvous" of the "Chappaqua Working Mothers Dinner Club," as it was initially called, were handed out on the train platform, at the soccer field, at school and in town.

"Thirty-three women said they would come to our first dinner," Ms. Weissmann said, "and all 33 showed up. For many, it was the first time they were able to express their common struggles and feelings. Directly or indirectly, these women were reaching out to one another, and there was an unmatched electricity in the room."

Since then, membership has risen to 201 dues-paying women, some from neighboring towns, and this past August, a Web site was started ([www.secondshift.org](http://www.secondshift.org)). Meetings are held quarterly at local restaurants.

At the dinner in February 2000, Hillary Rodham Clinton took part in a program on balancing work and family.

Three of the four meetings feature guest speakers, and they have addressed topics like "Sex and the Overextended Woman." The fourth meeting is dedicated to networking and socializing.

Which for some members is really the

point. Sallie Fraenkel Zuch of Chappaqua, who is senior vice president at Showtime Networks Inc. and the mother of two daughters, 15 and 12, has been involved with Second Shift since its inception.

"While I enjoy the speakers," she said, "I'm particularly interested in the networking opportunities. I have met women whom I have called upon later for work-related situations."

The professional networking aspect of Second Shift is something Ms. Weissmann emphasizes.

"Historically, women don't network the

**'I was overwhelmed by how comforting it was to share experiences.'**

way men do," she said. "Beyond being a support system, this group provides the perfect forum for women to exchange professional information and expertise, and to promote the business efforts of one another."

Ms. Weissmann plans to institute smaller, more informal, member-led gatherings, "after the kids are in bed," where women can discuss topics that have personal relevance for them. "Even within the group," she said, "there are diverse issues and

needs. These smaller discussion groups provide the opportunity to address the individual concerns of our members."

For Diane Madfes, a dermatologist who joined Second Shift after speaking at last November's meeting, the value lies in shared community.

"This is a group of professional women who are taking time out for themselves with other women who absolutely understand what they are going through," said Dr. Madfes, who is the mother of a 4-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl. "For once, I didn't feel as if I had to apologize that I wasn't spending all my time with my children."

The professional lives of its members separate Second Shift from other mothers' groups.

"The suburbs can be isolating for those women who aren't at home much of the time," said Elise Wagner, a lawyer and the mother of 12-year-old twins. "Second Shift not only allows women with similar concerns about work and family to connect, but it shortcuts the process of getting to know other members of the community who are not around during the day. It's really nice to know they're there."

Anne Angowitz, a principal in an executive search firm, the mother of two sons, 9 and 6, and one of the original members of the group, put it this way: "Second Shift has filled a need that many of us didn't know existed until it started. Once it did, lo and behold, women have come out of the woodwork to join. It's like the birth of a community within a community."