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Working moms weave a girlwide web

By SUSAN F. WOLFERT

If you're a working mom and you enjoy the company of your peers, but never see them; want to be a part of your children's school life, but don't feel connected; want to network for business, but can't make the time, you are not alone. And now, Chappaqua-based Second Shift, a nonprofit support organization that addresses those very issues, is expanding down county in a sign of just how not alone you are.

Second Shift was started in 1998 when Mara Weissmann, an attorney and mother of two young boys, arranged a small gathering of women to seek ways to manage the isolation they felt living in the suburbs, raising children and maintaining work outside the home. The idea behind this small gathering, initially called the Chappaqua Working Mothers Dinner Club, caught on. Today, Second Shift boasts more than 280 members.

In June, the new southern Westchester chapter made its debut thanks to Weissmann together with Edgemont resident Laura Wilker, Scarsdale resident Ruth Raisfeld and Eastchester resident Leslye Davidson.

When Weissmann became a mother and continued to practice law, she thought, "I'm the only one doing this and no one knows how hard it is." But, she started meeting other women on the train and soon discovered that while she might be in the minority in her community, she was certainly in good company. Weissmann conceived of the idea of mobilizing working moms to support, socialize and network with each other and started by distributing fliers "at the train station, the ball field, anywhere."

Raisfeld, an attorney and mother of two daughters, also credits the train with bringing together and bonding women who are raising families and work outside the home. Until last year, Raisfeld commuted to Manhattan, but now manages a private practice in employment law from her home. She said that the Scarsdale 8:02 and the 8:28 trains are filled with working moms who regularly "commiserate and trade stories about nannies, teachers, camp and work." Many of these women were among the attendees at the first southern Westchester meeting.

That meeting, held at American Bistro in Tuckahoe, drew 46 women from Scarsdale, Edgemont, Hartsdale, Ardsley, Bronxville, New Rochelle



SUSAN F. WOLFERT PHOTO

Mara Weissmann, founder of Second Shift, and Ruth Raisfeld spend some quality "first shift" time in Raisfeld's home law office in Scarsdale.

and Eastchester.

Wilker, a public relations professional, author and mother of 4-year-old Sam, observed there was great "energy and power in the room" at the first southern Westchester meeting. She noted, "It is much easier for non-working moms to bond because they see each other all the time. Second Shift provides a needed connection for working moms."

Second Shift's mission is to provide a supportive, educational, resourceful and fun environment for working mothers trying to juggle their many obligations. The organization also seeks to effect cultural change in the workplace for the growing number of mothers who work outside of their homes.

As part of its mission, Second Shift seeks to bridge the gap between working and non-working mothers with respect to school volunteer activities. Weissmann observes a lack of understanding between the groups and feels, "Both sides have to educate each

other. The PTA needs volunteers and moms who work outside the home want to be involved at school."

Raisfeld, whose volunteer activities include the school board nominating committee and the board of Westchester Reform Temple, echoed this view. She said that even in Scarsdale where there are many working mothers, "The moms who work and those who don't have very little understanding of each other."

Second Shift also addresses the stress working moms are under as they endeavor to balance the many demands on their time. Weissmann argues that as working mothers feel increasingly stressed out and overburdened, they begin to consider leaving the workforce. She questions, "What will happen to the economy when talented women leave work because it is just too hard to balance work and home?"

Second Shift provides a networking opportunity for professional women to share war stories, generate business

and strengthen their ranks in the workplace. Raisfeld observes, "There are a lot of women out there who are interested in socializing and networking in a more informal setting than a business meeting."

She also said that women frequently decline business dinners because they need to go home, but a quarterly event provides a manageable alternative.

Second Shift also helps its members connect with their communities through a variety of philanthropic efforts. A read-a-thon held by the children of Second Shift members in Chappaqua provided funds for a local day care center to purchase new playground equipment. Another fundraiser generated a \$6,000 gift to My Sisters' Place. The next project, Bottomless Closets, will seek to collect clothes for women coming off welfare and entering the workplace.

Second Shift's dinner meetings are held quarterly at local restaurants. Three meetings feature a speaker and one is dedicated exclusively to networking and socializing. Noted speakers to date have included Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and journalists Lisa Belkin and Edie Magnus. Other speakers have addressed such issues as physical and mental self-defense and the stress of always being "on call" with modern communications technology. A sex therapist and a comedian were also among Second Shift's many presenters.

The Aug. 5 meeting of the southern chapter will be dedicated to networking and socializing. The November meeting (a joint Chappaqua and southern Westchester gathering) will host Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute. Galinsky has studied the effect on children of having two working parents and sought ways to make work and family life more manageable.

Second Shift brings together people who might not otherwise know each other to share the experience of balancing work and family life. Weissmann describes members as "feeling connected, part of a critical mass." She said, "It's like being a new resident, then all of a sudden feeling like a part of the community."

More information about Second Shift is available on its Web site (www.secondshift.org). Membership costs \$25 per year and is required to attend meetings. For a membership application, send an e-mail to maraworks@netscape.net.