

Women's advocacy project fights 'feminization of poverty'

By Teresa A. Parsons

Don't just ride the waves — swim!

That's the message Jo Bard tries to convey to women through the Minority Advocacy Project.

An outreach of the Displaced Homemakers' Center of Tompkins County, the Minority Advocacy Project aims to support, educate and advocate for "women of color" who seek economic and personal self-sufficiency in the stormy seas of the job market.

By "women of color," Bard says she means all women. "White people aren't really white and black people aren't black," she explained. "We're all just people. And all women are subject to discrimination — whether by race, age or sex."

Despite the name of the project she coordinates, minority is a word Bard disdains to use. "Minority" denotes less than," she said. "Less than what? You put all people of color together and they are in the majority in this country."

Yet, they still take a back seat when it comes to jobs.

Thirty-two percent of the black families in Tompkins County are headed by women. Twice as many black women as white women are unemployed. Some people think they prefer it that way.

"There is a stigma that people of color who are on welfare don't want to work," Bard said. "A lot of poor women do work, but they're not making enough to support their families. Where's the incentive to keep working when you can care for your children better by not working?"

A woman earning minimum wage, for instance, is generally eligible for health care benefits only in case of an accident. Costs for her children's preventive medical care, such as checkups and well-baby visits, come out of her pocket. If she has to pay for child care, Bard noted, she might as well stay at home.

There's no denying that welfare can become a trap, particularly for women who head households. "It's a scary thing to think 'I've got to go out and take care of my family,'" Bard said. "It's easier to give that responsibility up to welfare and take their pittance and complain about how small it is. Taking responsibility is a scary thing."

As a single parent, Bard knows whereof

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Jo Bard, coordinator
Minority Advocacy Project

she speaks. "There's nothing wrong with welfare — I've been on it, and I know when it comes to feeding your children, you do what you have to," she said. "But I want to make a change so that when a woman of color walks into a store, people don't automatically think 'welfare.'"

Bard came to the Displaced Homemakers' Center in March, 1984, as an outreach worker and job developer. That was nearly five years after program coordinator Sandy Lyons started the center as a support group headquartered in her living room.

Initially, most of those served were divorced, separated and widowed women aged 35 or older. But gradually, the center began to specialize in particular areas of programming, such as one-on-one counseling, legal services and job readiness training.

Along the way, female heads of households, many of whom are minority members, emerged as one group the center was failing to reach.

Funded by a grant from the 1985/86 Campaign for Human Development, Bard focused her efforts on bringing more women of color to the center to determine and address their needs.

A native Ithacan, she looked up old friends to spread the word, went door to door, sent out letters and called agencies. In the process, she more than doubled the number of minorities served by the center.

"I found that jobs were the most prevalent issue," she said. "Even when these women found jobs, they didn't keep them for a variety of reasons. Either they weren't making enough or they weren't qualified or weren't really interested, or, in some cases, they were the victims of discrimination."

Lack of self-esteem was a related issue, she

learned. "You set your own restrictions. If you start out with 'I can't,' chances are you won't," Bard said. "Female heads of households tend to know what they want. They just don't know how to get it."

To show them how, Bard adapted some of the center's established programs to their more particular needs.

The Discovery Job Readiness Training Program, a series of group sessions designed to help women sharpen their skills and explore job and career possibilities, was one.

Introduced by the center in 1982, Discovery is designed to help women either enter or re-enter the job market. Through education, placement assistance and a support network, the program helps them look beyond their immediate need for a job to a career or long-term plan.

Bard found that out of necessity and lack of confidence, women of color quite often leaped at the first opportunity offered, regardless of the long-term prospects.

"The least threatening job options are at places that want your body, not necessarily your mind," she said. "That's not to be judgmental — there's nothing wrong with that choice. But a woman shouldn't automatically settle for the least challenging option."

Working with 28 women enrolled in a BOCES job training program (24 of them were referred there by the Displaced Homemakers' Center), Bard broadened the Discovery program to address pressures women of color encounter on the job.

"As a black employee, you always stand out. You're watched and you have to perform better than average," Bard said. "If everyone takes an extra five minutes at the coffee break, the person who is noticed is a

person of color.

"It's OK if somebody doesn't like you for whatever reason," she explained. "That's their problem until it affects your work. Then you have to decide what stuff you let roll off your back and what issues do you address?"

When discrimination is one of those issues, Bard also educates women on their rights as employees and informs them what to expect should they decide to file a complaint.

"The primary reason people don't follow through on (discrimination) complaints is lack of support — it's a lonely thing," Bard said. "Most people also don't know that most cases don't make it to court. Usually some kind of settlement is reached."

Despite what Bard terms "a big push" for affirmative action in Ithaca, many local employers complain that they are unable to find enough qualified minority applicants.

On the other hand, affirmative action quotas track only the number of minority workers hired. Thus, they provide companies with no incentive to keep minority employees on the job.

"Many people of color find they can get jobs because of affirmative action, but it's another thing to keep the job," Bard said. "We want to develop a group of qualified people we know will be capable of remaining in their jobs."

So along with Ithaca's Southside Community Center, Bard is developing the Minority Applicants' Pool. Currently, they are assessing the local job market and canvassing potential employers that the pool might serve.

Initially, Bard is targeting employers she has worked with successfully with in the past. "We're offering to assist these companies in adhering to their affirmative action policies," Bard said with a smile.

Campaign for Human Development funding for the Minority Advocacy Project expires January, 1987, by which time Bard hopes to have programs like the Minority Applicants Pool running independent of the center.

"For a cause to be successful," she said, "people need to do things on their own."

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