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Moms with a mission

By Ellen Wilkove, Daily Record

Call them mothers with missions. This weekend, more than 200 mothers from across the nation will come together in Parsippany to promote their roles and rights as caregivers. (And yes, child care is available.)

Welcome to Mothering Matters, a two-day conference at the Parsippany Sheraton that spotlights the work of mothers - with an emphasis on work.

The National Association of Mothers' Centers is a nearly 30-year-old nationwide organization operated by mothers, for mothers on a community level.

The centers foster supportive maternal bonds and also advocate the mother's well-being as a recognized individual.

Some call it the mothers' movement, and the 23rd annual conference will function as an open forum to move it forward.

"Women learn from each other about normal child development and discuss various parenting theories," Executive Director Linda Juergens wrote in an e-mail to the Daily Record. "Part of the goal of the program has always been to motivate women to work for changes that they felt were important to improve the lives of women, children and families."

Chock full of workshops, the conference kicks off Saturday with a wide range of discussion groups such as Grassroots Women's Activism from the Heart; Are Your Defenses Blocking Your Relationships?; Getting Dad Involved; and Moving Mothers Centers Forward.

Some of the association's original advocacy dates back to the late '70s, when the first group helped attain sibling visitation after birth, "at a time when women were hospitalized for three days for a vaginal delivery and five to seven days for a C-section," Jeurgens said. "It was very difficult for their other children (often 2- and 3-year-olds) to not see their mom for so long."

The weekend is co-sponsored by the National Organization for Women of New Jersey. Morris County Chapter President Mavra Stark sees this as a prime opportunity to move the mothers' movement forward.

The mother of two grown children, Stark believes that mothers should be on the front lines of the Women's Liberation Movement.

"I am talking about stay-at-home mothers, mothers who work part-time as well as mothers who are full-time pink collar workers and professionals. We have a great deal in common," she wrote in an e-mail to the Daily Record. "Imagine what we might do if we joined forces for the good of all of us."

According to Stark, NOW began in 1966 as a strong advocate for mothers' rights, but because of changing times, a rift formed between stay-at-home-mothers and working women.

"Many women left the organization who were basically with NOW to push for economic and social rights for what we then called homemakers," she said.

"After the backlash began, stay-at-home mothers tended not to align themselves with NOW or with any feminist organization because they thought we were all full-time professional women or gay women or didn't have any children. Heaven only knows what they thought.

"It's a funny thing, most women are mothers," she wrote. "Almost all activists in Morris County NOW have children. ... We'd like to see NOW chapters all over the country organize feminist mothers."

Laurie Pettine of Mendham, a co-founder of Morris Mothering NOW, a task force branch of Morris County NOW, is attending the conference for the first time.

"They are the top authorities on mothers' economic rights and issues," she said.

Morris Mothering NOW debuted in August, a collaborative effort of Pettine, Stacey Gregg of Rockaway and Beth Sparacino of Morris Township.

They meet at the Watnong Center in Morris Plains, and while their children play, the group lays its issues out on the table: Social Security credits for stay-at-home moms, paid family leave, overcoming the inflexibility of corporate culture.

"Most of our issues fall under the NOW umbrella," Pettine said.

Jennifer Vroom Braun of Byram credits her sister Amanda Vogler with introducing her to the National Association of Mothers' Centers, even before she became a mother.

"(She) had been a member of the Mothers' Center of Central New Jersey, where she received moral support, parenting information, camaraderie and personal growth in her journey as a new mother, a wife and a woman," Vroom Braun wrote in an e-mail to the Daily Record. "Equally important, she learned about child development and parenting."

Vroom Braun founded the Mothers' Center of Northwest New Jersey in June 1992 with her friend Susan Milovich after learning that the nearest center was more than an hour away. The pair

became mothers within two weeks of each other and shared similar anxieties, particularly isolation. This weekend they will attend the conference with their two teenage children.

"Many of us had worked full-time until having our first baby and didn't know anyone in our local area," Vroom Braun wrote. "We experienced feelings of isolation at the same time that we were faced with the most important and most difficult job of our life! The MC (mothers' center) was a lifeline which provided a 'family' of others in the same situation. We knew that we were not alone."

This group, with about 24 members from Morris, Sussex and Warren counties, meets twice a month on Friday mornings at the Panther Valley Ecumenical Ministry in Allamuchy but the chapter is non-sectarian.

The group focuses on a spectrum of issues, "from child abuse prevention to manicures; from goal setting to crafts; positive parenting; relationships with husband, in-laws, parents, friends, siblings; child development and reading; women's health; feng shui; family vacations; dining with kids; family-friendly meals; and many more," she wrote in an e-mail to the Daily Record.

Professional speakers who will address getting organized, goal setting and time management are on the agenda for the upcoming year.

"I believe that we focus more on the mother and her personal development than many of the other moms' groups," Vroom Braun said, praising the group for her own growth and acquired sense of belonging.

"I have become more confident as both a parent and a person. At my surprise birthday party yesterday (Sunday), there were about 10 women who all met through the MC over the years," she said "It's wonderful to network with these other moms and help them connect with new friends or important resources. Some of them have been mentors to me, and I have been a mentor to others. This all adds up to a great feeling of connectedness and belonging."

Having attended National Association of Mothers' Centers conferences since 1992, Vroom Braun looks to them as a vehicle to "enrich and energize" and unite with other members. Her 10-year-old daughter, Jessica "an NMAC baby," will help out in child care this year, she said.

"One difference between Mothers' Centers and other mothers' groups is child care," Vroom Braun said. "Paid child care workers watch the children during MC meetings, in a different room in the same building. Most full-time at-home moms welcome relaxation time, some more than others (some moms are desperate for some 'me' time, while others have more separation anxiety than their child.)"

While the National Association for Mothers' Centers strives for support and advocacy, other groups such as MOMS, Mothers Offering Moms Support, also connect mothers with young children on the community level.

"Our club has two facets," said Liane Swan, membership vice president of MOMS in Parsippany. "It gives mothers a chance to interact with other mothers, and we also do charity work that deals with mothers in need in the community."

MOMS is structured to promote family life, not intrude on it, Swan said. "We have one evening per month for just mothers - Moms' Night Out - and we also do family gatherings," she said.

Because of membership growth in the Morris County area, the original 70-plus-member club broke away from the Boonton branch and formed its own group in June. The group meets several times a week with child-focused activities such as a scavenger hunt, kite flying and play groups. Most recently the group went pumpkin picking and held a Halloween party for senior citizens at the United Methodist Church in Parsippany.

On a philanthropic level, MOMS of Parsippany adopted Morristown-based Roots and Wings, a nonprofit, mostly volunteer group that helps foster youth transition into self-sufficient adults.

Swan has a message for the characters on "Desperate Housewives," the new hit Sunday night TV show that centers on suburban stay-at-home mothers and their often exaggerated lifestyles.

"Hey, we're not all that desperate," Swan said.

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For more information regarding NOW-NJ Mothers' Economic Rights Task Force, Chapter MER TF development, or to receive additional action kits, please contact Laurie Pettine at mertf_info@nownj.org or 973-214-2643.