

Westford Eagle



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COMMUNITY / PART 2

Deepening community ties

Group promotes bonding to prevent violence

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Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of stories about communities — from virtual to cyberspace — and their effect on individuals and society.

Beneath the cursory “good mornings” and “looks like rain,” there is a quiet movement

underway that could find you inviting your neighbor out for a walk or offering to pick up his mail when he’s away.

The effort is about strengthening the bonds of community with a primary goal of preventing domestic violence. The offshoot, however, is that Westford is about to become a friendlier place.

The Westford Coalition for

Non-Violence (WCNV) has just announced its newest project — Westford Connects. The group, made up of 17 residents and town employees, is dedicated to maintaining safety in neighborhoods by promoting community bonding.

It’s the last in a three-pronged strategy of support,

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Christina Strutt flips through pamphlets created by the Westford Coalition for Non-Violence. The pamphlets are designed to educate residents about domestic violence and to inform about the Westford Connects project. PHOTO BY MELISSA WANG

COALITION

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education, and bonding, meant to prevent violence, according to resident Christina Strutt, who first pitched the idea for the project in April 2010 — three months after a Westford husband allegedly shot and killed his wife and two months after a Westford father shot and killed his daughter, according to police.

The WCNV was formed that winter in response to the two tragedies. Karen Leduc, 43, died by a gunshot wound allegedly fired by her husband Frederick Leduc, then 45, on Jan. 9, 2010. On Feb. 1 of that year, Brian Marchand, 59, shot and killed

his daughter Olivia, 17, critically injured his wife Jody Marchand, and then shot himself, according to police.

The tragedies shocked the town into action.

In that first year, members of the WCNV focused on supporting the victims. The next year, the second plan of action was to educate the high-risk groups, Strutt said. She added that after the initial tragedies, the WCNV hosted forums giving residents the opportunity to connect with domestic violence experts. The group later designed a website and brochures as educational elements.

More than two years later, the community is in a healing phase. A trial is pending on the Leduc incident. The Marchand family founded the Live for Liv Foundation and launched an annual bike ride and race, held each July, to raise money for victims of domestic violence.

But, there's more work to do, according to Strutt.

"The third part never gets done because it's the least urgent. I'm excited, and people are really excited that we are actually going to do this," she said. "My big deal here is sustainability. We have to recognize that people have very, very busy lives, so things may move a little slowly, but they'll move in a way that reflects the ways that a neighborhood can connect."

To connect a neighborhood, Strutt encouraged residents to do small acts of kindness for each other every so often. On the Westford Connects website at wcnv.org/westfordconnects, the group lists some easy ways to bond such as inviting a neighbor to walk around the neighborhood and picking up a neighbor's mail for him when he's away. Though Strutt said

she believes that the Internet is an effective way to link people in a community, such as through neighborhood email groups, she highlighted the importance of face-to-face interaction among neighbors.

"If you've never seen someone's face or spoken to someone in person, and you do need help, you might be very reluctant to ask. Once you've met someone face-to-face, it makes it much easier to call," she said.

Strutt hopes that Westford Connects can reach everyone in town and connect all neighbors with each other, since she considers isolation to be a factor hindering safety.

"The important focus also is to make sure we include the most vulnerable, which means the elderly or disabled," she said. "We could say the neighborhood is connected because most people are out and about with each other, but there might be two or three houses that aren't connected, and those people could be the most vulnerable."

To that end, six team members have volunteered to pilot Westford Connects in their neighborhoods—Ellen Harde, Laura Lamarre Anderson, Dorothy Posch, Raidu Rayasam, Christina Strutt and Pat Reppucci. Each one will delineate the range and size of the neighborhood they would like to start with and reach out to each home in their own way.

"Then we plan to compile a 'How-To' guide for new volunteer Westford Connectors, print decals to identify all the homes in connected neighborhoods, and take it from there," Strutt said.

The Westford Connects team first met on October 2011, Strutt said. Since then, team members have attended events such as the Westford Farmers Market

Team members, Westford Connects

- Karen Ancas-Santos, resident
- Ellen Harde, resident
- Ameeta Kaul, resident
- Laura Lamarre Anderson, resident
- Michele Long, resident
- Jody Marchand, resident
- Joell Mazza, resident
- Karen McManimon, resident
- Dorothy Posch, resident
- Raidu Rayasam, resident
- Patricia Reppucci, resident
- Christina Strutt, resident
- Aimee Thompson Arevalo, executive director of Close to Home, Dorchester
- Sandy Collins, chair of WCNV and director of Westford's Health Care Services
- Matthew Furlong, domestic violence officer, Westford Police Department (up until June 2012)
- Sandra Habe, assistant director of Westford Parks, Recreation, and Cemeteries
- Nirisa Nicoletti, domestic violence officer, Westford Police Department (up until June 2012)
- Everett V. Olsen, superintendent of Westford School Department



Strutt hopes others around town will place stickers like this prototype on their own mailboxes as a way to show unity within neighborhoods. PHOTO BY MELISSA WANG

and the Ride for Live/Run for Liv to hand out fliers about their efforts.

“The coalition has really dedicated members. A lot of people in the community have come forward to help,” said WCNV chairman Sandy Collins, the town’s Health Department director. “It’s a cross-section of professionals, town department heads, residents, and victims, and what we’re trying to do is find the best way to reach people that are probably impacted by domestic violence or any kind of violence.”

Jody Marchand, a member of WCNV, said she believes that Westford Connects is necessary for community development.

“In the same year that my daughter was killed, another woman was killed, so it’s obvious that word needs to get out,” Marchand said. “Some people think that domestic violence is just hitting. People need to realize that emotional abuse is just as bad, if not worse.”

Collins said she expects Westford Connects to have a positive impact in Westford.

“I think it’s unfortunate that it took the two terrible incidents that we had a few years ago to have this happen, but looking forward I think there are going to be a lot of resources out there and more people are going to be aware of this problem and are seeking help,” she said. “That’s a

Neighborhoodly actions

- Welcome a new neighbor with a meal, cookies, or gift certificates.
- Organize a rotation to cook for a neighbor who is ill, or injured and can’t walk or drive.
- Drop off a treat – cookies, muffins, chocolate – in a neighbor’s mailbox, for no reason.
- Call a neighbor to say ‘Hi’ if you haven’t seen her for a while.
- Drop off a card or note in a neighbor’s mailbox, or send an email to say you thought of him.
- Connect with neighbors on Facebook.
- Deliver a bunch of daffodils to every neighbor in March on Daffodil Day.
- Plant a bright colored plastic pinwheel flower in the snow in a neighbor’s yard.
- Stop and chat for a few minutes when you see a neighbor on the street.
- Invite a neighbor to go for a walk and talk.
- Invite a neighbor to go to a school presentation, concert or other community event.
- Babysit for a neighbor in an emergency.
- Send a teen to cut a senior’s lawn, or rake their leaves.
- Put out and take in a neighbor’s trashcan when he and his family are away.
- Pick up a neighbor’s newspaper, and mail from the mailbox, when he and his family are away.
- Snow blow a neighbor’s driveway or water her plants.
- Snow blow a neighbor’s driveway if you’re out there.
- Hold a neighbor’s key for emergencies when she’s away.
- Invite neighbors for an evening fundraiser.
- Have a Holiday ‘Open House’ for the neighbors.
- Put out holiday luminaries lining the street.
- Give a going-away-party when a neighbor moves out.

very positive thing to come out of it.”