

Local women help change lives through parenting center

By Michael Litzenberger
Staff writer

Sandy Horan and Susan Wilson believe that being a part of the Quakertown Community Parenting Center has changed their lives. As they reflect on the center's first year, they hope it has also contributed to other people's lives and will continue to do so in the future.

"I would say that the training process changed my life," said Wilson. "I didn't go through it and remain the same person. Not only did I learn parenting skills but also life skills."

These two women, both of whom are from East Rockhill Township, along with 11 others take all the knowledge they received through a six-month course offered by the Parenting Resource and Education Network (PREN) and present it to the local community through various workshops and programs.

When Horan and Wilson discovered that PREN was looking

for local parents to become prospective parenting teachers they jumped at the chance. The interviewing process was extensive, with applicants explaining how to handle different situations with children and parents.

"They were looking for parents that had children of different ages so they could bring different contexts to center," said Wilson. They both fit the bill, with Horan having 23- and 14-year-olds, Elizabeth and Joshua, and Wilson having children who are 14 and 11, Kevin and Lauren.

The training took place at St. Luke's Hospital and the students had to read 20-plus books on parenting. Wilson said they learned just as much about themselves as they did about parenting, and many of the skills translate to life in general.

"The biggest thing we learned was how to listen and communicate in healthy ways," she said. "Many of us came in thinking we were good listeners and we learned that really we weren't."

Now that the center's teachers

are out in the community, they have to put in a certain amount of hours of observation and teaching and then take a test to become certified by PREN. Horan said that almost all of the teachers are ready to be certified.

The center is a cooperative effort between the Quakertown High School, St. Luke's Hospital and the Upper Bucks YMCA and was initiated by Quakertown Superintendent Dr. Jim Scanlon through a \$25,000 grant for the PREN training. There are more than a dozen similar centers throughout New Jersey and Pennsylvania but none in the Penridge School District. The Quakertown center, though, services parents from all over Upper Bucks.

The center provides a number of services but the most visible are the workshops held through Quakertown's adult evening school. They are held during the fall and spring semesters and the courses cover the whole gamut of parenting topics, from toddlers through adolescence. There

are classes on the difference between punishment and discipline, ages and stages of behavior, understanding teens, setting boundaries, how to talk so kids will listen, how to yell-proof your house, coping with anger, and many others.

Workshops are a minimum of two evenings of two hours each and can be as much as five sessions or more. Class sizes are from 12-15 and Horan said they try to have fun with lots of props and visuals, and most importantly interactive work with parents.

"We don't tell people how to parent," said Horan. "We offer information and the parents take home what they need. If there is someone who needs something beyond what we are offering then we have a list of professionals that we give out."

The center also offers discussion groups, led by instructors, a lending library of parenting books and a successful Play 'n Share program where parents meet to talk about issues while their children play together.

Besides teaching, Horan and Wilson take on a number of administrative roles at the center. They are the faces of the center, making presentations to the community and doing public relations, and one of their most important jobs is making sure their educators stay healthy.

"This is 100 percent volunteer," said Wilson. "There is a high risk of burnout and in order to not just survive but to have the center take hold, everyone has to be healthy."

Every one of the parent educators has very busy lives with either full or part-time jobs and full-time families, and it can be a tough balancing act. Horan is an office manager for a dental office and Wilson runs her own firm, SCW Management Consulting, and has just opened an imported Italian ceramics business in



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Sandy Horan and Susan Wilson pose with the book "Growing Up Again" at Wilson's shop, Bella Vita in Pipersville. The book is one of the many that the two East Rockhill women use as teachers and administrators of the Quakertown Community Parenting Center.

Pipersville called Bella Vita.

"We all have a lot going on in our lives and we have to make sure we are not losing out in other areas of life from putting too much into this," said Wilson.

The center is not yet a non-profit organization, though Horan said that is one of their goals for the future. They would also like to offer workshops all year-round, and are expanding into the Palisades School District through its adult evening school. Another objective of Horan and Wilson is finding other ways to make the parenting center a vital part of the community and increase its visibility.

"We have a great thing to offer parents but many times parents don't always take advantage

of it," said Wilson.

One way to introduce the concept to the community is through the schools, and the center will be offering communication courses to all teachers in Quakertown School District in February. The Quakertown Rotary Club has also expressed an interest in making the center its service project for the next year. Bob Roth, a Rotary member, said that the club could help out the center in a number of ways and the project will be considered at a meeting later this month.

"This is the biggest job in our lives, and look how we are prepared," said Wilson. "There really aren't many other places for this kind of information."