

Womenews

Women's Center of Montgomery County



My Holiday Wish

by Maria Macaluso, Executive Director

Ask anyone who knows me and all will agree – I am one of those annoyingly Christmas-crazy people who starts watching Christmas movies on Halloween, listens to Christmas music non-stop from November 1st through New Year's and has never met a room that I didn't want to decorate.

Lest anyone think it is the commercial trappings of Christmas that draw me in, it is definitely not! Indeed, what the holiday season truly represents for me is the spirit of hope and optimism. It reminds me of the goodness in people, their capacity to be kind to each other, to set aside differences, to rise above our worst instincts, and to put the past behind us. Maybe it is the work we do here with children and families torn apart, physically and emotionally, by violence and hate, but the holiday season signals the opportunity to make our world better and become the best versions of ourselves. And whatever your faith, politics or beliefs, I think we can all agree that any occasion for rising above adversity and restoring goodwill is a welcome time!

This year, in particular, I think, we need these sentiments more than ever. From our volunteers and our communities, both local and global, I frequently hear expressions of growing tension, frustration, bitterness or anger, whether it be directed toward an individual or a system. Social media has added to the frenzy by providing anonymity to speak without license or concern for others. Rather than striving to be our best selves, we are sometimes sacrificing mutual goodwill and respect in engage for the freedom to speak without courtesy, caution or regard for the feelings of others. Again, regardless of politics or belief, we can all recognize the goodness that draws us together and celebrate and encourage a spirit of camaraderie and kindness. Together, with mutual respect and regard, we can conquer a great deal!

As I was reflecting and feeling these thoughts a great deal in recent months, I happened while driving, to be listening to Christmas music (of course) and the lyrics of one song resonated deeply with me because they speak of the world that I hope we achieve, not just for some distant, future generations but for ourselves and now. The lyrics of this song by Stevie Wonder, that I share below, are my wish for all of you this holiday season:

“Someday at Christmas”

Someday at Christmas, men won't be boys
 Playing with bombs like kids play with toys
 One warm December our hearts will see
 A world where men are free.
 Someday at Christmas, there'll be no wars
 When we have learned what Christmas is for
 When we have found what life's really worth
 There'll be peace on earth.
 Someday at Christmas, we'll see a land

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With no hungry children, no empty hand
One happy morning people will share
A world where people care.
Someday at Christmas, there'll be no tears
When all men are equal and none have fears
One shining moment, one prayer away
From our world today.
Someday all our dreams will come to be
Someday in a world where people are free
Maybe not in time for you and me
But someday at Christmas time

So my special wish – for our Women’s Center community and for the world at large – is that we expand our vision beyond making this a reality only at Christmas. Let’s together, strive to make this our goal to achieve in 2019!

To all of you, on behalf of the staff and Board, I wish you peace, happiness, safety and joy in the New Year!

Women’s Center of Montgomery County and Our Community Partners

On November 29th 2018, Hunter Robbins from ACCESS Services trained thirty WCMC staff and volunteers on **QPR, Question, Persuade, Refer**, an intervention technique to reduce the risk of suicide. Suicide happens when people are overwhelmed by stress, and when physical and emotional pain exceed hope. There are approximately 129 suicides every day in the USA. and around 100 per year in Montgomery County. Domestic violence can be one of those stressors, and we can best assist our clients by being confident in our communication with them when they are at risk of an impulsive act. QPR is not a counseling method or treatment, it is an in the moment intervention, intended to offer hope though positive action.

On December 2nd, 2018 staff member. McGibbon and Volunteer Lisa Poelck attended an “**Empower U**” day ‘organized by “Pillars of Light and Love”, a nonprofit agency based in Collegeville. Keynote speaker Daryl Davis presented on trauma, hope and resilience. Group discussions on healthy relationships and boundaries were provided by WCMC.



A Year in Review

Submitted by: Board Member Dominique Etienne

It is that time of year once again; the season of joy, laughter, happiness and cheer. As we begin to wrap up 2018, let us take an overall look of what this year has brought the Women's Center of Montgomery County.

This year has brought much success to the Women's Center. We participated in the Amazing Raise Campaign, increasing donations to the center in October 2018. Members of the Women's Center had an opportunity to attend "an evening with Tarana Burke, founder of the #MeToo movement. The 14th annual 5k run/3k walk entitled "Under the Sea/Over the Boardwalk" was held in August, 2018 at Germantown Academy.

The annual Spring gala "Philly Nights, being Phanatical about ending domestic violence" was a success, encouraging donations and awareness to the center while attendees being impacted by powerful testimonies from survivors. In celebration of International Women's Day, a social event at Gypsy Blu was held in March where attendees were able to socialize, partake in fresh hors d'oeuvres, and get free massages. During this year the center was also able to partner with the Mazzone Center to gain more knowledge on the LGBTQIA community.

While this year was insightful and entertaining while helping to continue to spread the awareness of domestic violence and its impact on all communities, we also had some losses of people dear to the center. We pay homage, respect and condolences to the family and loved ones of Regina "Jean" Byrne, Jodie C. and the father of board member Lisa Neely Poelck.

While this season is a time of cheer and joy, please remember the Women's Center. We look forward to a remarkable, unforgettable and prosperous year of 2019! Happy Holidays to all!

Member Relations:

Our Commitment to Empowering, Engaging and Enriching the Women's Center of Montgomery County Community

Since the Women's Center was established in 1976 we have been a membership organization, with nearly 800 individuals coming together each year to form a supportive community. Our members include our more than 200 active volunteers who contribute in excess of 20,000 hours of direct and indirect service to fulfill our mission.

Through these 43 years our Board and staff have remained committed to creating opportunities for our members to maximize their experience. This includes programs and activities that engage, empower and enrich, as well as opportunities to play a role in shaping our future and having a strong voice in the direction our organization grows.

As part of our current strategic plan, which began in July 2017, our Board of Directors are seeking to revitalize those efforts to ensure that our member relationships stay strong and offer the sense of community and involvement that has been integral to our history.

In furtherance of this goal, the Center has been fortunate to partner with a team of Vanguard employees who volunteer their services to help non-profits achieve their strategic goals.

In that spirit, we are seeking members – new and long-term – who are willing to share with us what makes their Women's Center membership meaningful and what more we can do to enhance your connection. Our Vanguard team of volunteers has developed a brief survey which can be completed online, as well as begun coordinating several in-person focus group opportunities for interested members to help us explore and identify membership benefits that would most interest our members.

We hope that you will consider participating in this effort so that you can have a strong voice in telling us what more we can do. If this is something that interests or inspires you please contact Maria at the Elkins Park office at 215-635-7340 or by email at mmacaluso@womenscentermc.org.

A message from the Fabulous Shoe Night – an event planning group that hosts social gatherings to promote mission awareness and support for local non-profits by raising much needed funding to allow them to do what they do best ... serve the under-privileged!

Fabulous Shoe Night/King of Prussia to benefit

The Women's Center of Montgomery County

Each year since 2014, the Fabulous Shoe Night organizes an event for The Women's Center of Montgomery County because domestic violence is pervasive ... and it's personal.

1 in 4 women will be affected by domestic violence in their lifetime ... which means that if these same women have children, their children will be affected too ... directly or "indirectly" ...for even when domestic violence isn't physical, it's effects are no less devastating.

Please join us on Sunday, January 20, 2019 from 1:00 to 3:00 PM at Seasons 52 for Fabulous Shoe Night/KOP to raise money and awareness for survivors of domestic violence. Hear personal stories from the brave women who escaped violent, abusive relationships to live stronger, better, safer lives for themselves and their children, and to shine the light of truth and awareness on a topic that has remained hidden and taboo for far too long.

Your \$30 ticket (+ \$3.46 processing fee) includes delicious flatbreads courtesy of Seasons 52 and a built-in donation to The Women's Center of Montgomery County. Cash bar, and food will be available to order.

There will be fabulous raffles (please note ... raffles are CASH ONLY), as well as sponsorship opportunities to promote your local business.

As with EVERY Fabulous Shoe Night event, 100% of BOTH raffle and sponsorship proceeds are donated to the cause we are highlighting at each event, in addition to 100% of ticket sales, minus event costs.

For details on sponsorship levels and prices, please contact FSN/KOP chapter leader Kathleen Albertson at kathyalbertson@comcast.net.

To purchase tickets online visit:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/fabulous-shoe-nightking-of-prussia-to-benefit-the-womens-center-of-montgomery-county-tickets-51962853293#tickets>

Fabulous Shoe Night ... Making a difference in our communities, one step at a time.

A Conversation with Jennifer Angelina Petro, LGBTQ+ Activist

By: Colleen Dych, Director of Special Projects

It was a rainy November morning when I sat down to speak with Jennifer Angelina Petro. Jenn, whose preferred pronouns are she/her/hers, was kind enough to share her story with the Women's Center in honor of Transgender Awareness Week, which took place this year November 12th through the 19th. The week concluded with Transgender Day of Remembrance on the 20th, to commemorate all of the lives lost to acts of anti-transgender violence.

Jenn had no conscious clues that she was trans until she was 45 years old. She explained that while many trans women have felt as if they were a girl trapped in a boy's body, that was not the case for her; rather Jenn described herself as a feminine boy, Joseph. As a child, she adored her mother's closet of clothes, jewelry, and perfume; her Catholic/Italian parents disagreed with this, and in turn decided to "make a man out of her". Jenn bravely disclosed the acts of sexual abuse committed against her by both her mother, father, and other people close to her- including a priest. She recalled how she was given pornography at the tender age of 7. Jenn also believes that she has an intersex story that was never told- up until her mother's passing. Jenn's mother told her about the day she was born, saying how Jenn's high estrogen levels and low testosterone levels were of concern to her doctors. She recalls experiencing multiple surgeries in her young life, many without sound justification, as well as medicines and prescriptions, such as testosterone shots, that she eventually stopped following through with. She believes that these acts of abuse contributed to her not having a clue about her true gender identity.

Once Jenn grew up, the "making a man out of her" appeared to have been successful, as Jenn married her spouse and they had three children together. One day after an intense trauma therapy session, Jenn found herself in the women's section of a thrift store, feeling happy as she bought women's clothing. And so she returned the next day, and the day after that. Jenn expressed her newfound happiness to her therapist, only for her to tell Jenn she needed to stop. Jenn's therapist went on to explain her behavior as someone who is simply experiencing a mid-life crisis, and Jenn left the session feeling confused.

Before the next part of her story, Jenn wanted to explain her relationship with her now ex-spouse. While they have maintained a pleasant relationship, Jenn shared that during their marriage their intimate life was difficult and that they slept in separate bedrooms. Jenn stated that this was caused by the sexual abuse she experienced growing up, and that she did not consciously know her true gender identity at the time. Because of having her own space, this gave Jenn the privacy to go home and try on women's clothes. Jenn described herself as having a full beard and being mesmerized by how happy she was when looking in the mirror.

After that moment, Jenn admitted that she was not satisfied with her therapist. She began to wonder if perhaps she was a crossdresser or gay, and during her research she discovered the word *transgender*. Upon this finding, Jenn found herself struggling with her internal homophobia, as she was raised in a discriminating household. At this point Jenn had been an elementary school teacher for twenty years, and found an openly trans friend who was also a fellow teacher to confide in. They suggested that Jenn attend a support group at the Mazzoni Center. Jenn did in fact attend, and while she admitted that she "had found her people", she said the thought of being trans scared her and she could not quite embrace it.

Jenn was confused; she had always had a rich spiritual life and enjoyed learning things from all religions. It was one day in late March when Jenn was walking through a park hoping for answers. She recalled looking up at the sky and asking the universe "What is going on?". She said the sky opened up and told her "You are a trans woman". Jenn said that to this very moment she still gets goosebumps when she thinks about that day, and that it has "remained the most beautiful, spiritual, and blissful moment of her life so far". She felt ecstatically happy and born in that divine moment. Despite her bliss, Jenn's next thoughts were "Shit, now what do I do?" as she chuckles. She was a teacher of twenty-three years and married with three children. During this time, she decided to continue attending support group; she began shaving her body hair and bringing a change of clothes. She would go to work every day in a tie, and change into her women's clothes at the train station to wear to support group; being sure to change back into her tie again as she began her trip home.

Jenn described feeling more at home every day. As mentioned earlier, Jenn and her ex-spouse had separate bedrooms. It was one day in July that Jenn had left a satin negligee out- a Freudian slip she believes. Her ex found it and asked if Jenn was cheating on her- or if she was just honoring her inner feminine hippie. Her ex then asked her “Or are you trans?”. Jenn’s ex then disclosed that she had had her suspicion’s for a year, but never said anything. Jenn told her ex that she was “Trans because I’m trans, not trans because of the abuse”. Jenn and her ex recalled the births of their children and how much Jenn had wished to be in her spouse’s place, recognizing that this and other signs had led her to wonder if Jenn was trans. Jenn expressed that her and her ex had a tricky talk but that her ex was extremely supportive of her, making Jenn feel very blessed. They ultimately decided to divorce, only spiritually at the moment, as Jenn would go on to lose her job with Jenn’s ex keeping her on her health insurance. They told their children in August, and their response was truly heartwarming. Speaking to Jenn they asked “Oh okay- are you happy?”. Jenn replied that she was and that they were welcome to continue to call her Dad, as that’s how they have known her all their lives. Jenn laughs as she recalls her middle son asking “Does that mean we have to buy you a Father’s Day card and a Mother’s Day card?”. The children ultimately decided to call Jenn their “Other Mom”.

Jenn felt like a proud butterfly; she had always had a passion for poetry and music and she said that when she looked back at everything she had wrote, her art knew she was trans before she did. And now with the love and support of her family behind her, Jenn decided to come out at work. When Jenn told the administration of the private school she worked at, they didn’t know what to do. Eventually the news slipped from the faculty to the parents of her fourth grade class and they were furious. Jenn decided that it was okay that they knew since the school already knows, and she had been out to the world officially since September 18th, 2015. While many of her student’s parents adored her, they were insistent that Jenn could not present herself femininely or be called Ms. Petro; they wanted her to continue to wear a tie. Since the school was tuition-based, the administration sided with the parents.

The administration didn’t fire Jenn, but began looking for her replacement for the next school year. Jenn believes that even her young student’s knew she was trans before she did, as they often braided her long hair and drew pictures of her in dresses; something at that point in time her fellow staff members and the children’s parents thought was funny and cute. Many of the student’s parents had an ignorant view that Jenn was unsafe to be with children- so the school hired an extra teacher for Jenn’s classroom. Jenn said that her and the other teacher got along great, and that they actually apologized for what happened to her. Even with an extra teacher in the room Jenn said that parent’s kept popping into her classroom randomly.

At this point Jenn had gradually begun to dress more feminine; something the administration wasn’t happy with but did not stop. Some of Jenn’s student’s parents were accepting, but unfortunately the haters were louder. Jenn began receiving hate emails on a daily basis, and was truly traumatized by the time that the administration stepped in. Jenn described her feelings of anxiety, hurt, and outright fear. It was Jenn’s students that supported her the most; making her cards and just being happy that she was happy. Jenn recalls thinking how enlightened they truly were- especially at such a young age. Sadly, not everyone would be as supporting as Jenn’s fourth grade students; when Jenn came out publicly, the school treated it as a tragedy. The administration wrote a letter to the entire student body, and had counselor’s present to comfort both the students and their parents. Needless to say, it was a very difficult year for Jenn.

To make things worse, some of the student’s parents in Jenn’s class decided that she was a distraction and that their children weren’t learning. She had sent in her evaluations and everything was fine, however the school decided to call in an evaluator from New York to please the parents. The students were tested and all of them tested above grade level, and the administration asked the parents to stop. The rest of the school year was quiet for Jenn, up until the end of the year when she realized being trans was going to prevent her from continuing her teaching career. Jenn’s fourth grade class wrote a petition to the school for her to stay, and called her Ms. Petro, something their parents found abusive to the kids. Jenn had begun looking for other jobs as she had known she wouldn’t be coming back the next year, and debated changing her name as she was still legally known as Joseph. Jenn decided on Jennifer Angelina Petro; taking her mother’s name. Despite the abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother, Jenn admitted she knows how rough her mother had it with her father, and doesn’t think her mother would’ve committed the abuse had she not been drunk. Jenn felt that it was right to take her mother’s name, as she admitted before her death to giving Jenn pornography when she was in second grade. Jenn described her struggle with finding employment since her time at her previous school had come to an unjust end.

Jenn's family had to sell their house of fourteen years as they could no longer afford it, leaving Jenn feeling ashamed that she couldn't contribute financially. Jenn's ex's parents let Jenn's ex and their children and dogs move in with them, leaving Jenn with nowhere to call home. Now apparently homeless at 47, Jenn found a shelter to reside in for quite some time. Eventually, Jenn did manage to find an apartment with the money she had saved from the sale of her house, only to find herself gradually losing her mental stability. She missed her family, and with the lack of support from her own sister and brother, she felt alone. She sent a picture of what she looked like to her father in Michigan, only to lose contact with him completely and be banned from his funeral. Jenn's brother had a change of heart, and arranged a private viewing for her, which meant the world to Jenn. He also referred to her as Jennifer in the obituary, much to her surprise.

With Jenn's name now legally changed in Pennsylvania, she began actively seeking trans medication. Jenn described herself as not being able to pass for a woman in regards to appearance, and during this time, Jenn recalls receiving hate mail from religious and random people alike; as well as a death threat from an old acquaintance. She was verbally assaulted in public, and bathrooms were always an issue. Jenn couldn't afford the cosmetic procedures, but made an effort to shave. Jenn realized through her trans journey that she is a "hairy Italian woman", and even though her body dysphoria is still there it is not always on the forefront of her mind. These were still scary times for Jenn, who described herself as a "walking in congruency to most people's lives", and that put her in danger. It eventually reached a point for Jenn where she was afraid to leave her apartment, and her bipolar disorder went through the roof. Jenn recalls residing in a psychiatric hospital for quite some time, and taking medications for suicidal thoughts. Jenn had the support of her family though, who showed up every day to visit her. Jenn found an affirming therapist, and while her insurance wouldn't cover gender-affirming surgery, she did have an orchiectomy.

At this point in time Jenn had been unemployed for three years; she had applied to fifty to a hundred schools. While she did snag two interviews, they both found some reason to turn her away. Jenn's mental health disorders were severe enough for her to get on social security, allowing her some financial stability. She found a new place to live with friendly landlords, and though she still had her struggles, Jenn was doing well. Her therapist encouraged her to get out of the house, and referred her to a Unitarian church; but Jenn didn't think it was quite the right fit. She researched queer churches, and found the Love in Action UCC church in Hatboro. Jenn decided to write the pastor a letter, who confirmed that they were welcoming and encouraged Jenn to attend a service. A whole year went by until she was ready to give it a try; and while she doesn't consider herself a Christian, she felt like she had found a home for herself. She recalls "femming herself out" and sitting in the back of the church- in case of the need for a quick exit. Everyone was awesome, and they took her under their wings

Jenn went on to help start the SAGA Community Center, which stands for Sexuality and Gender Acceptance. They attend rallies, host support groups, activity nights, and more to support members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Montgomery County. They will be starting the first ever LGBTQ+ library in Montgomery County in 2019, and lead services on days such as Transgender Day of Remembrance. The Women's Center actually hosted a Holiday Donation Drive to benefit their center- more information on this is available

Jenn is still unemployed, but has found her passion. Things have improved with her siblings, as she is now in contact with her sister from time to time and her brother always calls her Jennifer. She writes in a blog that she has had for seven years, hoping to normalize and humanize what it means to be trans. Jenn's blog is titled "The Wonder Child Blog". She hosts workshops at local libraries, called "Ask Me Anything", in hopes of spreading awareness about trans rights issues. She advocated before the Hatboro council about a non-discrimination ordinance in Hatboro. Despite there being so many haters, both on the council and in the public, the ordinance was successful. Jenn was afraid to walk to her car that night, and fondly remembers the memory of walking up to one of the police officers to request an escort; his response being "Ma'am, I will make sure you are safe. No one will hurt you tonight". Her ex spoke out that night too; her support for Jenn as strong as it had always been.

Jenn is an inspiring woman; from her tale of being a victim turned strong survivor, to her continued activism and advocacy for the LGBTQIA+ community. She admits that she still has rough days, and even though her safety is threatened now more than ever, she is out and proud. She refuses to be stopped, despite the hate and fear she still often faces, and is truly a remarkable person. Getting to speak with her was one of the most inspiring conversations I have ever been a part of, and I look forward to getting to work with her and the SAGA Center as we continue our LGBTQIA+ initiative. It was truly an honor getting to speak with her, and I hope you are as inspired by her story as I am.

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