

A History worth celebrating

By Sean Black

ICASA Staff

A can of pop, a cup of soup and a couch. Those were the perks, if you want to call them that. It's all ICASA could offer. It's all the founding mothers needed.

"We didn't dress up. We lived in raggedy jeans," Dickelle Fonda said. "We used to live on cups of soup and whatever people brought, but the thing is we never really noticed. It didn't occur to us. That was secondary to what we were doing. We were fed by our passion and commitment to this issue."

Upon that passionate foundation sits ICASA, 25 years older - bigger with better food and sleeping arrangements - but still committed to ending sexual violence.

"I see it as an evolution. It's like a rosebud. You have a bud and it starts to open and as it opens it gets bigger and bigger until it comes to fruition," Belleville director JoAnn Pisel said. "I don't think anybody saw it as it is now. It's a gradual growth that just continues to happen."

ICASA was founded in the spring of 1977 by nine community rape crisis centers. They didn't call it ICASA. This group was going to war for women's rights to be safe - so the name was ICWAR (Illinois Coalition of Women Against Rape.) By the second meeting, there were 13 centers present, providing support and information with each other.

"What I remember is people going to share information and manuals to other people so we wouldn't have to reinvent the wheel," said Bonnie Buckley, who began attending meetings in 1979 as the Volunteer Director of the Charleston center.

That the meetings took place was a testament to the women's dedication. There wasn't any travel reimbursement. There weren't any meals. There were church basements, bagels and good discussion.

"We had an awful time getting to the meetings because there was no money," said Nancy Carlson, who attended her first ICASA meeting in 1979. "We met in a lot of church basements. They had room and they were cheap, like nothing cheap."

Accommodations withstanding, there was an empowerment that only those meetings could bring.

"I remember the early meetings prior to anybody getting any money and being amazed that there were other things going on in other places," said Barbara Engel, who worked with ICASA beginning in 1978. "I remember being excited and sort of startled that there were other people doing this work. Whatever little success got magnified because we were all struggling. It made us feel committed to social change."

The coalition's early meetings also helped lay the groundwork for ICASA's governance structure. As in those first meetings, each ICASA member center is represented by one person on the Governing Body and the group uses a consensus decision-making process. Consensus decision-making was the brainchild of founding mother Deborah Wiatt. It prompts discussion on issues and provides each member with an equal voice.

"It's not just somebody setting a policy. It's that we got a voice," Buckley said.

Wiatt, who passed away in 2001, was one of ICASA's original founders and her impact on the organization's early years is substantial.

"I saw her as the heart and soul and spirit of ICASA," Buckley said.

The group's first state efforts at making social change reality came in working with the Illinois House Rape Study Committee. The committee and the coalition combined to formulate the Rape Shield Act, which was enacted into law in 1978. The law prevented a victim's past sexual activities from being relevant at trial. It was the first mark in blazing a lengthy legislative trail.

The early organizers also worked on a national level, helping found the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault in 1979. ICASA would go on to host a pair of national NCASA conferences prior to the organization's disbanding.

The move from group sharing to group movement began in earnest in 1980 with Elvera Anselmo leading the charge. In 1980, Anselmo became director of Rape Information and Counseling Service based in Springfield. She brought a pragmatic feminist view honed in the domestic-violence movement.

"I was looking at starting and creating concrete tangible products to move the coalition forward," Anselmo said. "... In 1980 things were really changing, money was becoming available. I felt and others felt that we needed to show people our ability to create and do what we did really well, and also that we could incorporate a lot of things, not by radical feminism but by other means. ... To be radical feminists and be able to help a few victims was wonderful, but we needed a bigger impact."

The decision to solicit funds was influenced by a successful grant application in 1980 by Rape Information and Counseling Service based in Springfield. It was only \$10,000, but it was a start.

"It was a very big step to decide to leave grassroots funding and to step into bureaucracy," said Judith Corvin-Blackburn, who helped write the first grant proposal

while serving as Director of RICS from 1978-80. “There was a lot of trepidation there, but in the same time if we wanted to anchor victim services and education we had to do that. It was a matter of practicality. ... Just to expand services and keep services, it made sense.”

In search of money, ICWAR applied for the Federal Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant that was being designated through the Illinois Department of Public Health.

“I remember going to talk to IDPH and thinking how was ICWAR going to get money,” Anselmo said. “Once again it was because of the work of all those centers. ... The fact of the matter was that we provided services to crime victims that no one else did.”

The facts delivered a grant of \$148,889 in 1982.

“That seemed like such a goldmine,” Engel said.

It was difficult to get the gold into the bank. The group had opened up a checking account in 1980, but it never topped more than a couple hundred dollars. When Anselmo brought in the big money check, the bank double-checked her.

“They made me go with one of the managers to look to see if it was for real,” Anselmo said. “They were totally shocked that this little group was able to come into this windfall.”

The money enabled ICASA to hire Polly Poskin as its Executive Director. She’s been there ever since. The bulk of the new money was allocated to 12 rape crisis centers; four centers later in the same year received smaller one-time training grants.

““People were really happy but we knew by taking (money) it was going to change,” Anselmo said.

What the group wanted was a strong coalition that would serve as a pass-through agency, subcontracting the funds it received to local member centers. The group also decided to split the money virtually evenly among centers in an attempt to fill all geographic areas with services.

“I feel very strongly that money talks. Whoever holds the purse strings has a fair amount of power,” Engel said. “It was important to make sure the coalition held the power. The only way to make sure that the feminist perspective remains is that the coalition held the money. I thought if you let some other agency or bureaucracy pick the best programs, whoever was easiest on the courts and police, whoever was the least threatening, would get the money. That’s not what we wanted.”

The plan was modeled after one utilized by the Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

“We imitated that model, and we had the big support and expertise given by Shirley Randolph of the Department of Public Health who thought we knew best how to serve victims of sexual assault,” Poskin said. “It works. It was one of those decisions that when it was made, you knew that if you had the right people in the field, it couldn’t fail. The people closest to the victims knew best what they needed. As long as state government respected that, then we couldn’t fail.”

It also didn’t fail because of the willingness of coalition members to share with each other and welcome others to the table. A year after first receiving money, ICASA

accepted four new members. The old members had to cut their own money to give to the new members.

“It was difficult because it meant taking money out of your own budget,” Anselmo said. “That was a pivotal year.”

The system of mutual respect and commitment has worked well enough to push ICASA’s budget to almost \$15 million and make it one of the largest and strongest coalitions in the country.

“That is a figure I couldn’t even fantasize about,” Fonda said. “It was a fantasy to think about five million. That wasn’t wishful thinking, that was fantasy thinking.”

The support of state and federal funds has been a key to ICASA’s survival and growth. And while money brought its own set of problems, it has been more than offset by the benefits.

“Money never comes without complications. Money never comes without some loss of control. ICASA and the centers had to accept that,” Carlson said. “We’d be back there if we hadn’t said yes to the money. We could not have survived through the lean years. Now, you could never run a meaningful amount of services on what we had then. That not only saved us, but propelled us forward.”

Moving forward began early. The coalition’s first push was for the passage of the Illinois Criminal Sexual Assault Act. Poskin and Engel teamed with Julie Hamas, Tina Chen and Linda Miller to become fixtures at the Capitol throughout the early months of 1983.

“We became the fearsome five,” Poskin said. “We had the good graces and support of the Cook County State’s Attorney’s office (which was then under the direction

of Richard M. Daley) and that was key. We were just undaunted. ... It was one of those times in the universe of a convergence of the right people, high energy and good timing.”

That convergence still didn't make it easy. The action was non-stop and sleep limited.

“By May or June we had to call each other up in the morning, not to see what we were going to wear, but to keep us going,” Poskin said.

The fight wasn't only at the legislature. The coalition itself struggled with the exclusion of the marital rape statute in the law. Members of the coalition debated long and vigorously about the exclusion with members walking out of the meeting at times. Eventually, the group came together to support the act without most of the marital rape provision and the act became law.

“I remember there were times where some sort of crisis was happening and Governing Body would hash it out and the center staff were so committed to ICASA as a whole,” Buckley said. “I'm just really proud of it. It's grown to something tremendous.”

The accomplishments continued in 1983-84 as legislation was passed making statements from victims to rape crisis personnel confidential. That victory was followed by the Illinois Violent Crime Victims Assistance Act, which provided money for counseling and advocacy.

“You felt you were right on the edge all the time,” Engel said. “We felt like little warrior women. We were taking on a huge male dominated system that didn't want to hear from us.”

The changes didn't stop at the capitol.

The coalition knew educating the public about the effects of rape and the new laws was a key facet to helping end sexual assault. In 1984, ICASA spearheaded the Implementation Project, an endeavor focused on educating the public about sexual assault. The key feature was a 24-minute film, showcasing then television star Betty Thomas of Hill Street Blues, highlighting the reality of sexual violence and key provisions in the new state law. It was the first of several educational campaigns the coalition introduced, culminating in the award winning “Real Men Don’t Rape” effort during 1997-98.

With their feet firmly established at the capitol and as a public educator, coalition members began debating a name change. The idea of changing names began in 1982 and was completed in 1984. It was an emotionally charged final discussion that was difficult, especially for the members that had been there near the beginning. In the end, ICWAR became the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

“That was a teary meeting,” Carlson said. “That was an emotional process.”

With its new name, ICASA continued to expand. In 1984, Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) passed Congress, providing future funding for counseling services. The State moved into the game in 1985, giving ICASA its first allocation of General Revenue funds. In 1986, the VOCA funds arrived.

“The federal VOCA funds were the infusion that catapulted rape crisis centers,” Poskin said. “It created the opportunity for paid advocates that could develop relationships with the police, prosecutors and the courts.”

Ten years later funding from the Violence Against Women's Act hit the budget line. This crucial piece of funding allowed ICASA centers to open satellite offices in underserved areas of the state.

It quite possible could have been the golden age of ICASA's growth.

"I don't think we will see again the kind of growth we've seen in the past 15 years," ICASA assistant director Carol Corgan said. "I don't see the government creating brand new funding sources like that again."

ICASA celebrated its 20th Anniversary in 1997 and soon after, in a remarkable contrast to its first office in a two-story house, ICASA opened a 7,000 square foot administrative building in 1999. It was an emotional moment for staff that had shared building space with everything from solar panel enthusiasts to a flower shop.

"What the building says is ICASA has a home, we have an identity, a place to keep the momentum going," Poskin said. "It gives us a place for ourselves and it gives us recognition that this is something that's here to stay. It means a lot to us to have this place."

ICASA hasn't stopped moving forward, continuing to battle for improved legislation for victims. It began a Training and Technical Assistance Institute and with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention co-hosted the second National Sexual Violence Prevention Conference during 2002. Oh, and there was that 25th anniversary thing.

Now along with continued funding questions, ICASA balances the potential conflict of professionalism vs. grassroots feminism. While others worry that the edge has

been lost, Poskin knows that ICASA and its member centers continue to stand by the values that started ICASA.

“There’s a passion for ending rape and helping rape victims. You can’t do this work without it,” Poskin said. “It might not be as demonstrative as it was in the late 70s and the early 80s. Part of that is because feminism is a mainstream principal in the work and the policy. It’s just become integral to doing the work.”

And doing the work is what ICASA does best.