
WESTCHESTER HOUSING

A Residence for Single Women



The New York Times/Harriet Gans

Home for single women run by the Rev. Dorothy Payne on Ridgeview Avenue in White Plains

WOMEN, SINGLE: The Latest On Dorothy's Ministry.....Elliott #1597

rently one woman is allowed to skip housework and pay \$140 because she is involved in a heavy study program.

Those with special talents or interests organize seminars or groups. For example, a woman who left her husband and son is now preparing a seminar on "runaway mothers." A 23-year-old professional woman, on a temporary assignment in White Plains, is leading a nightly aerobic-dancing program.

Mrs. Payne, who was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1970 at the age of 51, is the author of "Women Without Men," inspired by her own experiences as a widow and divorcee.

During her studies she lived in a women's hotel in Manhattan, where she said she "saw the magnitude of the problem of single women." There were 350 residents, and "they had nothing but four walls to come home to," she said.

"That was before women's liberation," she recalled. "Society simply did not see any of us. I wanted to have a milieu where women could help one another, feel dignity and feel a part of what is going on, and not feel less than the rest of society because they are not part of the nuclear family."

She got a job at a seminary, where she was given room and board, and saved her entire salary for four years. She got 12 friends to serve as her board of directors, which still helps to raise funds. At that time banks were not required to lend mortgage money to women, but the owner of the White Plains house, which had been used as a nursing home, wanted to hold the mortgage anyway, so she bought it.

"It looked so ugly then that I didn't really want it, but it was the only one I could afford," she said.

She redecorated it, with the help of women's groups from the Katonah Presbyterian Church, the Scarsdale Congregational Church, and the Hitchcock Presbyterian Church in Scarsdale.

Today it is painted in light colors and filled with plants and comfortable slightly worn furniture. It has two large living rooms, a dining room that can seat up to 25, an old fashioned kitchen, pantry and a large screened back porch. There are five large bedrooms and two baths for residents on the second floor and a top-floor bedroom and office for Mrs. Payne.

When she opened her doors, several of the first residents were mental patients. Mrs. Payne said she "couldn't hack it, you couldn't mix them with women who are able to control their own lives." Her "ministry," as she saw it, was to help "women in the transitions of life, who needed friends and a place to live."

In six years, the kinds of residents and visitors have changed. She had several women, for example, who

were escaping abusive husbands, but now there are shelters for such women. She used to do job counseling for the newly single women, but now refers them to professionals.

The dinner-table discussions are often personal, with women describing their problems, and Mrs. Payne gives limited pastoral counseling. Her main effort, however, is to provide a comfortable, friendly atmosphere and "not to get in over our heads with problems."

There are several house rules: no drinking "because too many people are on the verge of alcoholism," no pets, "for the welfare of the whole," no men in the rooms and downstairs rooms are supposed to be orderly at all times, "because if a woman is upset, she needs order," Mrs. Payne says.

Women who have children may invite them occasionally for meals. The Tuesday night suppers are for women only. They attract former residents and women who are interested in home cooking and feminine conversation. Men are infrequent guests, except at the Wednesday-night co-ed seminars. One resident had a male friend who occasionally helped with repairs in the house.

Women who want privacy can have it by closing their door; if they leave it open a crack, that means they are available for visiting.

Two of the residents now are typical of New Berith's clientele. They are Lisa Gritti, a 23-year-old I.B.M. programmer, and Paula Oldham, a 24-year-old electrical engineer for I.B.M. Each is in White Plains on a six-month assignment, after which Miss Gritti will go to Dallas for four weeks and Miss Oldham will go to Germany for six months. Both gave up trying to find apartments when they found they would have to pay at least \$500 a month.

"I come from a big, close Italian family, and our house is like Grand Central," Miss Gritti said. "This is like having a family."

"You get people from every walk of life here," Miss Oldham said. "A lot of them are well-educated. One night everybody at the table had a Master's Degree and one had a doctorate. Dorothy's a gourmet cook. Who wants to come home and fix dinner alone? Every working woman needs a housewife."

Mrs. Payne said she believes that the current tendency of many individuals to live alone is damaging and will change.

"When you have only privacy, you become selfish and withdrawn and push off from people," she said. "The problem is money. People who live alone have too much money, and it's easier to withdraw than get out and make friends."

BY BETSY BROWN

SINGLE women need "someone to come home to" and "a place where it's O.K. to be single," the Rev. Dorothy Payne decided several years ago — and that is what she is providing in a large old house in White Plains.

She opened the New Berith Women's Center six years ago today, and since then has housed about 200 women, five at a time, some as briefly as overnight and some for as long as six months. The center has also had an attendance over the years totaling about 10,000 at its Tuesday night suppers, rap sessions, holiday dinners and seminars. The women range in age from their

20's to 50's. The first residents were women "in transition," recently divorced, separated, escaping abusive husbands or widowed, who needed friends and a place to stay.

Recently a new type has moved in — young professional women who are new in Westchester or on temporary assignments, and who either can't find apartments they can afford or feel that a small apartment is too lonely.

At New Berith, which means new covenant, they share the housekeeping and have dinner together — cooked by Mrs. Payne — in a large, old-fashioned dining room. Most pay \$90 per week for room and board, and the house is partially supported by fund-raising projects. Occasionally a woman pays less money and does more work. Cur-