

Evelyn Jacobs Ortner



During the 1980s, Evelyn Ortner was Special Adviser to and speechwriter for the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. At the same time, she represented HHS on women's issues at the White House. It was then that she became aware of the enormity of the problem of domestic violence.

Upon returning to New Jersey, Mrs. Ortner learned that the suburban area in which she lived had virtually no facilities to support the numerous victims of abuse. To provide for this need, she founded The Unity Group, as volunteer advocates for battered women and their children. Within a few years, Unity grew from the original three members to several hundred, remaining an all-volunteer organization. Evelyn quickly became known as a pioneer in the field of domestic violence for her hands-on work as well as her public advocacy through writing, lectures, testimony before state committees, and TV and radio shows—all to provide awareness and help for anyone in need. She received both aid and pleas for help from all parts of the country. Working literally 24/7, Evelyn opened a shelter, providing clients with housing. She also obtained legal and medical assistance for them, as well as counseling—all without cost.

In 2003, she established the Evelyn Jacobs Ortner Center at the University of Pennsylvania, one of the first domestic violence learning centers at an academic institution in the country. The Center, which will continue in perpetuity, offers national conferences, interdisciplinary course work, fellowships, and advocacy for effective anti-violence legislation among local and state governments. She continued to work one-on-one with women who needed her assistance through her diagnosis with leukemia in 2010. The disease took her life on March 5, 2011.

For her decades of service to others, Evelyn's sole compensation was the often expressed gratitude of the many individuals whose lives she helped resurrect. Among the numerous awards and recognitions she has received are commendations from President Clinton, U.S. Senators Bradley (D-NJ) and Lautenberg (D-NJ), and a joint legislative resolution of the NJ Senate and General Assembly. She also received the 1999 Governor's Volunteer Award from NJ Governor Whitman, and a Certificate of Appreciation in recognition of her dedication to victims' rights from the U.S. Department of Justice. In October 2004, she received the Crystal Stair Award. Previous Crystal Stair winners include author Jonathan Kozol and Marion Wright Edelman, President and Founder of the Children's Defense Fund.