

## Miami women's shelter founder is honored

BY SUE ARROWSMITH

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Something special happens at the Lotus House Women's Shelter in Overtown at least once a month: A newborn comes home.

The new baby arrives like a beacon of hope, prying open the hearts of women bruised by life on the streets.

"I don't care how street-hardened a woman is, when one of our mothers brings home a baby, they too become mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters," said Constance Collins-Margulies, founder and director of the Lotus House.

There are other special moments -- graduation ceremonies, art and cooking classes, poetry sessions, counseling circles in the shelter's lush garden.

Located in one of the poorest large cities in the United States, Lotus House is a safe haven and resource center with a unique program to help homeless women break cycles of poverty, addiction, abuse and mental illness.

"Our mission is to educate, empower and uplift women and children in need," Collins-Margulies said.

In recognition of her work in the community, she was recently named an "Outstanding Woman" by the South Florida Region of the American Committee for the Weizmann Institute of Science.

Collins-Margulies left a successful career as a real estate developer to establish her non-profit organization, the Sundari Foundation, in 2004, the year she settled in Miami.

The foundation's first project, the Lotus House, opened in 2006.

Miami has several organizations that care for the homeless, Collins-Margulies said, but there was not a place to specifically help women who are often easy targets on the streets.

“Women who are homeless survive by being invisible, they are more vulnerable physically,” she said. “There really wasn’t a shelter that addressed gender-specific needs of women and resources.”

In 2004, she also met her husband, local real-estate developer and renowned art collector Martin Z. Margulies, who built the Overtown Youth Center. The two quickly discovered they were kindred spirits.

In fact, it was her husband who sold a sculpture from his magnificent collection in order to fund the construction of the maternity ward.

Together they host art fundraisers, often at his Warehouse gallery in Wynwood, to raise money for the Lotus House, which has an operating budget of nearly \$1 million.

Last year, the shelter opened the Lotus House Thrift Store at 203 NW 36th St., also an initiative to raise money.

Collins-Margulies runs the shelter with the help of nine full-time staffers, including three former homeless women who passed through the program and now serve as coordinators. Three years ago, Ray Johnson, the shelter’s health/wellness coordinator, was homeless and battling a drug addiction. She went to live at the Lotus House in 2007.

“I can see a little of me in each one of them,” Johnson said. “That’s what keeps me going.”

Lotus House can host up to 50 women and 20 infants at a time. The facility includes a residential building for single women and a maternity ward designed for expecting mothers and those with infants less than a year old.

The shelter is also equipped with a recreational room, laundry room and dining hall with a professional kitchen. Some women complete an intensive, week-long course to obtain a food-handler certification. At the end of each course, there is a graduation ceremony featuring a meal prepared by the graduates.

With the certification, some have obtained jobs in restaurants, such as Mario the Baker pizzeria.

“Gaining cooking skills is not the only goal. Starting something and having that sense of conclusion, of self esteem, is the most important part,” said Pam Manresa, a professional chef who teaches the course and the shelter’s employment coach.

Collins-Margulies said women stay an average of six months at Lotus House before

they can get on their feet, but they are guaranteed a spot for up to a year.

And even once they leave, they are always welcome to return for help at any time.

Lotus House is a dream come true for Collins-Margulies, a quiet longing she had been carrying around since age 13, along with a memory of a woman bundled in old clothes on a New York City street.

“She has been in my heart ever since,” she said. “I remember thinking, ‘how can anyone be happy when there are people who look like this.’”

Lotus House, 217 NW 15th St., Miami, FL 33136

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