



making a difference

By Cierra Nervo, Student Writer



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SOLUTIONS

Meet **SHARMILA GUNASEKARA**, past Volunteer of the Year for Domestic Violence Solutions for Santa Barbara County

Hope Ranch resident Sharmila Gunasekara has been living in Santa Barbara for almost thirty years now. She moved to Hope Ranch two years ago with her husband, Asiri, and their daughter, Erandi, to have more room for their horses, Skip and Coyote: "Our previous property didn't have enough space for our two horses so we moved to the current home in Hope Ranch and we love it here." Sharmila worked at Montessori Center School in Goleta as an infant and toddler teacher for about seventeen years and is currently working in their family auto repair businesses; Autohaus Salzburg and The Independent Automotive Group.

Sharmila got involved with Domestic Violence Solutions when her school was instructed to do a community project: "Each class was asked to do three acts of kindness, and I was appointed to be the person in charge of acts for our toddler class. So I started looking for local non-profit organizations which we could help."

After some research, she found Domestic Violence Solutions, located in Santa Barbara County. They told her that their shelters always needed bed



Domestic Violence Solutions Luncheon, from left: Asiri De Silva, Sharmila Gunasekara, Lois Capps, Laura Capps and Bill Burton. Photo by Kiel Rucker Photography.



Sharmila being honored as Domestic Violence Solutions Volunteer of the Year in 2019. Photo by Kiel Rucker Photography.



Domestic Violence Solutions South County staff from left: Lesly Sanchez, South County Client Advocate, Jaritza Rodriguez, South County Client Advocate, Amelia Borrayo, South County Lead Client Advocate, and Gaby Ordonez, Housing First Supervisor



Left: Domestic Violence Solutions Administrative Staff: left to right: Ken Oplinger, Director of Operations, Marilyn Simon-Gersuk, Executive Director, Debby Husch, Director of Administration, Jenni-Elise Ramirez, Development Officer, Julia Black-DeVre, Director of Marketing & Communications, and Norman Colavincenzo, Sr. Director of Finance

sheets, pillows, and towels, so she talked to the class families and received a huge amount of donations. "I was so impressed and inspired by all the great work they are doing in our community. Even after finishing the Montessori kindness project, I decided to stay involved with DVS personally."

Founded in 1977, Domestic Violence Solutions is an organization that helps families and individuals get out of toxic relationships and households. They have confidential shelters to provide security and protection for their clients, with day and night volunteers who are ready to help at any moment. Their donors, such as Sharmila, stand by to offer specific items such as car seats, baby items, etc. They also are equipped with volunteers who offer advocate assistance, administrative support, youth education, and help organize fundraisers and special events.

After learning about the stories of victims and survivors, which most of the time had young children involved, Sharmila was determined to help out wherever she could. In 2019, Sharmila was awarded as their Supporter Of The Year, feeling "very honored and humbled to be awarded by this remarkable organization."

During 2021, DVS answered thousands of crisis calls, provided thousands of safe nights at shelters and counseling sessions, aided individuals to locate permanent housing, and participated in over a hundred educational events throughout the community. Domestic Violence Solutions strives to provide the best level of service to its community and depends on volunteers to help achieve this goal. Volunteers are crucial because they can help give individuals the strength they need to leave their toxic environment and start a safe new life.

Sharmila, a volunteer herself, agrees that volunteering contributes directly to DVS's growth and success. **"To anyone who's interested in getting involved with Domestic Violence Solutions, I encourage them. I'd say talk to the wonderful staff at DVS, and they will show you how you can help."**

It's such a rewarding feeling that you are involved with a remarkable asset to Santa Barbara County."

Domestic Violence Solutions for Santa Barbara County
Admin Office: 411 E. Canon Perdido St., #12,
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
24/7 Hotline: 805-964-5245
info@dvsolutions.org

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