

A Group Called WANDA

Single mothers in San Mateo band together to break the cycle of poverty.

It's not easy being a single mom. Roughly one in three live in poverty and their families are usually stuck there, unable to escape the cycle of paycheck-to-paycheck living they know all too well. But one group of compassionate San Mateo women has found a way to give local moms a leg up and an opportunity to build promising futures for their families, a nickel and a dime at a time.

Founded last August, the Women's Achievement Network and Development Alliance (WANDA) was created with the idea that, given the opportunity and education to take control of their often difficult financial situations, single mothers can raise families that thrive. "The moms we work with are hard working and strongly motivated to achieve success, both as mothers and in their careers, so we felt a desire to do something for them," says Susan Kokores, one of the organization's key local founders who is particularly excited about WANDA's inaugural group of women. "Our purpose is to provide the information, support, and resources they need to achieve success."

Participants in WANDA's three-year-long program, which mirrors similar efforts made by their umbrella organization Lenders for Community Development, attend regular classes that focus on financial management and personal development. They also commit to saving money each month and in turn having their savings matched 2:1 through donations during the three years they participate. They can then withdraw these funds from their account and use them to gain an asset—by purchasing a home for instance. "The goal is to help these women gain self-sufficiency by being able to save money," explains another of the organization's key founders, Luba Kipnis. "What they can do with their savings will help them break that cycle of poverty."

And breaking from that cycle generates other positive side effects for these mothers, whether that means choosing to go back to school, getting out of a bad relationship, or encouraging their children to apply to college. Education on all these topics, from relationships to college applications, is provided through WANDA's quarterly courses and meetings. "There's also a sense of pride for them in seeing their finances not as something a bank or husband takes care of, but as something they can control themselves," explains Gwendy Donaker-Brown, the program manager for Lenders for Community Development and an avid WANDA supporter. "Another innovative element is that we encourage networking between the women in the program. The key is to gain relationships with people who can serve as role models," she adds.

Many of those role models are the 17 founders themselves, some of whom know firsthand how difficult single motherhood can be. "I myself was a single mom," says Kipnis, who lost her husband shortly after moving here from the former Soviet Union. "I'm especially interested in this cause because I know how difficult it is to be a single mom." And those founders who don't know firsthand what it's like certainly sympathize. "There's really little that separates us all," says Kokores. "This is all about women reaching out to one another and drawing strength from each other." Finances aside, it often seems that it's supportive relationships such as these that are the fabric of a truly rich life. www.womensfoundca.org/WANDA ■



WANDA's inaugural group of participants began the program this March.

How You Can Help:

- Help WANDA set up additional seminar classes for single mothers on topics such as resume writing, job advancement, and parenting skills.
- Contact WANDA through their website to inquire about volunteer and donation opportunities.

—LINDSAY SCHAUER