

## Laurel Center head focuses on completing new shelter

By VAL VAN METER

The Winchester Star

**WINCHESTER** — With experience rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Kaye Harris is rolling up her sleeves for another construction project: Completing a new home for The Laurel Center.

Harris, 56, became executive director of the Winchester center — a safe haven for mostly women and children seeking escape from an abusive home situation — on Aug. 3.

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Kaye Harris started as the executive director of The Laurel Center on Aug. 3. She is aiming for January 2016 to begin a capital campaign to raise the needed funds to complete the new shelter on North Cameron Street.

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**Laurel Center**

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Donna Carpenter, who for 30 years headed what was originally known as the Shelter for Abused Women, “stayed on for three weeks for the transition, to teach me as much as possible,” Harris said. Her priority is clear: Getting the Laurel Center out of its cramped quarters and into the new building, which is now only a shell and needs to be finished inside and equipped. Work on the 20,000-square-foot, three-story facility halted in spring 2014 after the project ran out of money. The Laurel Center board was forced to take out a \$720,000 loan from the Bank of Clarke County to complete work on the exterior, which ran about \$2.5 million. At the time, it was estimated that it would take close to \$2 million to finish the interior. Harris is aiming for January 2016 to begin a capital campaign to raise the needed funds.

"We need to get into our new building ( on North Cameron Street) so we can grow our program," Harris said. "We're so much more than a shelter." The center offers counseling for its clients, as well as support through the legal system for those who want a divorce or to prosecute their abusers. There is education for all and many prevention programs. There are also special programs for children to teach them to respect themselves and others. Where the current facility can only squeeze in 14 to 16 women and children, along with staff members, the new building will provide comfortable quarters for 40. Staff will have the entire ground floor for education and assistance efforts, while the shelter — with individual rooms for families and other spaces for dining and group activities — will occupy the second floor.

"Now," Harris added, "we have to turn people away."

In 2010, the center sheltered 180 women and children for the year but turned away 254.

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Statistics show that one woman in four will be physically or sexually assaulted during her lifetime, she said. "There are no socioeconomic boundaries," she added. "It's not just poor people or those with drug and alcohol problems." And, she added, it's not just women. Men and children can be the victims of abuse. And the psychological damage extends to all family members. Harris grew up in Alabama, and as a young woman, experienced the violence of the school integration era.

"I learned so much about how people are treated," she said. "We have a moral obligation to look out for each other." Her years of schooling in Boston played havoc with her southern accent, and her move back to Mobile, Ala., in 2005 didn't help her reclaim much of it. But it brought her back just a month before Hurricane Katrina arrived to destroy the home she was building for herself and her daughter, Joanna. Her experience with the disaster-relief system led her to help a variety of regional nonprofit groups, which had to seek grants to rebuild. "There was so much corruption in local government" in New Orleans, Harris said, that she and others were led to create the "Coalition on Open Government," to try to combat the corruption and get money flowing to the people in need. A decade later, with her daughter in medical school, she felt it was time to find another job she could be passionate about. Her basic principals were simple. Every human being has the right to live with dignity. All human life is sacred and everyone should have the right to work and to live in peace. Domestic violence and sexual assault fly in the face of those beliefs. "If our homes aren't places where we can be safe, there's nowhere to be safe in the world," Harris said. "We want it to stop," she said of domestic violence. To that end, "I'll work until I'm too old to show up."

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