

Westporter thrives on town's creativity, spirit of giving

BY MEG LEARSON GROSSO

Next year's president of Entrepreneurial Women's Network, Jessica Bram, moved to Westport in 1998 as a single mother with three sons, no job, and no friends.

She chose Westport because she loved the fact that it was sophisticated without being snobbish. She loved the fact that it had a homeless shelter, had an Interfaith Housing Association, and lots of creative people. She liked that it actually had a commercial base, too.

"I plunged into the community," she said, and she seems to have done that. She is not only a member of the Rotary, where she is their communications director, but also of the Chamber of Commerce. She writes the newsletter for Temple Israel, and she teaches memoir writing to seniors at the Lifetime Learning Institute at Norwalk Community College.

She finds it extremely rewarding to help these people who seem to have "an urgent need to document their lives. It's important for people in their 70s and 80s to get their stories down," she realizes. As a result of that course, she now also teaches creative non-fiction in NCC's Workforce Education Studies program.

She's an essayist herself, having written on the pitfalls of

keeping your maiden name through marriage and childbirth, as well as a thoughtful piece on what it's like to hire a blonde goddess to be your children's au pair.

She's a "rabid Democrat," so she worked on Bill Scheffler's campaign for state representative, and has also worked for Diane Farrell's campaign for first selectwoman. She's on the Democratic Town Committee, and she went to the Democratic National Convention last month at the invitation of RTM moderator and WestportNow Web site editor Gordon Joseloff.

Bram ended up writing a piece on the overwhelming and impressive security at the convention. It was subsequently picked up by WSHU and then by "All Things Considered" for National Public Radio.

This is probably not where Bram expected to be when she got her master's degree in city planning from Cornell. Indeed, she did work as an Urban Fellow for the City of New York for a while. Then, somehow, she segued into a job as a lending officer for Bankers Trust. Her clients were rust belt companies, such as Bethlehem Steel. She quit when her first son was born in 1985, heeding the advice of a woman high up in the banking business who said, "You can always get back on the fast-track. You can never get back the years

MINUTEMAN PROFILE: JESSICA BRAM

with your children."

She notes that many in Entrepreneurial Women's Network, or EWN as it's called, have become entrepreneurs for this reason. "They want to find a balance between work and family," she points out, noting that having their own businesses they can control their own lives in a way they couldn't if they were going the corporate route.

"EWN is a wonderful group. It's not competitive — something that I don't remember from my corporate days," she notes, adding that successful women in that world would often shut the door behind them.

She touts the opportunity for entrepreneurs to get together and have a support network that is missing when one doesn't have a water cooler. She points out that the once-a-month lunches, or morning round tables, or professional development workshops provide that chance.

Bram started her present



Photo by Meg Learson Grosso

business life by working for the Fairfield County Business Journal as an editor of its special sections. Her strong business background helped her out. Then, John Vaccaro of Westport Resources, a financial group, asked if she would do some promotional writing for his firm. She began Jessica Bram Communications as a result. She has since gotten work from a large P.R. firm when the owner has had jobs that were too small for his company.

As for that balance of work and family, she says, "I adore my kids." She notes that David, Robert and Alex Nitkin, 19, 16, and 11, are "funny, interesting and very supportive of me as a single mother."

"They've really helped. They shoulder responsibilities," she said.

Having grown up in New York City herself, she says that she has found her home in Westport, in a way she never did in northern Westchester. Here, she has walking buddies, writing buddies and she says it's a good place to be a single woman. She loves going to the fireworks at the beach, or to the Levitt, or the Playhouse and knowing lots of people.

As to how she got to this place in her life, she says, "You don't get to be part of a community by going to cocktail parties, but by rolling up your sleeves and working alongside people on causes you care about."