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“ We have touched the lives of over 800 women.

Sue Wilson, Garden of Empowerment

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Women Who Mean Business honor their own

WILSON TURNED TRAGEDY INTO SUCCESS

By BOB PEPALIS
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CUMMING – Sue Wilson turned a series of personal tragedies eight years ago into a triumph of entrepreneurial spirit, so it should have been no surprise when the Women Who Mean Business initiative picked her for its first quarterly award. But

Her extraordinary entrepreneurial spirit is empowering hundreds of women every single day not to just survive, but to thrive.

KAREN HANDEL
Georgia Secretary of State

the founder of the nonprofit Garden of Empowerment was so surprised she was shaking like a leaf as Secretary of State Karen Handel presented her the award.

Introducing her as the first award winner, Handel said Wilson “channeled her personal tragedies into an extraordinary program [that] helps women grow, move in to a new phase in their life. Her extraordinary entrepreneurial spirit is empowering hundreds of women every single day not to just survive, but to thrive.”

Eight years ago, Wilson suffered injuries in an auto accident that were so serious even her doctors were surprised that she survived.

Shortly after that, her dad and a woman she loved also died. Then a beloved pet died as well.

To make matters worse, one day her husband walked out on her, taking everything with him. A day later a Sheriff’s deputy served her with divorce papers. She had

no job, and was about to become homeless.

The emotional and physical traumas were severe.

“I thought, ‘What am I going to do?’” Wilson said.

What she did was call some women she knew to get together to talk about shared experiences such as becoming widowed or divorced. That was the beginnings of what became Garden of Empowerment.

The nonprofit organization is not a support group, she said. It is an organization for personal growth.

“We have touched the lives of over 800 women,” Wilson said.

None of them are charged, because many don’t have any money and she doesn’t want to exclude anyone. Corporate donations and other aid keeps the group running.

Wilson said when she was younger she used to tell people she understood when they told her about their problems. Now that she’s had so many of her own, Wilson said she knows she didn’t know anything back then. But now she can really say she understands.

Key to relating to these other women is being open and honest about those tragedies in her life.

So many women are embarrassed about getting into



BOB PEPALIS/www.northfulton.com

Sue Wilson, left, of Garden of Empowerment was presented the award by Georgia Secretary of State **Karen Handel**.

bad relationships. They are ashamed, but it’s nothing to be ashamed about, Wilson said.

“Things happen,” she said.

Garden of Empowerment has also had psychologists come in to tell the women how to stay sane in what appears to be an increasing crazy world and provided art and music therapy, as well as other types of programs for personal growth.

Pathfinder of the Month

July

*"Do not go where the path
may lead, go instead where
there is no path and leave a trail."*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

This cat's got nine lives and lands on her feet no matter how far she falls. Rising from what many would consider disastrous life events, Cumming resident Sue Wilson quickly learned to lick her wounds and empower herself by beginning life anew, and Garden of Empowerment was born.

Sue Wilson is no ordinary leader. A car wreck nearly ended her existence. Soon thereafter, she lost her father, her mother-figure and her pet in back-to-back events, which crushed her. Turning to her husband in her darkest hour, Sue was astonished to find herself utterly alone. He had vanished, pulling the rug out from beneath her and leaving her destitute and stunned.

And so it is with empathetic ears that Sue greets other women who have lost their companion through separation, divorce or death. It is through experience that she weaves them an intricate network of other women who have rebuilt their crumpled lives when their own paths took an abrupt or devastating turn. And it is through landing on her feet, time and again, that she helps women pull themselves up by their boot straps and empowers them to be self-confident, self-sufficient and self-loving individuals.

Through Garden of Empowerment, Sue fosters a sea of vibrant women who didn't realize they were perennials, bringing out in them the will to come back beautiful and strong all over again. Not finding a pre-set network with the chops to help her navigate her own devastating ordeal, Sue bound together the scant resources she did find, added several of her own, and created Garden of Empowerment for women to recuperate from their losses and move forward in a positive direction.

As a program director for White Oaks at Lanier Assisted Living Facility, Sue born to lead people to hope and to assist in their recoveries. Her extensive experience in volunteerism began at age 15 as a candy striper and continued through motherhood to present day. She's served as the president of her son's Parent/Teacher Association, a middle school mentor, scout and den leader, adult literacy volunteer, facilitator for S.T.E.P (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting Programs) and developer of a "Good Touch, Bad Touch" program. Sue also serves on Habitat for Humanity's Selection Committee and the Cumming/Forsyth Chamber of Commerce's Steering Committee, to name just a few of the many organizations Sue has impacted.

Sue Wilson

To know Sue is to know an incredibly outgoing, vivacious and compassionate woman. To nurture her own needs, Sue enjoys cruises, live theater, reading, social exchanges and relishing her favorite time of all, "Grandma." She leaves her special imprint on everything she does, including handwritten messages on each monthly newsletter she sends to the women of Garden of Empowerment, noting it is often times the only positive thing these women receive in a mailbox otherwise stuffed with bills and legal documents.

Sue and her volunteers offer courses ranging from goal setting, financial planning, emotional sustenance, self-defense, esteem building and boot camps through a variety of platforms.

Since Garden of Empowerment is a 501(c)(3) organization, it is powered solely by Sue Wilson, her brigade of volunteers and community support. There are no fees for women to utilize Garden of Empowerment's network of programming, therefore, donations and community involvement are paramount to its survival. Sue always welcomes event sponsors, postage stamps for mailings, guest speakers or services, volunteer programmers or marketing assistance, and good ol' fashioned greenbacks to keep our services in place for women to begin again.

Many of the organization's initial members now serve as leaders as a tribute to the help Sue provided them in their own times of need. They wholeheartedly stress the importance of putting an established system like Garden of Empowerment in place to help women who've experienced their own new beginnings.

Sue points out that any woman who is reluctant to seek help may call her to speak confidentially and to learn more about Garden of Empowerment's structure. All ages and stages of healing are welcome. For more information about Garden of Empowerment, contact Sue Wilson, or to donate money, supplies or services, please contact Sue@GardenofEmpowerment.org or call (770) 815-2000.

Garden of Empowerment meets the first Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. to listen to a guest speaker and the third Saturday of each month at 10:30 a.m. for Weekend Tea and Talk. Please call for this month's location. www.gardenofempowerment.org.



Left to right: Nancy Lee and Sue Wilson.