

## Women's online magazine grows by keeping it real

By [Paul Swider](#), Times Staff Writer

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ST. PETERSBURG — Jean Harper never intended to be an online publisher, but she can't help herself.

After a career in sales at Sony and Toshiba, the 55-year-old thought about starting a consulting and training business. But as she networked, she kept finding women with intriguing backgrounds. So she started writing their stories and put them on her Web site, [womentcb.com](#).

"After that first story, I started getting all these e-mails," Harper said. "One story leads to another."

As the site caught on, Harper's little publication was starting to draw lots of readers, mostly women. Soon she added other content areas, including finance, automotive and mental health. But everyone kept talking about the stories.

"It's not prim or proper or packaged," said Chantelle Ashby, who was the subject of Harper's first "Moxy Woman" profile. "It's real. You can feel the connection."

It's not pretty, though. Ashby's story is of a young woman who grew up in an abusive household in a community filled with drugs and violence. She reflected it and, at age 11, was thrown out after threatening her own family. She bounced around from Toronto to Vancouver to Nashville. Today the 24-year-old lives in Palm Harbor. Along the way, she found a way to overcome her pain and build it into a career as a singer.

Ashby's story was an apt beginning, Harper said, because the online magazine *Women Taking Care of Business* has now flourished into a site of information and relationships all revolving around women inspiring others to succeed. Other stories are like Ashby's, which is part of the reason Harper is sponsoring a singing contest to benefit CASA and survivors of domestic abuse.

"Once you bare your soul, other people come forward," said Nancy Rispoli, another singer whose story of abuse is also on the site. "But the site is not just about troubled people. It's about sharing with other women who are empowered."

Harper said that since September, she has garnered 4,500 subscribers to the Web site's newsletter. She now has a staff of five, as well as outside contributors for a publication that reaches women in 37 countries and dozens of U.S. states, but mostly Floridians.

Though there are much larger players in the same space, she said she's pulling in advertising revenue and growing a customer base. Readers and contributors say it's because of authenticity.

"I know about iVillage and Oxygen, but I never visit those sites," said Kristin Guenthardt, a Raymond James financial adviser and sponsor of Harper's singing contest, Women Taking Care of Music. "I like to do things in our community. These people on this site are people I will actually meet."

Guenthardt said she, like Harper, has no personal experience with domestic abuse but appreciates the courage of the women willing to share their stories to help others. She also appreciates the other information on the site and its casual, even rambling style.

"It sounds like a friend talking to me," said Guenthardt, who is also a contributing writer.

"It feels like it's coming from a real person. It's a little quirky, perhaps messy, but that's what it's like to be a woman."

Jane Bajor is another contributor to the site and she stresses that it contains much more than stories of pain. She said the site's variety caters to a broad range of interests.

"It's about positive things, about women taking care of all kinds of business in life," said Bajor, who writes a mental health column. "Learning that it's about women by women for women just makes it more comforting."

The site includes stories about travel and pets and parenting. There are features about famous women, like Gloria Steinem, and an upcoming story about Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio. Harper is sponsoring a Moxy Mom contest and later plans an event called Women Taking Care of the World.

"Jean's a good promoter," said Susan Collins, who writes *Suzen* the Car Guru and is a car-buying consultant. "It's remarkable how it's grown in such a short period of time. But the stories are probably the heart and soul of it."

Harper said the whole venture has taken on a life of its own, but the music show is especially carrying her away. Over the past two months, several rounds of competition have whittled the field of 100 entrants to five finalists, who will compete Saturday at the Palladium in St. Petersburg. Rispoli and Ashby were among the judges and they will round out the show along with performances by Lorna Bracewell, Jennifer Diedrich, Terez Hartmann and others, even some men. Many of the songs are original and inspired by the women's difficult circumstances.

"It's a way of saying, 'I am not a victim,' " said Linda Osmondson, executive director of CASA. "I talk about it. I sing about it. I want the world to know that nothing can hold me back."

For Harper, her accidental Web business has become a labor of love.

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