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Suzanne Douglas Harris is a survivor. Fighting back from dire financial and emotional effects after her divorce, Ms. Harris, like so many in today's world, was forced to rebuild her life --re-entering the work force full time, raising two children and buying a home--all on her own. It was this experience that prompted her to focus her energies on aiding other people suffering through difficult times. And, her effort has manifested itself in her new role as a 'life coach'.

"I have been through a lot of what people struggle with," said Ms. Harris, a Weston resident who officially opened her own personal and professional performance coaching practice in Norwalk earlier this month. "Because of both my personal and professional experiences over the years, I have the ability to empathize with people who are out of their comfort zone. I lend an empathetic, experienced and trained ear."

Ms. Harris - who began working as a 'life coach' nearly a year ago - said her personal experiences help her work with clients on clarifying their present situation, values and goals, and identifying their issues or challenges. Through confidential in-person meetings, Ms. Harris said she is able to provide the tools, resources, motivation and support which enable her clients to develop and implement a practical, action-oriented plan to achieve personal and professional objectives related to career, relationships, finances and health or such life skills as communications, goal setting and time management.

"Clients turn to me for a variety reasons," said Ms. Harris. "Some look for an external partner who has the expertise, experience and confidence to provide practical, action-oriented coaching to inspire them to resolve their short- or long-term issues. Others are completely overwhelmed by their current situation, resulting in an inability to see things clearly and take action to change or improve their state. "Many times, clients are looking for someone to listen and take the time to really understand them as an individual. They want to avoid 'going it alone' and need a trusted advisor who takes a genuine interest in supporting them in their efforts to attain their goals," added Ms. Harris.

According to Ms. Harris, several of her clients are just looking for an objective, unbiased and qualified professional to serve as a sounding board with whom they can share ideas confidentially. "The common thread among the people coming to me is they all have a sense of frustration with some aspect of their personal and/or working lives," said Ms. Harris. "They are committed to improving their situation, yet recognize a need for outside support. The advice, mentoring, and advocacy they derive from this coaching provides them with the impetus to take action to reach their goals."

A naturalized American citizen who immigrated with her parents to the United States when she was in sixth grade, Ms. Harris spent more than two decades in marketing, in both large and small companies. Her prior professional background includes management stints at Good Neighbor Direct and Donnelley Marketing, numerous consulting assignments, and an assistant professorship at California State University, Fullerton. It was while working with Harris Heery & Associates in Norwalk that her consulting practice evolved beyond executive search to a focus on energizing and motivating people in the workforce.

"I think I have a good blend of having been there for many situations people bring to me," said Ms. Harris, who has a diverse clientele - both male and female, with ages ranging from the early to mid-20s to late 60s. "Having that real-life experience allows me to sit together with a person and have a better feel for their situation. Having lived through many of the situations I support my clients with, helps me tremendously personally," added Ms. Harris. "I have marched through a lot of things in my life, and nothing gives me a greater sense of accomplishment than helping others overcome their struggles."

Ms. Harris holds a MBA with honors from Temple University. She is Myers-Briggs qualified, a certified transition coach, and a member of the Association of Career Professionals International and the Adult Career Development Network.

As a result of her personal and professional experience, she offers empathy and firsthand advice to clients challenged by career morphing, abrupt transitions, cultural dislocation, financial downfall and the rebuilding process, single parenting, parenting teens, coping with an alcoholic spouse/ partner or divorce, or being thrust into unfamiliar territories such as new financial responsibilities or middle-aged dating.

The value that clients can expect to derive from her coaching is a well-defined self-identity, practical advice, a customized action plan, sustained advocacy and the motivation to achieve steady progress toward self-actualization, an increase in self-reliance, and an overall good feeling from being in control.

"When you are in deep despair, you don't realize how many things will open up that you don't even know about yet," said Ms. Harris. "Opportunities present themselves, and I want to help show them the opportunities that are available."

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