

HEALTH & FITNESS

Compeer Friendships Offer Hope & Healing

By Betsy Dru Tecco

Life is all about relationships," says Rob Chisholm. "If we don't have them, life is empty." That's a very simplistic explanation for why Chisholm founded Compeer Chester County 10 years ago in April. The unique, nonprofit organization is a one-to-one friendship program that matches volunteers with people in recovery from various psychiatric disorders. A project of the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania (MHASP) and supported by the Chester County Mental Health and Mental Retardation (MH/MR) Administration, this Compeer affiliate is part of an international movement that started in Rochester, NY, in 1973. The word 'compeer' means 'companion or peer.'

"For people recovering from a mental illness, connectedness with another person is such a key ingredient in getting their life back and reclaiming their dreams," reasons Chisholm. "Going back to school, getting a job, owning a home, all the things people want. Having one person in your corner that holds your hope is really a powerful thing."

Yet, many people with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression, or other psychiatric diagnoses are socially isolated. The only connections they have are with family members, mental health professionals, and others in the mental health system. The loneliness they feel impairs their recovery. Compeer serves as a bridge to help them integrate within the community, which fosters growth and healing.

MHASP's CEO Bill Dinwiddie says, "Compeer helps people in recovery from mental illness by demonstrating hope and a sense for a future, hope that is part of the volunteer/friend relationship that occurs 'outside' of a professional relationship."

The goal is empowerment and using your personal strength to be all you were meant to be, adds Chisholm.

"The volunteers partner on that journey, walking side by side for the person in mental health recovery."

Not surprisingly, the need for adult volunteers is ongoing and open to anyone who is properly motivated and willing to commit to the program. Volunteers, as well as the people in recovery, need to satisfy four expectations: have weekly contact by phone or email; spend four hours a month together sharing an activity of mutual interest; strive to build the relationship for at least a year; and update the Compeer staff on the friendship's progress on a monthly basis. Training is provided to the volunteers.

Mental health professionals from across all of Chester County typically refer their patients for the program. Those who are selected to participate must be actively engaged in treatment for a serious psychiatric disorder and be willing and able to reciprocate a friendship. These same people also make excellent volunteers, Chisholm acknowledges, because they have shared a common experience and can offer empathy.

Other volunteers make phone calls or write emails and letters to lend support to people who are waiting for a one-to-one match to be found. Group connections are also made, such as churches who befriend people living in transitional residences and volunteers who offer skills such as tutoring. "It's not our primary service, but it's something more we do," says Chisholm, who likes to think of the word 'compeer' as a verb when he remarks: "Compeering is a most wonderful kind of volunteering."

He should know. Since 1991, Chisholm has been a Compeer friend to John, a former patient at Norristown State Hospital where Chisholm worked for 17 years as the Volunteer Resources coordinator. "It's a most special and meaningful relationship," says Chisholm, who takes John to church and to Compeer social functions.

Caroline Smith, deputy administrator for mental health, Chester County Department of MH/MR, in West Chester, adds: "One only has to attend the annual Compeer lunch and listen to people's testimonies of their experience with Compeer to realize how much the service is valued by the people who use it."

Results from a 2008 survey showed that Compeer friendships made people in recovery feel more cared about, less lonely, and more self-confident as well as more trusting of others and better understood. Volunteers are also rewarded. Says one volunteer: "Reaching out to help another has been an immeasurable blessing to me."

Currently, there are 67 pairs of matched Compeer friends and 18 men and women waiting for friends in Chester County. If you are interested in volunteering or making a donation, call 610.436.4445 or visit www.CompeerChesco.org. As it happens, May is National Mental Health month and this year's theme is connections and friendships. What could be more appropriate? ♦