

Student friends help cure mental patients' isolation

By DOUG FICK
Of the Emerald

At a table outside the University bookstore Thursday, Ellen Bezona will be looking for friends — but not for herself.

Bezona is coordinator of the Community Friends Program of the Mental Health Association in Lane County, and she'll be seeking University students willing to befriend mental health patients.

"We are not looking for therapists — just good friends," Bezona says.

The program helps ease patients back into the community, both from outpatient care centers and from the social isolation that many patients experience.

All of the patients, or clients, involved in the program are undergoing psychiatric therapy.

A volunteer who provides support and companionship is the program's chief tool. All volunteers sign a contract to spend a minimum of eight hours a month for three months with their friend. New volunteers must attend a 20-hour weekend training clinic to become familiar with the county's mental health programs and to gain skills in communication and assertiveness.

Volunteers are matched with clients of the same sex according to age and common personal interests. Although the volunteers are required to spend at least three months with the friend they are matched with, they can be reassigned if the relationship does not work, Bezona stresses.

"It is a two-way street — you both get a lot out of it," says Karla Hackenstaff, an area resident who volunteered for the program last year.



Photo by Doug Fick
Ellen Bezona

Hackenstaff admits her first meeting with her "friend" was awkward, since the two were, in effect, strangers.

"She (the client) was withdrawn, so I had to put out extra energy, but now she is an initiator," Hackenstaff says. She continues to see her friend, but her official involvement with the program ended last year.

Although the two have done a number of things together, Hackenstaff says the most valuable time with her friend has been spent just talking.

"We have no problem getting clients — it's volunteers we need," says Tony Mounts, chair of the Community Friends Advisory Committee. The program is especially in need of male volunteers, he says.

According to Mounts, volunteers must be at least 18 years old to participate in the program. But younger volunteers can be accepted if they have something special to offer the program, Bezona says.

Bezona will be answering questions — and seeking friends — Thursday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.



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