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Compeer volunteer helps friend in need

Group arranges companions for often-isolated mentally ill people

Kevin Oklobzija
Staff writer

While Kathleen Pringle was growing up in Brighton, her parents instilled in her the belief that the secret to living is giving.

"I was raised by very generous parents who always taught all of us the value of giving back," she said.

Which is why for nearly five years Pringle has been a volunteer with Compeer Rochester, a nonprofit organization that helps children and adults overcome the devastating effects of mental illness.

Compeer matches volunteers with residents of our community whose recovery will be enhanced by friendships and social interaction.

"I have a personal belief that everyone contributes to society and everyone should live a life of value, self-respect, compassion and dignity," Pringle said. "And further, everyone has untapped potential. And everyone includes everyone."

Her Compeer friend, Alma, is the perfect example. Alma lives in a group home in East Rochester. Before Pringle began her one-on-one mentoring, Alma had few visitors and rarely left the premises.

In the four years of bonding with Pringle, Alma has gone to sporting events to watch Pringle's sons compete, and now she runs errands for other group-home residents.

Pringle, 43, visits her at least weekly, and they also chat on the phone.

"Alma calls me, faithfully, every Tuesday at 1:30," Pringle said. "No matter what I'm doing, if I have a client call, I tell them at 1:30 I need to excuse myself for five minutes."

Pringle is president of Predictive Insights Inc., a career strategy and executive coaching firm in Pittsford, and she says her business clients are important. But nothing is more important than a phone call from Alma.

"Part of it is knowing she can talk to me at any time," Pringle said.

When Pringle began the visits with Alma in March 2002, she was the only one doing the talking.

"I went to see Alma every week for 10 minutes, every week for four months," Pringle said. "I'd just chat and finally after four months she put her hand on mine and said, 'I like you.'"

"She needed to know that I was committed to being there."

There are hundreds of Almas in Rochester and the surrounding communities. Nearly 800 people are served by about 750 volunteers, but there still are 300 to 350 children and adults on the waiting list in need of a mentor.

Besides developing her friendship with Alma, Pringle now chairs Compeer's board of directors. She believes wholeheartedly in the program, which is recognized by the American Psychological Association as a best-practices model.

"One of the gifts Compeer gave me was the opportunity to carry on the legacy of showing my children that the secret to living is giving," Pringle said. "My sons (Mark, 16, and Michael, 10) have been a very important part of her recovery, as she has in their growth as nice, young men.

"If you really want to help people live happier, more productive lives, then Compeer is a wonderful way to contribute to our community."

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Compeer Rochester

Total annual revenue: \$1.1 million.

Number of volunteers: About 750.

Year founded: 1976.

Address: Monroe Square, 259 Monroe Ave., Rochester 14607.

Web site: www.rochester.compeer.org.

Phone: (585) 546-8280.

Greatest need: Volunteers for the youth program, primarily African-American males, for pre-teens and teens.

If you want to volunteer: The Web site has forms for volunteers. A commitment of four hours per month for one year is required. Training is provided for all people who pass the screening process.

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