

Make the holidays and beyond special with a Compeer friend

by TIMOTHY CHIPP
Reporter

It's December. That means it's the end of the year. The holidays are approaching, and everyone is being constantly bombarded by pleas to help make a difference during the season of giving.

But Compeer of Greater Buffalo, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to making a difference in the lives of children and adults afflicted with a variety of mental health conditions, is trying to spread a different message this month: Give all year long, not just in December.

"In my opinion, it's not just about giving back this one time of year," Kenmore native Jessica Hall, an admissions adviser for the University at Buffalo, said. "It's all year. It's important that every day of the year (we give back), not just in the holiday season."

Compeer works with volunteers to provide friendships to those individuals enrolled in the program. The feeling is that

the individuals already have enough professional opinions in their lives, so Compeer only looks to provide friends.

Hall is a relative newcomer to Compeer volunteering, having just started this past July with an 11-year-old boy named Adam.

Unlike similar programs, such as Big Brother/Big Sister, which focus on children in at-risk situations, Compeer offers help for children, adults and seniors suffering from the effects of depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disease and many other diseases affecting the brain.

Being a friend with a Compeer buddy is easy, because they don't demand a lot, even as they get older, said Ryan Daley, director of adult services for the local Compeer office. In fact, the only thing they



Ryan Daley, director of adult services for Compeer of Greater Buffalo, poses with Compeer volunteer Jessica Hall. Volunteers are paired with individuals of all ages who are suffering from mental illness.



Volunteer Jessica Hall, an admissions counselor for the University at Buffalo, has been a member of the team at Compeer since being paired with 11-year-old Adam this past July. Photos by Timothy Chipp

demand, and Compeer itself demands, is a total of four hours per month and a one-year commitment from the volunteers.

For Hall, that meant doing some creative crafts and even baking. For Halloween, she made some cookies with Adam. The experience was so much fun for him, she said, she's going to do it again for Christmas.

"We really had fun with (the Halloween cookies) together," she said. "He pretty much said that was one of the more fun days hanging out together, so that's something we definitely plan on doing."

To help her meet her quota of four hours per month, coordinators such as Daley say that it's easiest to meet for one hour each week. Hall said it's all about including the Compeer friend in the decisions.

"I just include him," she said. "Every week when we meet ... we choose things we are both interested in doing."

Other ideas they've followed through on, she said, have been going to haunted houses in October and going to art museums. She said that he's even helping her with one of her dogs, who is going through agility training.

Adam, she said, has just recently met her family, including her parents and her fiancé. And she said his favorite thing to do is talk.

"He likes to talk," she said. "So it's a way for him to ... constantly talk. It's a really great way to get a lot of things out in the open."

However, for most volunteers, the most important part of the process is that it not only gives the Compeer member a person to talk to, but it also gives the volunteer

another person to enjoy spending time with. While Hall has other people in her life, other people have volunteered in order to find someone to share time with.

Matching up volunteers and members of the organization, no matter what age range, involves an extensive personality questionnaire allowing the match to be as compatible as possible.

"We have so much in common," Hall said. "Even though he's 11 and I'm 30."

According to Daley, volunteering now is more important than ever. In this current economic climate the country faces, one of five individuals is facing life with a mental illness, while one in four families does the same, he said.

So during the holiday season and beyond, help make the world a friendlier place, he said. To volunteer, call Compeer of Greater Buffalo at 833-3331 or go on-line to www.compeerbuffalo.org.

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