

Lifestyles

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Compeer... A family experience

by TIMOTHY CHIPP
Reporter

One click on an online ad can have a profound effect on one's life. Just ask Katie Szczesny of West Seneca and her family.

The Buffalo State College student came across an advertisement for a volunteer agency called Compeer while surfing the social networking Web site Facebook. She signed up, and the experience turned out to be so good that both her older sister, Kelly, and her mother, Annie, decided to join the program.

Compeer is an international, not-for-profit agency that functions much like Big Brother/Big Sister. It pairs volunteers with children, adults and seniors who have either been diagnosed with a mental health problem or are designated as at-risk.

"Most of our youth are either at-risk or have been diagnosed with a mental health issue, and all of the adults in our program, anyone 18 years old and older, has been diagnosed with a mental health issue," said Ryan Daley, director of adult services for Compeer of Greater Buffalo. "Our mission is to use the power of volunteers to help improve the lives of children, adults and seniors who are striving for good mental health."

Compeer volunteers, Daley said, are asked to spend one-on-one time with their friends for a minimum of four hours per month. That requirement is something easily met within one day, according to Katie Szczesny, because activities such as watching movies and preparing meals often take up multiple hours at a time.

"It's really nothing," she said. "Because you can't really do anything in an hour. You get them to your house, and then you gotta take them back."

Instead, Daley said, it's about

becoming friends with the individual, not sticking to a rigorous timeline, which is something doctors and health care professionals already provide.

"Whether it's painting or watching a movie at your house together, making milkshakes or reading a similar book ... the biggest thing that they really need is a friend," Daley said. "They already have a ton of professionals in their lives. We provide friendships."

Daley said the goal of Compeer is to "promote recovery through the healing power of friendship."

For Katie Szczesny, getting started with her friend, Jenna, was a little tough. Katie's a college student, holding down a job and going to school at the same time. Jenna, who recently turned 16, is dealing with instability.

"Before I got into it, I was kinda scared because they kinda gave me a heads-up, like, 'Jenna, she's tough. You're gonna have to work with her,'" she said. "And I was like, 'am I gonna be able to handle this? I'm not a professional or anything.' But we spent time together, and she's just like a typical teenage girl."

After getting started, ideas began to take shape, and the two realized they had many things in common. Among the things they do together now are arts and crafts, listening to music, going to a park, in-line skating and attending concerts. Jenna's grandmother even purchased tickets for the two to see the musical "Wicked" when it was playing at Shea's Performing Arts Center.

For Kelly Szczesny and her friend, 5-year-old William, the buzz word has become convenience. William lives down the street from her, making time spent together easy to arrange.

That convenience is a big factor that Compeer of Greater Buf-



Ryan Daley, director of adult services for Compeer of Greater Buffalo, explains the benefits of participating to Kelly, Katie and Annie Szczesny, volunteers in the organization. The West Seneca

family is among the many in the area that have volunteered their time to become friends with mentally troubled individuals or at-risk youth.

Photo by Timothy Chipp

falo considers for volunteers, Daley said.

"We can always do our best to find someone in your area," Daley said. "Some people are willing to travel all over Erie County ... but we always try to match the individuals up with people in their area."

Working with a younger child, Kelly said, it's easy to get caught in the trap of treating William like a pupil and not a peer. But she said it isn't about educating him or telling him how he should act. It's about just being a constant presence in his life.

"(I) know what (his) mental health background is, but we're not so much ... trying to do anything but be a friend," she said. "A lot of times, I get caught up in trying to educate him, but they just need a friend."

For fun, William likes to get a little dirty, she said, often going to creeks and streams to look for tadpoles and other wildlife.

"He's coming home with all sorts of bugs," she said. "Oh, his poor mom."

She said William also likes to play video games, which she said

she tries to curtail.

Naturally, the choices for activities are much different for Annie Szczesny and her friend, 60-year-old Phyllis, than for Kelly and William. Having just started with her friend a few months ago, Annie said they often just share conversations while trying to build up a mutual comfort level.

"It's starting to really click and get comfortable," she said.

Annie said she started to feel good about the relationship when she was invited to a party being held where Phyllis is living. It was the first time Phyllis did the initiating, she said.

But with Compeer, Daley said, the opportunity to help people of all age groups exists, because of the client base that is served.

"The thing with Compeer is we do serve the entire life span," Daley said. "On average, our relationships at Compeer last about two years. So, say after Kelly spends her time with William, maybe she decides to spend her time with ... someone closer to her age."

That aspect is a major differ-

ence between Compeer and programs such as Big Brother/Big Sister. Being able to continue on after a relationship has hit a plateau and the individuals move on is not offered in the other program.

Annie said taking on a young child would likely be the next step in her journey with the organization.

"It would be nice to do some of those fun things, like go to the zoo," she said.

In addition to spending time with friends in person, opportunities exist for volunteers to participate simply by talking on the telephone. The calling program pairs adults who aren't as mobile as healthy individuals to have a telephone relationship.

Due to safety concerns for all parties involved, all volunteers with Compeer are subject to a background check, Daley said, to ensure that people are who they say they are.

Anyone interested can call 883-3331 or sign up online at www.compeerbuffalo.org. Compeer is located at 135 Delaware Ave, Suite 210, downtown.

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