

A Friendship Minimizes Disabilities

Volunteers Reach Out In New Program

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Nancy Goldberg looked at Roberta Faltus one day during lunch.

"I'm damaged goods," Goldberg said.

Faltus asked what she meant.

"Because I have a mental illness," said Goldberg, who has schizophrenia. People have used the term to describe her, she said.

Faltus told Goldberg that anyone who would say that is the one with damaged goods.

Goldberg's sharing of her feelings with Faltus speaks volumes of Goldberg's progress since the two women started going on outings in February. They participate in a new program called Friend to Friend, which matches volunteers with compatible people with psychiatric disabilities.

Thanks to individual and corporate contributions, the Foundation for Mental Health, a nonprofit organization in the state, has earmarked \$86,000 for Friend to Friend. The We Can Clubhouse, run by Genesis Center, a Manchester mental health group, is the first of three Connecticut sites chosen for the program. The foundation is considering New Haven and Bridgeport for the other two sites, said Diann Wienke, founder and president.

The program evolved from a Yale University study of 260 people with psychiatric disabilities from 1993 to 1998. It found that people with mental illness responded positively when paired with another person.



NANCY GOLDBERG, left, and Roberta Faltus are an example of the friendships forming through a program in Manchester that pairs people with psychiatric disabilities with volunteers. Goldberg, of Manchester, and Faltus, a nurse from Vernon, meet twice a week for social outings as part of the Friend to Friend program offered through Genesis Center. (STEPHEN DUNN)

For some, the results were surprising. In the past, it was thought that people with psychiatric disorders wanted to be alone, said Larry Davidson, who teaches psychology at Yale.

"Social withdrawal is a major component of schizophrenia," he said. "We thought that people stopped wanting social interaction."

But it turned out they simply had no one to socialize with, Davidson said. When Yale asked people with disabilities if they wanted to sign up for the program, 67 percent said yes, he said.

"What people tell us is it's the first caring relationship that they've had since high school," he said.

That is clearly the case with Goldberg, 45, who goes to the Genesis Center clubhouse and lives with her father, Abraham Goldberg, in Manchester. Her mother died of breast cancer in 1982.

Abraham Goldberg said he has seen a change in his daughter, who was more withdrawn before she met Faltus, 46.

"She's more extroverted," he said. "She mixes socially now. She mixes more with other people at the Genesis club. She has learned a little more about handling money."

Goldberg runs up to Faltus and hugs her every time she arrives to pick her up to go out, Faltus said. They get together twice a week - even though the program pays for one weekly outing. Faltus picks up the cost of the second weekly visit.

Faltus, who is matched up with another disabled woman as well, doesn't mind.

"I get joy from her being happy," she said. "It just makes me feel so good, that I can get joy out of making someone else feel good."

On each outing paid for by the program, Faltus gives Goldberg her half of the \$20. She lets Goldberg figure out for herself how much of the money she needs to spend, whether it is for a movie, popcorn and a soda or for lunch. Now that the weather is warmer, more outdoor activities are in the works, such as miniature golf, fishing and swimming.

"I like the program," Goldberg said. "It helps two people learn about each other. I enjoy doing the same things she enjoys, like the popcorn."

Faltus dotes on Goldberg as a mother would her child. She has a son who has some symptoms of schizophrenia, which motivated her to become a volunteer, she said.

"I see the stigma of it, and that's got to change," Faltus said.

Her motherly tendencies were clear at Burger King in Glastonbury one day. Faltus noticed that Goldberg left her soda at the edge of the table.



ROBERTA FALTUS, left, was motivated to become a volunteer in the Friend to Friend program because her son has some symptoms of schizophrenia. "I see the stigma of it, and that's got to change," she says. Here, she and Nancy Goldberg have lunch recently at a Burger King in Glastonbury. (STEPHEN DUNN)
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"Move your soda up so you don't spill it," Faltus said. Faltus moved it toward the center of the table herself. "There you go, baby."

Later, Goldberg abruptly demonstrated how strong her feelings are for Faltus.

Out of the blue, she leaned against the table to get closer to Faltus.

"I like you, Roberta," Goldberg said.

Faltus: "I like you too, baby."

Goldberg: "You're like a mother to me."

Faltus: "I can never take your mother's place ... but I can be there for you."

The Foundation for Mental Health is looking for volunteers and donations for Friend to Friend. The foundation phone number is: 860-674-8920. The address is: The Foundation for Mental Health, P.O. Box 1412, Farmington, CT 06034-1412. The foundation's website is at www.thefoundationformentalhealth.org.

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