

Program reaches out to county's mentally ill

BY ANGELA MOORE
ASSISTANT CITY EDITOR

Mental illness hit Martha Bethea head-on years ago when her daughter was diagnosed with manic depression, an illness of emotional highs and lows.

Though Bethea's daughter's case is considered mild, she said her daughter's experience made her more aware of the isolation mentally ill people face.

"People think of it as a character flaw, not an illness," Bethea said. "It's not a matter of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps."

So when Bethea saw an article about Compeer, a program designed to help the mentally ill by providing friendship and companionship, she was eager to get involved. A year later, she is a friend to a woman who has been schizophrenic for more than 30 years and tells Bethea she is her first friend since she became ill.

Compeer is a 23-year-old national program that came to Orange County last September through the Mental Health Association in Orange County. Since then, director Rosemary Hutchinson has enlisted the help of 17 county residents of all ages in providing companionship to people with mental illnesses ranging from depression to paranoid schizophrenia.

Volunteers are matched with a mentally ill person around their age, Hutchinson said. The volunteers range in age from a UNC freshman to retirees.

Volunteers serve as friends to people with mental illnesses for at least one hour

per week for one year.

Hutchinson said volunteers and their companions "get cups of coffee, take walks, talk, go to art exhibits, pet stores, the cinema or just sit in their houses as they get to know each other."

"Through the simple premise of friendship, people are changing lives," Hutchinson said.

Chapel Hill resident Phyllis Dye learned of Compeer last spring through a brochure.

"I liked what it said about reaching out to people who need friendship," Dye said.

In June, Dye met Dana, 44, a paranoid schizophrenic who is beginning to get out on her own. "It has progressed to a great friendship," Dye said. "I admire her. She makes me appreciate my good health. She has to have drugs just to struggle to live normally."

Dye said she and her friend Dana, schizophrenic since she was 16, often go shopping, on short trips or out for frozen yogurt, and talk on the phone every day.

"At times, she can still get hallucinations, and she hears voices," Dye said. "Now, she'll call me and talk about it."

Hutchinson said that Compeer had been making a big difference in people's lives. However, 16 mentally ill people remain on the waiting list for Compeer volunteers, she said, most of them between 30 and 40 years old. Volunteers of similar ages are needed, Hutchinson said.

Hutchinson said volunteers of any age or background should apply to help.

Doctors debate treatment for failing Mother Teresa

■ The 86-year-old nun's condition became critical Sunday in Calcutta.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CALCUTTA, India—Mother Teresa was in critical condition Sunday. She was weakened by lung and kidney problems that slowed her recovery from surgery to clear blocked coronary arteries.

The 86-year-old nun remains "conscious and cheerful," Calcutta's B.M. Birla Heart Research Center said in a

statement. Doctors reprogrammed a pacemaker implanted in 1989 but her worsening condition postponed planned treatment for her irregular heartbeat.

At her Missionaries of Charity home, the West Bengal state minister led Catholic nuns and Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists in prayers for her recovery.

The 1979 Nobel Peace Prize winner suffered a mild heart attack on Nov. 22 and has been hospitalized ever since. It is her fourth hospitalization this year alone — the second for heart problems. Two others were for injuries from falls.

Doctors performed an angioplasty

Friday to remove blockages from two arteries. The procedure went so well that doctors thought they would be able to begin drug treatment Sunday for an irregular heartbeat — and Mother Teresa thought they would be able to end treatment entirely.

"You're done," she told doctors Saturday after the angioplasty and gestured at the tubes and cables connecting her to medication drips, oxygen and monitors. "Pull all these out — I look like a Christmas tree." She awoke in stable condition Sunday, but weakened in the afternoon.

Doctors responded by reprogramming

her pacemaker to bolster her heartbeat so that her kidneys would function better, chief heart surgeon Debi Shetty said.

Her urine output has been low, probably because of dehydration, Shetty said. Mother Teresa suffered a chest infection and pneumonia last August.

The lung and kidney problems "continue to be a major concern which could complicate her condition and recovery," the heart center's statement said.

Doctors postponed the drug treatment for her irregular heartbeat because of a slight risk it could worsen the other problems.

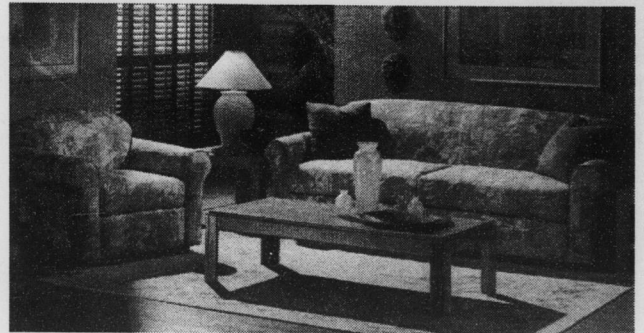
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