



A TALE OF TWO FRIENDS

by Mary Ellen Ezarsky , MHA Ambassador and Former Compeer Volunteer

My own experience with mental illness began shortly after I went away to college, when I began experiencing panic attacks. My parents and doctors didn't know what to think or do. Counseling was never mentioned. Valium was prescribed but I chose not to go that route, having always been afraid of drugs of any kind. Unable to focus and sit in class, I dropped out of college, got a job and tried to live life the best I could, plagued by anxiety.



Penny and Mary Ellen, in 2001

My life changed the day an article was published in the *Charlotte Observer* about a psychotherapist who was working with people with chronic anxiety and Agoraphobia (avoidance of public places because of fear of panic attacks). I contacted her immediately and I can honestly say she changed my life. It took many years, but through diligently doing what was necessary to change my thought patterns, I became anxiety-free and haven't experienced a panic attack in over 15 years. I also know if I ever were to again, I have the mental tools necessary to get back on track. Most importantly, I learned that I had nothing to be ashamed of, so I am very open about the fact that this was an experience in my life. My health recovery process has enabled me to make a difference in the lives of many people who have reached out to me for help with their own anxiety.

While still dealing with anxiety as a wife and working mom, I no longer viewed it as something terrible and embarrassing, but just as something I had to manage in my life. In the early 90s, my first cousin was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Everyone in my family was horrified because there was no understanding of this type of thing; thus the general thought was "oh no, not in OUR family." Well, as we all know now, it can happen in any family, and does. I had seen an informational ad about the MHA's Compeer program and thought it would help me understand what was happening to my cousin. I went through the training process and was matched with my friend, Penny. **It was one of the best things that could have happened in my life.**

When we first met in 1991, Penny was in her early 30s, was heavily medicated and catatonic much of the time. It was very hard to reach her, but as we slowly got to know each other, I shared my experiences with her. I was able to use my own experiences with anxiety to not only know she could get through panic, but I was also knowledgeable enough to teach her how. This is where the ice was broken.

Our experiences together are numerous. In the beginning we went to lunch, dinner and the movies. I encouraged her to drive herself and eventually she did. She shared several Thanksgivings with my family. I have made dinner for her at her home when she couldn't get out. I have gotten to know her family and case workers. She has gotten to know my family and adores my husband and kids.

It has now been many years and Penny and I are technically no longer part of the Compeer program, but we are forever friends. I have watched her go through many medications and have witnessed the miracle of medical science with where she is today, as compared to when I first met her. And even though she moved to another state several years ago, we talk on the phone several times each month and she is much better at keeping in touch by letter than I am. Over the years, as she has recovered from a disease that can take so much from you, she has given back to me so much more than I would have ever imagined. She is truly a friend who cares and our conversations are now like any other conversations I would have with any other friend. There is always hope with any illness, mental or otherwise and Penny knows that. **And to have had someone like Penny in my life, I will always be blessed.**

Mary Ellen Ezarsky

This is an excerpt from a recent letter that Mary Ellen received from Penny:

How is the compeer program going?
I say a prayer at least 3 times a week,
Because I know it works. You are my best
friend. I thank God for you and the program.
Say Hi to Barry and Ryan,
Hope to here from you two
soon. Love Much!

Love,
Penny



Mary Ellen Ezarsky



Penny

In case you have any difficulty reading Penny's handwriting:

How is the Compeer program going? I say a prayer at least 3 times a week. Because I know it works. You are my best friend. I thank God for you and the program. Say Hi to Barry and Ryan. Hope to hear from you two soon. Love Much!

Love, Penny



The Mental Health Association of Central Carolinas' Compeer Program serves adults in mental health recovery through its core service: one-to-one supportive friendship. Through this matched relationship, Compeer friends meet once /week or every other week for one hour for one year – most last longer. Meetings occur in natural settings using natural supports (i.e., enjoying a walk together, meeting for coffee, playing checkers or tennis, exploring a library). Based on the time-honored tradition that the support of friends is healing, the Compeer program is “making friends and changing lives.”

Compeer achieves measurable results:

- Our volunteer mentoring relationships build self-confidence and independence.
- Our program saves precious health-care dollars by reducing hospitalization costs.
- All those involved in our programs – the people we serve, volunteers and therapists – give us outstanding effectiveness ratings, ranging from 94-100% satisfaction

To learn more about becoming a Compeer volunteer, call 704-365-4830, visit the website below or e-mail the Compeer program at mha@mhacentralcarolinas.org.

www.mhacentralcarolinas.org