



Volunteering for NAMI Mercer is good for your health.
By Madeline Monheit and Elisabeth Hagen

They range in age from their teens to their eighties. They are judges, lawyers, and also people who have served time in prison and lived on the streets. They are doctors, social workers, and microbiologists alongside consumers who have spent years in psychiatric hospitals. They represent diverse walks of life, races, cultures, and religions.

The common bond that unites these 150 individuals is that they all have experienced mental illness on a personal level, in their families or communities and now dedicate their time and talents as NAMI Mercer volunteers.

With only two full-time staff members, Executive Director Sally Osmer and Office Manager Danita Saunders, NAMI Mercer depends on volunteers to perform its operational and mission-related activities of education, support, and advocacy. According to Volunteer Coordinator Tom Tompkins, NAMI Mercer receives an average of 500 volunteer hours per month.

"Volunteers publish our newsletters, write content for our website, speak publicly on our behalf, teach our classes, lead support groups, staff the Helpline, organize events, sit on mental health boards, oversee our finances," explains Osmer.

Clearly, NAMI Mercer could not exist without its volunteers. Perhaps equally important, as volunteers dedicate themselves to relieving pain, fighting stigma, and instilling hope in others, they also realize unanticipated personal benefits.

Many sign on as volunteers out of gratitude to NAMI Mercer. Bob Demers is one example. Years ago, having benefited from NAMI's free services during a time of crisis for his son, Demers was asked by NAMI leaders Tom and Chomy Garces to join the Family Partnership at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital (TPH). Demers agreed out of a sense of obligation.

Gradually, the motivation for Demers' voluntary work changed from payback to empathy to a life-fulfilling endeavor.

"Many of the TPH residents have been rejected by society and even by their families," states Demers. Every month, he schedules teams of observers to visit the hospital and report on conditions to the Board of Trustees. Bob takes pride in knowing that the Family Partnership contributes to improving the lives of TPH residents.

Bob's wife, former NAMI Mercer President Pat Demers, often cites Ralph Waldo Emerson who wisely said: "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

"Research has shown that volunteer work enhances well-being by improving life satisfaction, self-esteem, a sense of control over life, physical, and mental health," explains psychiatrist Dr. William P. Hayes, president of the NAMI Mercer Board.

The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research (2007), which documented findings from more than 30 rigorous, longitudinal studies, found a significant positive correlation between volunteering and good health.

Pursuing interests and passions through volunteering often renews one's overall creativity, motivation, and vision. English Professor June Valley found her niche on the Helpline, which appeals to her love of learning and teaching. "I found a place to apply my education and experience to helping others to learn the complexities of mental health and to remove the stigma associated with mental disorder," says June.

Volunteering also offers opportunities to learn new skills and improve self-confidence. "We invest in our volunteers," says Sally Osmer. "Many roles require extensive training."

Abigail is a perfect case in point. Diagnosed with bipolar and schizoaffective disorders, she connected with NAMI after four years in and out of the hospital. The training and experience she received as an In Our Own Voice presenter and coordinator of NAMI's Hearts and Minds program paved the way to her full-time employment at Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey.

Volunteering also keeps people in regular contact with others and helps to develop a solid support system, which can be protective in challenging times.

"I volunteer to help myself through the tough battle at home," admits Joanne Johnson, a microbiologist at Shering Plough. Through teaching NAMI classes and her involvement with the Just Kids program, she says she has met the nicest, most caring, and empathetic people. "We develop wonderful friendships and help each other through difficult times."

In the words of one of NAMI Mercer's Board members, "Our volunteers power the 'Love Machine' that supports us as we cope with mental illness." If you are interested in joining the NAMI team, go to www.namimercer.org or call (609) 799-8994.

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