



## **Pat and Bob Demers 2014 Night Out with NAMI Honorees**

At “Night Out with NAMI” on Nov. 9 at the Stuart County Day School, NAMI Mercer will pay tribute to Pat and Bob Demers. They will receive the organization’s highest honor — the NAMI Mercer 2014 Pillar Award — in recognition of their extraordinary 15-year contribution to our mission through volunteerism, leadership, advocacy, and charitable giving.

Pat was born in Fruita, CO. With a BS in psychology from Douglass College and a Masters from the Rutgers Human Resource Management Program, she has had a distinguished, 30-year career as a human resource manager for several biotech, health care, and engineering companies in the area.

Bob, who was born in Woonsocket, RI, holds a BS in machine design from the Rhode Island School of Design. He was employed by RCA for 43 years, eventually with Sarnoff Labs in West Windsor. In 1974, 1979, and 1984, he received a RCA Laboratories Outstanding Achievement Award for his VideoDisc research. He holds 14 patents for his inventions, including several for his contribution to hearing aid technology and virtual reality games.

Pat and Bob met in 1985 on a hike with the Princeton Ski Club. They have six children in their blended family: Erik, Evan and John Bjornen, and Richard, Lisa and Peter Demers. The Demers’ grandchildren are Traver, Khloe, Kollin (deceased), Jessy, Amanda, and Trent.

Like so many other NAMI Mercer volunteers, Bob and Pat have experienced mental illness in their own families. Bob’s first encounter with mental illness occurred when his son began to act incoherently and, at times, abusively. “I was totally unprepared for such behavior and must admit that mental illness was not in my vocabulary,” he recalls. In desperate need of education and guidance, Bob was fortunate to find NAMI Mercer as a resource.

"They encouraged me to take steps that led to my son's being treated and later hospitalized. Without such counseling, it is difficult to imagine the consequences," Bob continued.

Bob began volunteering to repay the organization for supporting him during his son's crisis. When NAMI Mercer founders Chomy and Tom Garces asked Bob to join the Family Partnership, a group of family members that monitored conditions at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital (TPH), Bob initially did so out of a sense of obligation.

Over time, Bob's obligation became his mission. "I saw at first hand the patients and their plight, especially the long-term patients, for whom TPH had become permanent living quarters. Many of these people had been rejected by society and even by their families."

For nearly 10 years, Bob led the Family Partnership, made up of representatives from Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, and Burlington Counties. He scheduled four teams of two volunteers to observe the four TPH units each month. He designed and mailed completed evaluation forms to the hospital trustees each month and sat in on all public Board of Trustee meetings. He was invited to join a committee on risk management that provided him with data on incidents and trends.

At first, Bob's monitoring team reported only on the physical environment. He then broadened the scope to look at how the programs were run, how the staff treated patients, and how the hospital dealt with families.

Bob takes pride in knowing that the Family Partnership contributed to improving the lives of TPH residents. After he stepped down in June 2010, the monitoring program went dormant for a while. However, the New Jersey Division of Mental Health Services (DMHS) established a new program to monitor the quality of care in state psychiatric hospitals. Our current NAMI Mercer Advocacy Committee is deeply involved in this program. Surely, Bob's persistent work over the preceding ten years laid the groundwork for the new monitoring effort.

Pat also has a personal connection to NAMI Mercer. As a teenager, when her mother was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, there was no one to help her understand and process what was happening in her family. Her friends, and later her work associates, did not know about her mother's illness. "So when I found NAMI, it became a passion for me to help grow this organization so that it had the resources to help everyone in need, to stop the stigma that lived with me for so many years, to educate those seeking understanding, and to advocate for programs and services."

With Pat's leadership, NAMI Mercer progressed from "adolescence" to the mature stage of our organizational lifecycle. Recruited in 1999 to assist with the "Campaign for the Future," Pat was instrumental in developing the Night Out with NAMI fundraising effort that supported the hiring of a professional executive director and an intensive period of organizational growth. For the next five years, she shared her

expertise in the area of human resources and business administration to build a professional environment at NAMI Mercer. She facilitated board development, our first five-year strategic plan, as well as a transition plan. In addition, she helped our affiliate create job descriptions, handle our new payroll and insurance responsibilities and develop a financial tracking system. Over the course of nine years, Pat led three well-designed executive director searches that led, each time, to the hiring of someone who would extend the reach and influence of NAMI Mercer.

During her presidency from 2005 to 2008, Pat dedicated herself to the growing functions of the organization: the multi-cultural outreach committee; advocacy at both state and local levels; the children's social program; and the activities of the Helpline. She continued to chair the Development Committee, guiding the process of attracting and diversifying funding sources, instituting an annual appeal, soliciting grants with the executive director, and overseeing every event. "I was privileged to work with Pat on the first NAMI Mercer Walk," said NAMI Mercer Secretary Madeline Monheit. Since then, the Walk has become our biggest source of income.

According to former NAMI Mercer President Ellen Heath, Pat's true gift is "inspiring people to step beyond their comfort zone, reaching beyond themselves to carry out large visions for NAMI Mercer." Pat has been able to attract enthusiastic volunteers, funders, and outstanding Board members. With boundless empathy for NAMI Mercer families, she always took the time to be a friend to all who entered our doors.

Although Pat and Bob are retired from their official capacities, they continue to attend and support every major NAMI Mercer event. They are loyal members of the Patron Society, and last year, Pat was the Walk's single largest fundraiser.

With all the time and energy that they have devoted to NAMI Mercer, it is hard to believe that Pat and Bob also have been active volunteers for many other organizations. Pat has served on the Mission, Service and Grants Committee of the First Presbyterian Church of Cranbury. She also is a member of the Woman's Club of Cranbury, the Cranbury Library Foundation, and Zonta International, a world-wide service organization whose mission is to improve the status of women and children. Both Pat and Bob do community service at the Skeet's Food Pantry in Cranbury. In his spare time, Bob enjoys gardening, woodworking, and sports. Pat's hobbies include reading, traveling, and going to theater performances and New Jersey Symphony Orchestra concerts.

When she served as NAMI Mercer president, Pat often began her messages and talks with an inspiring quote. One of her favorites is from Robert F. Kennedy who said: "Each time someone stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope." NAMI Mercer honors Pat and Bob for generating countless ripples of hope for Mercer County families affected by mental illness.