

# You've got a friend in Gladys

For Akron senior, volunteering includes sharing her life with others

By: Lori Van Ingen- Staff writer for Intelligencer Journal, Lancaster, PA

Friendship is important to Gladys Claassen - especially friendship that helps those with mental illness. For the past two years, Claassen has been a volunteer at Compeer Lancaster, which matches people living with mental illness with volunteers who simply share the gift of friendship. After a two-hour training session, Claassen, who lives in Akron, was matched with a married woman in her 50s from Lititz.

"I'll never forget the first time we got together," Claassen said. "She came to the door, peering out the window, eager to see her new friend."

Volunteering at organizations like Compeer is nothing new to Claassen. Years ago she volunteered at a mental hospital in Norristown, and for three years she served on the board of Indian Creek Home in Harleysville, which places persons with mental challenges in supervised housing or in group homes. Also during this period, she and her husband befriended a man with mental illness, seeing him once a month and doing something with him, she said. "I've often wondered if he's still living," she said. Although her Compeer friend is currently hospitalized, Claassen continues to keep in touch with her friend's husband. "He's often expressed his appreciation for my friendship (with his wife)," she said.

Before her friend was hospitalized, Claassen spent at least four hours a month and made telephone calls to her - as all matches are expected to do, she said.

Her friend's favorite activity was shopping, and her favorite place to go was Oregon Dairy, she said.

"We'd sit in the back with the two booths since she was shy in public," Claassen said.

Claassen also appreciated Compeer's staff, who arranged for social activities for the friends, such as a summer picnic at Long's Park, entertainment and a meal at Lancaster Friends Meeting and free tickets to Dutch Apple Dinner Theater once a year.

"You don't always know what to do with your friend, so this was really appreciated," she said.

Because of some health issues of her own, Claassen, now 81, has formally ended her volunteer work with Compeer

"But I'm really glad for this experience," she said.

She encourages others to become Compeer friends.

Although there are 40 active friendship matches, there are 80 persons referred to Compeer who are still waiting for friends. Male volunteers are especially needed, she said.

"Most are not married and appreciate a friend to take them out," she said.

Even though she had to end her affiliation with Compeer, Claassen is still an active volunteer.

Every Monday afternoon she's a Red Cross volunteer at Ephrata Community Hospital, every Wednesday morning she binds quilts at the Material Resource Center, a branch of

Mennonite Central Committee and every Friday she and her husband deliver Meals on Wheels in Ephrata.

She also is a member of the congregational life committee at Akron Mennonite Church, where she's in charge of meeting transportation needs of church members.