

Jay, Joe and the therapy of friendship

Jay Garber stopped by Joe Kahl's apartment Tuesday to play Rummikub. The men got together about once a week. Kahl, 42, opened first. He placed six numbered tiles in the middle of the kitchen table. Garber, 71, studied the 14 tiles in his rack. Unable to make a play, he drew a 15th tile.

"Wendy and I became engaged on Sunday," Kahl told Garber. "Congratulations!" Garber said. The news wasn't entirely unexpected. Kahl has been seeing his 30-year-old girlfriend for a year and a half. They met in a counseling program. "Give (the engagement) some time now," advised Garber, glancing across the table at his middle-aged friend. "See if it will work." "That's what we're going to do," Kahl assured him.

Garber and Kahl are something of an odd couple. Garber is trim, clean-shaven man with a sharp nose and angular features. Before he retired, Garber was personnel director for Eastern Mennonite Missions and pastor at New Danville Mennonite Church. He and his wife, Lois, bicycle 8 1/2 miles each morning, and then Garber works on his son's farm.

Kahl is no-so-trim man with a shaggy, reddish beard and a puffy face. He served 7 1/2 years in the Army. For most of those years he was based in Germany, where he made maps. After his discharge and before he qualified for disability from the government, Kahl was a dishwasher. Off and on through the 1990s, Kahl went into the hospital for psychiatric care.

One of Kahl's favorite things to do is assemble models. He has decorated his apartment in Village of Lancaster Greens with plastic warplanes. He also fashioned a covered bridge from Popsicle-like craft sticks, which he buys by the thousands.

Kahl and Garber were introduced in february 2002 through Compeer Lancaster, which matches people living with mental illness with volunteers who simply share the gift of friendship. "Studies are showing the value of friendships for all of us, but particularly for persons struggling with mental illness," said Sarah Myers, Compeer program director.

The Harvard Mental Health newsletter recently noted that people with schizophrenia have a greater sense of well-being if they have social contacts and do not feel lonely. Maintaining a weekly friendship is what in part defines recovery.

Friendship also has a dollars-and-cents benefit. Mentally ill people with caring friends are less likely to return to a costly psychiatric unit.

Myers was inspired to start Compeer after meeting a mentally ill man who once won bowling trophies but was no longer had anyone with whom to bowl.

Compeer asks each volunteer to spend on average, an hour a week with his or her friend. Thirty volunteers are now matched. The number waiting for a volunteer is 73. Getting in gear

Garber's visits are a highlight of Kahl's week. "I'm usually home pretty much most of the time unless I have doctors' appointments," Kahl told me.

Kahl has come to regard Garber as a father figure.

Last week, Kahl acquired a used 10-speed bicycle, and Garber hauled it in his van to Kahl's apartment. Tuesday, after defeating Garber at a round of Rummikub, Kahl rolled the bike into his living room. Garber knelt and looked it over.

The chain was badly rusted, the gear cables were questionable and the tires needed air, but Garber was encouraging.

"I have a little pump," he said. "I'll bring that along next week, and we'll see if the tires can hold air. And I have a little oil can that my wife has for her sewing machine."

"Maybe we'll do that next week and see what happens," Kahl agreed. "The brakes work fine."

"I wouldn't take it to the bike shop," Garber said, "You'll just spend your money. I bet if we get this thing oiled up a little bit, it will work fine."

Garber said he might bring his bike next time and they could ride together. Kahl liked the idea.

"That was my goal all along," Garber told me later. "If it did take two years for that to happen, that's all right.

The currency of friendship, after all, is time. And Garber and Kahl have found ways to spend it well.