

## WORDS WITH FRIENDS

We listen in while a volunteer buddy chats with a person with mental health issues.

THOSE AFFLICTED WITH DEPRESSION or other mental illnesses can feel like the loneliest people in the world, trapped inside their own heads and increasingly isolated from friends and family. The Compeer friendship program, run locally through Coastal Behavioral Health-care, takes a brilliantly simple approach to that problem: Connect a person with mental health challenges with a volunteer buddy. The idea is that spending quality time together and enjoying mutual interests can create a sense of stability, belonging and wellness. To find out more, we listened while Martha L., in an assisted living facility near downtown, called her friend, volunteer Mimi H., who was in Chicago for the summer.



Martha and her friend, Compeer volunteer Mimi.

**Mimi:** We both entered this relationship hesitantly, with some uncertainty about how it might work out. But at our very first meeting together, it's like we clicked, and I already started feeling comfortable. What about you, Martha?

**Martha:** Oh, I've always been comfortable with you.

**Mimi:** It was just the thought of getting together that was a little worrisome at first. Then we started meeting once a week. We'd do things over at the Senior Friendship Center. I introduced you to a game—

**Martha:** Rummikub!

**Mimi:** —and you were a natural. Then you taught me how to play pool.

**Martha:** But we're not very good. I'm lucky to get any in the pockets!

**Mimi:** We have a good time together. We walk places, like down to the marina, and in—what's the name of that park? The one with the statues?

**Martha:** Oh, that was Gillespie Park.

**Mimi:** Yeah, Gillespie. I think we just enjoy one another's company. There's a mutual respect and regard for each other's feelings.

**Martha:** It's a good feeling, much better than sitting around and doing nothing.

**Mimi:** It's certainly broadened my horizons. I had never had a relationship with someone who hasn't lived independently, and you and I would not have met under any other circumstances.

**Martha:** Compeer gives connections to people that we wouldn't have otherwise. We'd just be stuck. I have no family alive, so it makes a big difference to me.

**Mimi:** You have a lot of talent that I didn't know about at the outset, like music and sewing, and we're looking for ways you can use that in the community. When you're friends with someone, you open one another's eyes to different things. We're talking a lot about the future, and I'm hopeful about it.

**Martha:** Me, too.

—BEAU DENTON