

Buddies give a little and get a lot back — the gift of caring

By Anthony D. Advincula
Journal correspondent

In September 2000, "Carol Jones" tested positive for HIV. She fell into a depression, feeling she had no one to turn to.

But life greatly changed for the 48-year-old Jersey City resident (who spoke on the condition that her real name not be used) after she got involved in the Hudson Buddies program of Jersey City Connections Inc., the only social service agency in the county that provides volunteer companions to work one-on-one with adults and teens living with HIV/AIDS.

"I'm very glad to have found someone who could sincerely be there for me, relate to me emotionally, talk to me when I feel down, or help me get the stress out of my head," Jones said. "My buddy has given me hope and inspiration to move on."

According to Joanne Smith, executive director of Jersey City Connections, the Hudson Buddies program recruits, trains and supervises volunteers who encourage HIV-positive people to maintain adherence to complicated medical regimens and give encouragement to stay out of isolation and depression.

"Buddies supply a human connection. When they call and say, 'How are you? Don't forget to take your medicine today,' they make a big difference in the life of someone living with HIV/AIDS," said Smith, who has worked as a social worker for most of her career.

Because many of those who contracted the disease have been afraid to tell anyone — even their families — Smith said they yearn for someone "who has a nonjudgmental ear" and can be a source of strength to "fight the insidious stigma associated with HIV/AIDS."

Buddy Walter Rutter, 67, said he can't describe how good it feels to volunteer in the program, through which he's been teamed with a Jersey City man for about eight years.

"He has been confined to the hospital since yesterday," said Rutter, also of Jersey City. "I'm so distraught because he's not just my buddy anymore, he's al-

ready my best friend.

"We played chess, watched television, went to the movies, shared each other's jokes, and there were times that we just sat and enjoyed quiet moments together."

Volunteer Blanca Iris Corretjer, 60, of West New York, concurred.

"I feel as though I won a lottery to have her," she said of her buddy, with whom she's been teamed for about a year.

"It seems that I have found a long-lost sister. We talk on the phone for hours, three or four times a week. And sometimes when I have a puzzle to solve, she calls me when she has an answer."

"We have (been) given so much by the Lord. It's time to give back to someone who is in need," she said.

As the county's population has become more diverse over the years, minority and immigrant buddies have become integral to the program, said Marvin Krieger, director of Hudson County HIV/AIDS Services Planning Council.

The council has begun plans for translation services for non-English-speaking residents. For now, Krieger said, Spanish language translation is available.

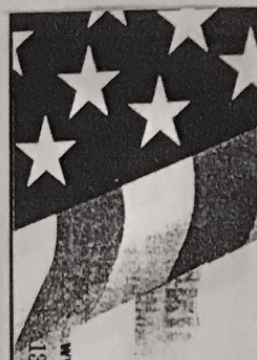
"Honestly, minorities are extremely difficult," he said. "One of the reasons is cultural taboos, as sex is not easy to talk about."

When a buddy and an infected person are from the same ethnic group, it is a lot easier for them to identify with one another, Krieger said.

About 90 buddies now help 186 clients, Smith said, adding that her organization is always in need of volunteers.

To help...

Jersey City Connections Inc. is always looking for people to help in its Hudson Buddies program, through which volunteers are teamed up with someone who has HIV/AIDS. The next program orientation and training will be on Saturday; call (201) 963-4779 to help.



www.nj.com/Journal
138th Year — No. 179

THE JERSEY JOURNAL

JERSEY CITY - HUDSON DISPATCH

Wednesday, December 1, 2004

Home Delivery: \$3.30 weekly

50¢