

Peer support works because it offers real-life examples of recovery. Here's your chance to meet a few peer specialists on the front lines.

# Peer specialists inspire hope for recovery

Text and photos by Art Spikol

Say you've just undergone a serious surgical procedure—one that will result in your having to make significant lifestyle changes that, from your hospital bed, seem overwhelming. In walks a visitor—a seemingly cheerful and well-adjusted person—who explains that she's had similar surgery, is now living the life you're fearing, and starts telling you all about it. And, that fast, you begin to see that you have a future.

There's a message there that nobody else can deliver in quite the same way—that life will go on, that you'll be able to handle it, and that there is real potential for you to have a happy, productive existence. Just like your cheerful visitor.

The visitor has *credibility*. Had the operation. Walks the walk. Talks the talk.

That's the idea behind peer specialists, although they deal with mental, not physical, ill-

ness. They constitute a relatively new category of professionals—very turn-of-the-21st-century—who are recovering from a mental illness and have been trained and certified to help others do the same.

This innovation in mental health care came about as part of the response to the 1999 Surgeon General's report on mental health, which identified a *focus on recovery* as the missing link in the mental health system. People

## Pam Howard

*She's director of Adult Mental Health Services at Montgomery County Mental Health/Mental Retardation/Drug and Alcohol/Behavioral Health. She has spent many years in the field, including eight at Hedwig House, a psychiatric rehabilitation program.*

"Peer support is essential. It's important to have access to people who have experienced what you're struggling with, and to hear that they were able to move forward in their life. That can help you find your own path.

"We've trained about a hundred peer specialists in

Montgomery County. Each gets 75 hours of training; each has been through various mental health issues, so they're providing peer support from the get-go.

"Many of our peer specialists have been in their jobs for over 24 months. There would be more peer specialists if we had more jobs for them, but that will come.

"Today, everyone who comes to a clinical treatment provider here—whether for the first time or in an emergency—will find peer support behind any door. We instituted that. Even the supervisors, who are not peers but traditional mental health supervisors, have been trained in peer support. And we offer networking and professional development seminars on a regular basis.

"I never had a mental illness. But I have family members who did. It touches the lives of so many people."

**"We focus on 'This is possible' instead of 'We can't afford to try that.'"**