



Amy and Annemarie have developed a friendship over the past three years through St Vincent de Paul's Compeer program.

Photo: Kate Luke

Compeer celebrates fourth birthday

For three years, Amy and Annemarie have been friends; hanging out together, having dinner, going to the cinema – the usual friendly activities.

The only difference to this friendship is that Annemarie is a volunteer, and the two were paired up through a St Vincent de Paul program called Compeer.

Compeer is celebrating its fourth birthday this week, and the award-winning volunteer program is aiming to break down the stigma of mental illness through friendship and social support.

Annemarie is a long term volunteer in the community, and said she noticed the loneliness experienced by the people she spoke to, many of whom had mental health issues.

'I just thought, "What am I going to do about that?" I looked around and I found this program, and I thought this is just perfect to try and address people's loneliness,' said Annemarie, who visits Amy every two to three weeks, volunteers as a phone counsellor and also works full-time.

'I don't think we realise that simple things that we would take for granted, like being a friend to someone, is a really big deal in the lives of people who maybe don't get out of their house very often. That's

why I did it,' she said.

According to Annemarie, Amy was a little bit sceptical of the whole situation to start with.

'I remember Amy sitting across from me and we were both looking at each. She kept asking if I was being paid to do this, and I kept saying no. She asked three times, just to make sure,' Annemarie said.

Annemarie drives the hour round trip from Canberra to Queanbeyan to visit Amy every fortnight or three weeks, depending on how much time it takes Amy to save up for their next activity.

'Amy has a pretty tight budget, so it just depends on that really. We go to a lot of movies and we go out for dinner. Occasionally we go for walks or we go bowling. Bowling is always fun,' Annemarie said.

'I think over the years I've seen Amy grow a lot in confidence, and I've seen her really blossom. It's a very simple thing, unlike my other volunteer work which requires a lot of training and a lot of skill. This doesn't require skills; you don't need particular skills to be a friend to someone, you just need to be available.'

For more information on the Compeer program, or to become a volunteer, visit www.vinnies.org.au

- Kimberley Granger