



Company along the road

By Douglas Fry

THE road to recovery from mental illness can be a long and arduous one, often made more difficult by the societal stigma it attracts.

A program run by the St Vincent de Paul Society aims to break down those barriers, however, by matching volunteers with mentally ill people to provide them with a friend on their journey to recovery.

The Compeer program, which commenced in Sydney in 1995 and last week celebrated its fourth anniversary in the ACT, currently has 32 local volunteers participating in the one-on-one program.

ACT Compeer program officer Anchal Goel said the program had attracted volunteers from a range of different

backgrounds, including public servants, university students and retirees.

"There are also people who have had an experience or a history of mental illness in their life, and feel they would benefit from something like this, and feel that their personal experience of having gone through a mental illness can benefit someone else," she said.

Volunteers committed at least four hours per month over a year-long period, with the goal of increasing the friend's social participation. "The aim is to give the friend someone to talk to, someone to reduce their isolation, the neglect and ignorance they have received in society because of their mental illness," Ms Goel said.

Volunteer David Pearson

said he joined the program two years ago after seeing an advertisement in *The Chronicle*. "I'm a pharmacist by profession, and I have an interest in the treatment of depression through medicines and non-medicine therapies as well, and this seemed to be something I could add a bit of value to," he said.

Mr Pearson was matched with a 33-year-old man with schizophrenia, social anxiety and depression. "The lack of communication in the early stages really caught me off guard, and I really felt it wasn't working," he said. "But of course, that's part of that person getting that sense of trust."

Once a rapport was established, Mr Pearson said his friend gradually began to

change, becoming more open in conversations and starting to laugh more.

"There's been a significant decrease in his anxiety about attending what we would consider to be 'normal' activities," Mr Pearson said. "I use the example of just walking through a place like the Canberra Centre, which can be

incredibly challenging for people with schizophrenia."

Mr Pearson said he had learned the power of friendship in the mental illness recovery process.

■ The Compeer program is always on the lookout for volunteers. For more information, email compeer@svdp-cg.org.au



St Vincent de Paul Compeer program officer Anchal Goel, right, and volunteer David Pearson with other program participants.
Picture: Douglas Fry