

Lifestyle

SECTION F

Stayin' clean with a little help from friends

GILBERT ARIAS/P-I PHOTO



Cathy Hobbs, left, is teamed with Project Skills volunteer Jean Koenig, whom Hobbs credits with giving her the confidence to re-enter the community after completing a drug rehabilitation program.

By Pam Miller
P-I Reporter

Whenever Laurie Jo Nelson and Jackie Toma get together, they discuss "guys, relationships and future goals." They see movies, visit the Seattle Aquarium and take walks through the zoo.

And though none of that may sound unusual for two friends, ages 24 and 29 — what is unusual is how the former drug addict and the Bureau of Aging employee met.

Project Skills is a Seattle effort to prevent rehabilitated drug addicts from slipping back to their old ways. As program designer David Hawkins puts it, matching ex-drug addicts with community volunteers provides the former with "a positive social network" so they feel less pressure to return to former networks of drug-abusing friends.

Pleased with results

Hawkins, a professor at the University of Washington's School of Social Work, says he conceived the matchmaking idea when an earlier study of his indicated that many drug addicts return to drugs because they lack ways to meet and retain new, non-drug-addict friends.

Awarded a three-year grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Hawkins and colleague Richard Catalano have coordinated Project Skills for 18 months.

And although final results have not been tallied, more than 20 same-sex "couples" have graduated from Project Skills' nine-month sessions. Project coordinators not only bring volunteers and clients together, but also require them to find activities in common. The counselors also provide group exercises on everything from how to initiate conversations to "how to say 'no' to drugs."

Nelson and Toma, one of the program's few female pairs, say they feel theirs is "one of the best matches."

Her first friend

"That's what's made it work. We had a lot of similar interests," says Toma, who volunteered for the program "because I always wanted to experience this side of social work."

"So far, it's working quite well," agrees Nelson, a resident of the Seattle Drug and Narcotic Treatment Center and a student looking to a career as a medical secretary.

The Vancouver, Wash., native explains, "I have no friends or relatives up here. Jackie's the first outside community person I've met that I get along with. I need to have a good friend out in the community to do things with."

Prior to meeting Toma, Nelson says she was never involved in community affairs.

"I haven't been active in anything except trying to get my life back together, which was a chore in itself," she says.

Now the two are members of the Seattle Zoological Society, co-editors of Project Skills' monthly newsletter and buddies who discuss everything from bad days at work or school to boyfriend problems.

Gained confidence

Toma, introduced to Nelson last September, says she has seen changes in her new friend already.

"She's lost a lot of weight, gained a lot of confidence. She's become real open. Just in the time I've known her, I've seen her go through a lot of very serious problems and not think of going back to drugs. We've developed a trust and friendship."

Cathy Hobbs is a 30-year-old single mother and former alcoholic and drug addict, who ends her stay at Seattle's Family House soon. The idea of returning to the community used to terrify her, but not since she participated in Project Skills, Hobbs says.

Joined support group

Since being matched with volunteer Jean Koenig, a 54-year-old housewife, Hobbs has enjoyed picnics, movies, bowling and raspberry picking in the Seattle area. The two have made jam, attended movies, taken outings with Hobbs' 8-year-old daughter and

scoured garage sales for items to furnish Hobbs' new apartment.

Hobbs also credits Project Skills with giving her the impetus to join a local chapter of Parents Without Partners. And because Koenig is only a phone call away, Hobbs says she's confident "I'll do all right" when she re-enters the community.

Though their nine-month commitment as a team was over last June, both women say they're unlikely to sever the bonds for a long time.

A missed experience

Koenig says she's gained a new perspective from the volunteer work.

"I didn't grow up around drugs. I kind of wondered if I had what it took to do this. I wouldn't have missed the experience. It was really in-depth training. (The counselors') concern and follow-up is just great. And think Cathy and I will be associated as friends for a long time."

Though Hawkins and Catalano say it's too early to declare Project Skills a success, they don't hesitate to smile when saying, "It proves successful if it's open for national distribution."

The program needs more volunteers, especially those selected as "people successful in coping with their own lives, and willing to be guides but not saviors."

Anyone interested may phone volunteer coordinator Barbara Cunningham at 545-1907.