

Friendship Place provides safe place to spend time

Mentally ill can find comfort at Neenah center

By **PATRICK L. DELABRUE**
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NEENAH — Since he started coming to Friendship Place seven months ago, 45-year-old Menasha resident Jeff Berton has made significant progress coping with his mental illness.

"I withdrew from family and friends," he said. "I would hardly speak with any of them. I was almost totally nonfunctional."

Now, Berton plays guitar and sings his favorite Beatles tunes in front of the friends he made at Friendship Place with newfound confidence — something he couldn't imagine himself doing a year ago.

Under a new executive director, Friendship Place is carrying out its same mission with renewed vigor.

"We are a safe environment for the chronically mentally ill to attend," said executive director Lori Hill.

Hill, who started this past January, said she sees 25 to 35 people coming into Friendship Place on a daily basis.

"Our purpose here is to provide a safe place for them to come for recreation, socialization and peer support," she said.

Friendship Place was established in the early 1990s by 84-year-old Neenah resident Hazel



JANICE REITZNER of Menasha shoots pool at Friendship Place in Neenah. Friendship Place was created as a safe place for mentally ill people to meet and have fun.

News-Record photo by Patrick L. Delabru

Kane.

Kane, who worked for Winnebago County as a community supportive care worker, saw a continuing need for a place for the mentally ill to go when the county pulled funding for the county operated drop-in center.

"They thought it wasn't necessary anymore, but we still had people to help and they had nowhere to go," she said.

That's when Kane contacted the pastor at Our Savior's Lutheran Church.

"He let us use the kitchen and other facilities. We had

about eight to 10 people coming in daily," Kane said.

And that's where Friendship Place was born.

In addition to social networking, consumers of Friendship Place services also benefit from informal counseling and one-on-one contact with the staff that helps them develop job seeking skills, shopping and acting as a conduit between Friendship Place participants and area human services agencies.

For most of the people who come to Friendship Place, it's

finding a relaxed setting with people who face similar challenges that makes it worthwhile.

"Coming here and talking about myself and listening to others has been therapeutic," Berton said. "I feel comfortable here. I've been able to open up."

For some, feeling that level of comfort was elusive at first.

Neenah resident Vickie Gillen said she was afraid when she first came to Friendship Place five months ago.

"I was told by my therapist to check this place out, but I didn't

want to. It seemed like kind of a street thing," she said. "I thought it was a drop-in center for homeless people."

Gillen said she allowed herself to believe some of the stereotypes that surround people with mental illness, and that fueled her fears. After growing comfortable with the Friendship Place her fears disappeared.

"These are people who come from good families; these are decent people here," Gillen said.

Dispelling stereotypes of people with mental illness has been difficult.

Menasha resident Kerry Bork said he heard some of the stereotypes firsthand.

"There was a bar across the street that used to call us n.b.c.," he said. "They said it stood for nut ball corner."

"People speak out of ignorance. They just have to realize we're not dangerous people here, we're good people that face some unique problems."

After recalling some of the unpleasant attitudes he encountered, Bork sat back in his chair, smiled, and acknowledged how helpful coming to Friendship Place has been for him.

"This place gave me an outlet I didn't have before to make friends, have a nice place to come and hang out and deal with my problems directly. I'll be coming here for a long time," Bork said.

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