

## 2012 Cultural Competency Series: Peer Specialists Thrive on Connections

*The Cultural Competency series tells the stories of UPMC employees who put patients and others first by being culturally competent and by recognizing each other's differences.*

Last month's Cultural Competency article examined the work of the Peer Support Department of Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic of UPMC. The peer specialists work with people who are dealing with a mental illness, and they have a very direct connection to those they're trying to help: peer specialists are themselves in recovery from a mental health issue.

"We're both staff members and consumers," says **Tom Krivjansky**, a peer specialist. "We provide an example for others; you could even say a role model. People can look up to you and say, 'That's what I want to do,' and you can all work together."

When Mr. Krivjansky joined UPMC in 1992, there was a part-time position available for someone who could use computers to help mental health patients with their treatment. The peer specialist program was developed as a result of this project. Today, peer specialists lead more than 100 groups that help patients learn life skills such as computer literacy, cooking, and resume writing. There also are games groups and activities, such as poetry and karaoke, that provide consumers who might be isolated with a chance to socialize and perhaps open up to people who are there to help them.

Some consumers attend just a few meetings; others keep coming for years. "There are people who graduate from the program, and it's a goal to help them get back into the community," Mr. Krivjansky says. "People go back to school; they get a job. That's one of the most sought-after accomplishments — to get a job. That's an indicator that things are going well."

"We applaud when we're in a meeting and we learn that someone has succeeded," he says. "It's motivating to do even more, to see the difference it made and you feel good about yourself and them at the end of the day. I can't think of a better job. I've been here 20 years, and I want 20 more."

There are peer specialists throughout the UPMC organization, but they are perhaps most urgently needed at the re:solve Crisis Network. People who arrive at re:solve are often at a very low point in their lives, and peer specialists like **Cheryl Germany** are there to give them the support they need at this moment of crisis.

"Our job is to listen to them and be a support to them," Ms. Germany says. "We're the ones they would talk to one-on-one, and they usually choose us because they're consumers and we're consumers as well; we're not there to be judgmental. By talking to us they can get things off their chest, and because we're all on the same level they feel more comfortable talking to us about certain things."

There are groups offered at re:solve as well, and there is no limit to the number of times a person can visit. A person may be experiencing a moment of crisis when he or she passes through the doors, but the fact that someone has taken the initiative to seek help can be the first step toward recovery.

"You take life one day at a time; you can get better, but you have to utilize the resources that are there to help you," Ms. Germany says. "By sharing my experiences with them it allows them to open up and be more open and honest with their clinicians, because they feel like we really care."

"We're all human beings — we're all subject to falling, no matter where we are in life," she says. "A failure is a person who doesn't try. The person who is successful in life is one who falls off the horse and gets back on and moves on. And the stronger you become, the less you fall off the horse. You might not be moving at the pace you want, but you are making progress. We're here to help you, and that's what you have to focus on."

*The best way to encourage cultural competency is by sharing outstanding examples. If you or someone you work with has helped a patient with special needs, tell us about it. Email your story to [inclusion@upmc.edu](mailto:inclusion@upmc.edu), and if it's chosen, the story will be included in the Cultural Competency series in Extra. By treating people the way they want to be treated, we ensure that inclusion is at the core of everything we do.*

### Of Note

**Tom Kennedy**, director of Capital Projects, Corporate Construction, was recognized as one of Clean Water Action's Environmental Heroes of 2012, representing UPMC.

**Jami Shelton**, doula, Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC, received the Community Health Worker Extraordinary Service Award from Spectrum Health at the Fifth Annual Community Health Worker Conference in Grand Rapids, Mich. The award recognizes outstanding service, dedication, and excellence within the community health profession.

### Featured Perks

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