

## Friendship Club finds healing in simplest of jobs

By Brenda J. Buote, Globe Staff | April 20, 2006

Fry cook. Inventory clerk. Office custodian.

They may not be glamorous jobs, but for men and women who are living with a mental illness, these entry-level positions can be a path out of darkness. The simple tasks of daily life -- getting dressed, arriving to work on time, earning a paycheck -- can provide a sense of purpose, according to Laura Giannino, director of the Lynn Friendship Club.

"Our goal is to help people find the strengths that exist within them, and build on those strengths to reach their goals, whatever those goals might be," said Giannino, whose organization strives to help people who are hampered by a mental disability.

For some people who turn to the club for help, the goal is simply to build strong relationships with other people. For many others, the dream is to hold down a part-time job, or to become independent and leave behind government safety net programs. For them, the Lynn Friendship Club is more than a social support group; it offers an opportunity to work part time with the support and guidance they need to succeed in the workplace. As part of the club's transitional employment program, a job coach works with them on-site until they are comfortable going solo.

Today, five employers participate in the transitional program, including a local dairy company, the owner of two North Shore McDonald's restaurants, and a retail store in Swampscott, and Giannino would like to recruit at least five new employers to join them.

"For many people, this may be the first job they have had in five, 10, or even 15 years," said Giannino, who has been working with the mentally ill since 1996. She started her career as a job coach at the Lynn Friendship Club and has seen the impact a supportive work environment can have on its members.

One member is now a shipping manager at Sears in the North Shore Mall, and another has a part-time job at a local restaurant during the day while taking evening courses through Harvard University. Others are just beginning their journey back to mainstream life. For them, the job translates into a lot more than money.

"Having a job gives me a sense of pride and purpose," said William J. "Jack" Harney Jr., 49, who completed the transitional employment program last year and now works part-time at a McDonald's in Salem.

Harney suffered a breakdown when in his 20s and was hospitalized. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, he found it difficult to hold a full-time job.

"Being out of work is demoralizing," Harney said. "Complicate that with mental illness, the stigma of that, and poor self-esteem, and you can start to see how difficult -- how overwhelming -- life can become. The transitional employment program provides more than just a paycheck. It offers a way back to good mental health, to feeling better about yourself."

For Anthony Fisher, 31, the program offered a safe way to reenter the workforce. Fisher started working at the age of 16, but shortly after graduating from high school in 1993 he began experiencing problems. Overwhelmed by the responsibilities that came with adulthood, he couldn't keep a job for longer than a few months. Eventually, Fisher became so distraught that he was hospitalized. It was then that he was diagnosed with a mood disorder.

Today, Fisher takes pride in his independence. A shipping manager at Sears with 15 employees under his supervision, he has a one-bedroom apartment in Lynn, owns a car, and is helping to support his three daughters. He spends his free time painting abstract art: His work has been featured in several local exhibitions and is prominently displayed in the lobby at Bridgewell, the social services agency that runs the Friendship Club. He also is considering going back to school.

Fisher said the club's employment program has renewed his ability to believe in a brighter future, for himself and for his girls.

"I would love to go back to school," Fisher said. "I want to be a teacher, and own a home. Most of all, I want to be able to support my children in every possible way as they get older."

According to the employers who have partnered with the Lynn Friendship Club, the program offers rewards to everyone who participates.

"It's wonderful to be able to help people," said Stephen Rima, owner of the McDonald's restaurant in Salem where Harney works. Rima said in the 15 years since he first partnered with the Lynn Friendship Club, at least 20 people have worked in his restaurants on the Lynnway in Lynn and on Canal Street in Salem.

"It's been great to see people really come into their own," he said. "Although many of them start out being timid, and working in entry-level positions, most quickly blossom. Right now, we're considering one woman who came to us through the program for a part-time management position."

Lynn Friendship Club opened its doors in 1972 to address the needs of patients newly discharged from state hospitals. Its founding organization, the Greater Lynn Mental Health & Retardation Association, changed its name to Bridgewell last fall after nearly 50 years of offering a range of comprehensive services for people with disabilities. Today, the organization has 2,900 clients in 18 communities north of Boston.

*Employers interested in partnering with Lynn Friendship Club should contact [Laura Giannino at 781-581-2891 or lgiannino@bridgewell.org](mailto:lgiannino@bridgewell.org). Brenda J. Buote may be reached at [bbuote@globe.com](mailto:bbuote@globe.com). ■*