

From the St. Petersburg Times:
Mentoring program lets people dial for dialogue
Denise Watson Batts, Staff Writer

After years of working in social services, Ward Cox developed a simple idea: Why not connect people going through life's hardships – such as divorce or single parenting – with people who've successfully overcome them?

By using the phone, people could get help with a veil of anonymity. Small problems could possibly be worked out before exploding into crisis. And while it wouldn't replace professional counseling, phone buddies wouldn't live by a clock.

So Cox developed the Family Referral Network in 1998, which he runs out of a donated office on Sterling Avenue.

"There was a gap that I perceived," Cox said. "Human wisdom was an underused resource. This taps into the ultimate renewable resource."

Here's how it works: Cox recruits Mentors, typically (though not exclusively) from churches. The ones they help, Associates, can be self-referred but are often sent by other groups, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Cox screens Mentors through the Florida Department of Law Enforcement database. He asks them to note areas in which they feel comfortable giving advice, such as work-related issues, family or grief. He asks Associates for their areas of need. Cox then links partners for what he calls dialogues.

Mentors and Associates are only on a first name basis initially, and Cox sets up a time for the Mentor to call the Associate.

"The Mentor is the only one who calls so that the person who needs the help doesn't call at an unscheduled time," Cox said.

The Mentor and Associate then set up convenient times to call each week. If the two encounter a problem they can't deal with, they call Cox, who consults his list of counselors and psychologists who volunteer for the Network. The Associate can also be referred to another agency.

Mentors are asked to give at least one hour a week of their time. Cox hopes the dialogues will spark friendships.

"Another purpose of the Network is to rebuild the community, to give folks a mechanism to help one another and be one another's keeper."

He still runs a public relations consulting business called Get The Message out of his Lowry Park home, where he lives with his wife, Linda, who's a teacher. Cox does voiceover work and writes press releases for businesses and government agencies to help pay the bills.

Cox would like to have a paid staff with a clinical director, funded by grants or an endowment. He has an umbrella organization, For The Family, which includes the Family Referral Network. He hopes to expand it and include other community service programs.

Linda Bingham heard about the Network three years ago after she saw a display table at a fair. She signed up as a Mentor.

I thought there was definitely a need in the community,” Bingham said. “It’s free, it’s available. You don’t have to be just a Mentor or just an Associate. You can be both and draw from other mentors, and associates can teach you a lot about the world, too.”

Bingham, 38, volunteered because she felt she has a lot to offer. She home schools her three children. Bingham suffers from systemic lupus and is a survivor of domestic violence and post-traumatic stress disorder. She’s also a retired teacher.

She’s worked with several people over the years helping them with parenting and childcare dilemmas, and safety issues surrounding domestic violence.

“We talk about everything under the sun,” said Bingham, who lives in southeast Seminole Heights. “That’s one of the wonderful things about the program, the flexibility that we have.”

The Network allows her to volunteer from her home, which is a necessity with her lupus. Bingham has found that she gains as much as she hopes she helps. One of her Associates studied Judaism and taught Bingham songs, celebrations and customs.

At first, she thought the Network sounded “too optimistic.”

But she’s seen it work.

“A therapist can’t sit and talk to someone for four or five hours and talk them through a crisis,” Bingham said. “Not to say that I’m a therapist, but for someone who needs to work through a situation and rehash a situation, mentoring is a good ear.”

Betty Patterson, who lives in Palma Ceia, saw the program listed in a county resource guide last spring and the name caught her eye.

“I was going through some personal issues and looking for a new approach to deal with them and trying to find resolution,” said Patterson, 43.

Patterson’s Mentor calls her at least once a week, but if she needs to speak to her more frequently, she calls Cox to arrange more time. Her Mentor has helped her develop skills she might not have developed on her own.

“It’s amazing how it has changed my life,” she said.