

MEDICAL BRIEFS

Bipolar disorder

About two million Americans, or about 1 percent of the population, have bipolar disorder. Also known as manic-depression, bipolar disorder is a mental illness characterized by wide mood swings from mania (euphoric/irritable states) to depression (hopeless, unhappy states). A person with bipolar disorder usually returns to a normal mood in between episodes of mania and/or depression.

St. Mary Mercy Hospital, Livonia is offering a class, "The Complications and Treatment of Bipolar Disorder," from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Monday, Feb. 19 in West Addition Conference Room B of St. Mary Mercy Hospital. Pre-registration is requested. Call (734) 655-9344. St. Mary Mercy Hospital is located at the corner of Five Mile and Levan roads in Livonia. Use the south entrance off Levan Road.

New cancer therapy

A feasibility study is under way at the Hermlin Brain Tumor Center at Henry Ford Hospital to test a new drug delivery system to benefit patients with leptomeningeal metastasis, cancer in the lining of the brain or spinal cord.

The implanted drug delivery systems allows precise, programmable dosing for continuous intraventricular infusion of chemotherapy. To learn more about this study or to refer a patient, call Dr. Lisa Rogers at (313) 916-8662.

Acupressure

If you've ever wondered what acupressure is and if it could work for you, check out the Botsford Center for Health Improvement's acupressure class, 7-9 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 21.

The workshop discusses the technical theory and healing benefits of acupressure and acupressure and demonstrates pressure points for common ailments such as pain, tension, circulation and energy. The simple, practical applications of acupressure that physicians often use to enhance health will also be taught.

Botsford's Center for Health Improvement is located at 39750 Grand River in Novi. To register for the acupressure class or for more information, call (248) 477-6100. The cost is \$45 per person.

Volunteers

Oakwood Annapolis in Wayne is looking for individuals with some time to spare to work as hospital volunteers evenings, weekends and during the day.

Volunteers are needed to provide clerical help in various departments, work in the Gift Shop and visit with patients, particularly in the NICHE unit (Networking to Improve Care for Hospitalized Elderly). The Gift Shop needs a volunteer skilled in accounting practices and Quicken software, as well as those who can work in sales.

"We ask that volunteers be at least 18 years old and able to give us at least three hours in a block every week or every other week," said Deborah Norton, volunteer recruitment officer. "Other than that, we don't have restrictions. If people are willing to volunteer, we'll find something that will suit them and help the hospital."

Oakwood Annapolis will work with teenagers looking for volunteer opportunities to fulfill high school requirements. Prospective volunteers should call (313) 791-1991.

We want your health news

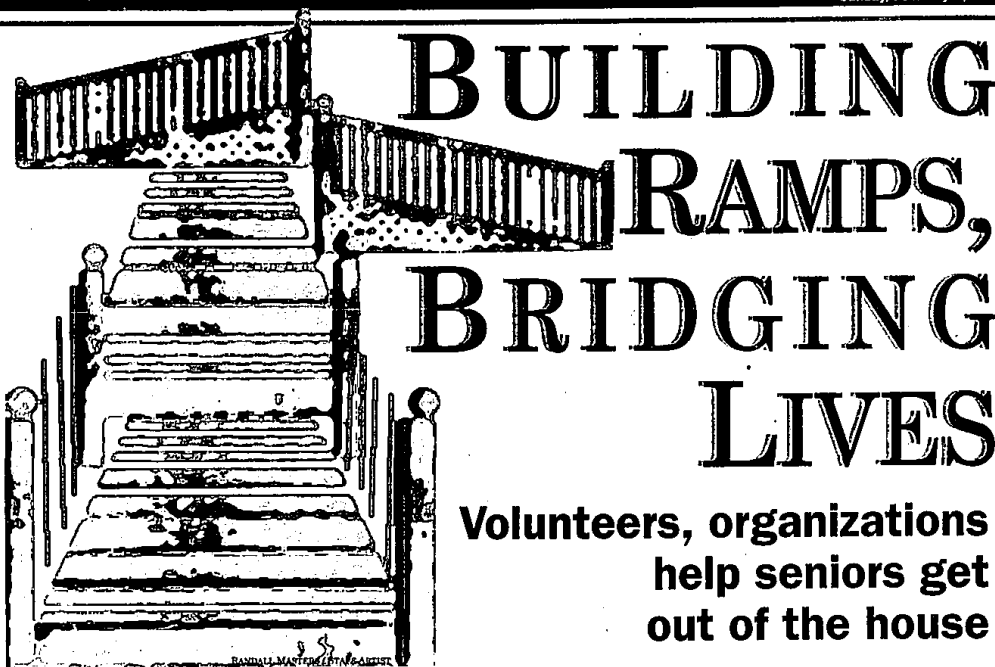
There are several ways you can reach the Observer Health & Fitness staff! The Sunday section provides numerous venues for you to offer noteworthy information including Medical Databook (upcoming calendar events), Medical Newsmakers (appointments/low bills in the medical field), and Medical Briefs (medical advances, short news items from hospitals, physicians, companies). We also welcome newsworthy ideas for health and fitness related stories. To submit an item to our newspaper you can call, write, fax or e-mail us.

CALL US:
(734) 953-2128

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BUILDING RAMPs, BRIDGING LIVES

Volunteers, organizations help seniors get out of the house

BY RENEE SKOGLUND
STAFF WRITER
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Allen Odell and Molly Mundt of Plymouth and Lisa Filar of Canton are spending a cold Monday morning in a barn off Jackson Road just west of Ann Arbor pounding nails in a bunch of 2-by-4s that eventually will become the backbone of a ramp. While none of them claim to be "Bob Villa," they know their efforts will soon make all the difference for a homebound resident in Wayne or Washtenaw county.

"I'm a retired occupational therapist and I know how badly ramps are needed and how costly they are," said Mundt above the din of hammers and saws.

"Most of my time is spent in volunteer work," says Odell, who retired from Frank's Nursery. "That way you stay active and have a job. You can do something for your fellow man."

Filar, a former newspaper ad and sales representative, says when it comes to a choice between vacuuming at home or building ramps at the barn, there's simply no choice.

"I'll volunteer all day long," Mundt, Odell and Filar are just three of several volunteers recruited by Sally Repeck and Dawn Vogel of Neighborhood Senior Services in Ann Arbor to build ramp modules, which, when assembled at site, will create a customized ramp. Since the volunteer program debuted in January 2000, 25 ramps have been built and installed. Repeck and Vogel hope to double that output this year.

The beginning
"When we first started this program, we were trying to find companies to purchase ramps from," says Repeck, president of Neighborhood Senior Services. "Ramps are expensive - about \$4,000 each - but cost was only one issue. We also couldn't find places that made ramps."

(The estimated production costs incurred by Neighborhood Senior Services range from \$3,600 to \$4,000 for the average ramp. This includes staff time, site assessment costs, delivery and transportation costs.)



Giving time: Neighborhood Senior Services volunteer Robert Vaclavek of Ann Arbor assembles the framework for a ramp module inside the barn.

Eventually, Repeck made contact with the Metropolitan Center for Independent Living in St. Paul, Minn., an agency already engaged in ramp-building program. They sent her their publication, *How to Build Ramps for Home Accessibility*.

"Next came the call for volunteers, who build the ramps with the help of licensed contractors. All ramps are made by code, and the group obtains all required permits."

Initially, production was slow. It took the fledgling group two months to complete one ramp, which typically measures 20 feet in length and is comprised of eight modules. The group wasn't saving as much money as they originally thought. The main culprit was lack of space.

Then, as often happens in volunteer efforts, a hero appeared.

Saint Joseph Mercy Health System offered the group the use of a barn located on property they own. The barn, which formerly housed a thrift shop, had been vacant for some time.

"First we had to vacate a family of raccoons," says Dawn Vogel, director of SNN's home maintenance and repair services. "We had to do a lot of shoveling of raccoon poop."

The group now had the room to order supplies in bulk, reducing costs, and the extra space allowed the volunteers to complete more ramps in a less time. In one five-month period, they produced 20 ramps.

Neighborhood Senior Services also made arrangements with N. A. Mann Company of Plymouth for a generous discount on lumber costs. "Because we now have the space, we can order a larger supply of lumber and get it at a discounted rate. Plus, they deliver the wood when their trucks are in our area," says Repeck.

Finances
The problem, says Repeck, is that no specific agency or source really funnels ramps. "If you are a senior on \$8,000 a year and you need a \$5,000 ramp, there aren't many resources. And if there's a fire, how are they going to get out?"

Funds for Neighborhood Senior Services' ramp-building program come from many sources, including the Townsend Foundation (which provided the start-up money), United Way, Community Foundation, Area Agency on Aging, the Kiwanis Club and other civic groups, and individual donors.

If a ramp recipient can pay, or at least share some of the costs, the money is used for people who can't pay. "I can't stress enough how much we need donations. We have to pay the staff and buy the wood," says Repeck.

The modular ramps have two significant built-in financial advantages: They can be taken down and re-used (on average, 75 percent of the ramp is salvageable) and, because there are no footing holes involved and no cement costs, the ramps can be

installed all year, even in the winter.

Permanent ramps are less visible. "When you take a permanent ramp down, you destroy it," said Repeck.

Costs are worked out with ramp recipients on an individual basis, says Repeck. There are also leasing possibilities. "Our main goal is that everybody has accessibility."

Expansion

Although Neighborhood Social Services installs ramps primarily in Washtenaw County - they presently have seven people on their waiting list that county - they are planning to extend their ramp-building program to Wayne County. It's a matter of getting the word out and the funding in.

Expanding services is also about getting more organizations and volunteers involved. Currently, Gordon Construction of Ann Arbor sends some of its carpenters over to the barn during the winter months rather than lay them off when workloads are low. And this spring, Washtenaw Community College may send some students from their building construction program. Repeck believes companies should volunteer their employees as part of team-building exercises. "You're all equal when pounding nails," she says.

For Fred Munson of Manchester, who's been volunteer ramp-builder for a year, the satisfaction is two-fold: "It's good to know people can stay in their homes because of something we do. If we can make it possible for someone to stay another six months, two years or five years, those are quality days," he said.

"Another reason is just plain selfish: I love it." Filar put her volunteer ramp-building efforts into perspective: "It's amazing. So I put together pallets. Big deal. But it is a big deal to these people when we put them up."

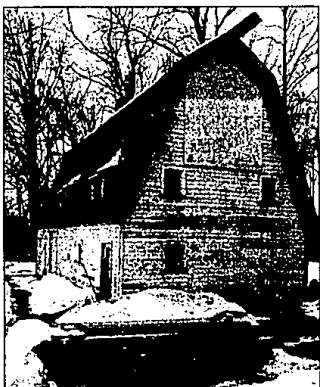
Contact Neighborhood Senior Services at (734) 712-7253 or (734) 712-7256.



Helping hand: Lisa Filar of Canton puts the finishing touches on a ramp module. You don't have to hit the nail on the head every time to be a volunteer, she says.

Gone from fat to fit?

Recently lost weight and started exercising? On the road to fitness? Tell us about the "new" you and send us some "before and after" pictures (you're entitled to bragging rights!). Send information to Renee Skoglund, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 30251 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia, MI 48150; fax: (734) 953-7279; e-mail: rskoglund@oe.homecomm.net; phone: (734) 953-2128. We prefer to receive photos by mail.



Workshop: A once vacant barn owned by St. Joseph Mercy Hospital now serves as the ramp-building headquarters.