

MEDIA RELEASE**5 April 2016**

Are you brave enough to befriend a complete stranger?

That's exactly what the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria (Vinnies) is encouraging Melbournians to do through its Compeer Program – read on to see if you've got what it takes.

St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria (Vinnies) is calling on Melbournians living in the eastern suburbs to sign up to its [Compeer Program](#) to help build meaningful connections and friendships with people experiencing mental illness in the community.

With around 20 per cent of adults reported to experience some form of mental illness every year, the Compeer Program is designed to break down the barriers of isolation and loneliness that often affect people experiencing mental illness by connecting them with people within their local community.

Manager of Vinnies Compeer Program, Elizabeth Cromb, said the program allows people from all walks of life to create friendships and to shape new experiences that broaden their horizons.

“We are so proud of the work undertaken in our Compeer program every day, as we see the benefits of introducing people experiencing mental illness with others who are willing and enthusiastic to make a difference in their lives. Something as simple as a regular cup of tea can be all it takes to lift someone’s spirits,” said Ms Cromb.

The Compeer Program does not come with any formal responsibilities, other than to offer a hand in friendship to someone with similar interests. There is no requirement to offer counselling or support services, but rather to offer a pathway into leisure time and friendship for as little as one hour a week.

“We have a team of five people at the Vinnies Central Office in Box Hill who provide a wide range of support for our Compeer Volunteers to ensure they have the knowledge, guidance and inspiration to show their new friends a good time. Often we’ll facilitate group functions, which are always well attended and appreciated,” says Ms Cromb.

The Vinnies Compeer Team is currently recruiting volunteers over the age of 21 in the eastern suburbs and is particularly inviting males to participate, as there is currently a shortage of men who can regularly volunteer their time. They will be hosting information sessions in Box Hill during April and May for anyone interested to learn more about how the program connects volunteers with a person living with mental illness.

A local forklift driver from Croydon, 46-year-old Steve Garland, signed up as a Compeer volunteer just over a year ago to give back to his local community and hasn’t looked back since. As a father of four with only a limited amount of time on his hands, Compeer was the perfect way for him to do his bit to give back.

“I had been looking for a volunteer activity within the community and I didn’t want something that was going to be too time consuming. Compeer is only a couple of hours a week, so I knew I could handle it very easily with other things I was doing,” says Steve.

Steve spends around 1.5 hours a week or a longer amount of time on a fortnightly basis with his friend, a middle aged man experiencing mental illness. He says the benefits go both ways.

“I don’t have a massive circle of friends and I’m a bit of a private person. So for me, it’s an opportunity to connect with the community as well. It’s a two way street - he’s gained a friend, but I’ve also gained a friend,” says Steve.

Steve says one of the great surprises and joys of the Compeer Program is getting to meet someone you might not otherwise encounter.

“The kind of friend you ask for and who you get matched with is a surprise. It’s like a present and part of the joy of establishing a relationship with someone you don’t know.

“I don’t think of people as having mental health issues, I just see people in need. With the guy I see, I don’t even know what he’s experiencing outside of our time together and it doesn’t matter. What matters is that we’ve established a friendship and rapport and we enjoy catching up each week,” says Steve.

Steve says he was well supported in selecting a friend who shared similar interests and has received guidance every step of the way in navigating his relationship. He’s urging others to embrace the experience and know that the Vinnies Compeer Team will have their back.

“People may be afraid to offer support for something that seems like an unknown. But it’s not really their job to offer support, it’s their job just to be a friend.”

To volunteer for the Compeer Program or to register for an upcoming information session in Box Hill phone the Compeer Team on 03 9895 5886 or email compeer@svdp-vic.org.au. Visit <http://bit.ly/compeer> for more information about the program.

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STORY RESOURCES: Manager of Vinnies Victoria Compeer Program, Elizabeth Cromb, and Compeer Volunteer, Steve Garland, are available for interviews upon request. A photo of Steve Garland may be downloaded [HERE](#).

About the St Vincent de Paul Society:

The St Vincent de Paul Society and its wide network of members and volunteers provide practical frontline support, advocacy and friendship for the most vulnerable members of our community. Key services include home visitation; youth programs; soup vans; assistance for asylum seekers and refugees; compeer programs for people experiencing mental illness; education and tutoring; and a range of professional accommodation and health services through the VincentCare network. The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia has more than 40,000 members and volunteers. Internationally, the Society operates in 149 countries and has over 950,000 members. To find out more visit www.vinnies.org.au.