



Alexian Brothers Center for Mental Health

Outpatient group therapy enables young adults to cope with mental illnesses

Plagued by bipolar disorder and substance-abuse issues, 24-year-old Samantha Kondle had dropped out of college and had been living in a nursing home when she was referred to the Alexian Brothers Center for Mental Health (ABCMH) for treatment in 2004. ABCMH at the time was developing a new outpatient group therapy program for young adults with significant mental illnesses, and Kondle, whose real name has been changed by *The Alexian Way* to protect her identity, became one of its first participants when ABCMH launched the program in 2006. During the next few years, she faithfully attended the program's weekly sessions, entered ABCMH's transitional housing program and enrolled in ABCMH's vocational rehabilitation program. Today, she works part-time, lives independently in her own apartment and plans to become a social worker after completing her college studies. "Her goal is to become a provider of the same services that she has been receiving," says Rick Germann, ABCMH Director of Operations. Kondle, now 30, continues her involvement with the young-adults program, even though she has come a long way since she first enrolled. "It helps sustain her day structure, and it's another outlet for her to keep maintaining those skills she needs to continue working on," says Mari Brzostowski, ABCMH Outpatient Therapist and Clinical Training Coordinator, who leads the program's group sessions and provides one-on-one therapy for many participants. "In addition, Samantha has taken on a sort of peer-mentor role in the program." Kondle is among several program participants who have learned to manage their mental illnesses and are now living independently. The program has had "a very dramatic impact," exemplifying the Alexian Brothers' mission and values by addressing an unmet community need, Germann says. The first symptoms of mental illness often appear as adolescents move into young adulthood and encounter stress factors such as starting college, entering the military or moving out on their own. Yet most outpatient group therapy programs are geared toward adults over 30, and young adults who join them often disengage quickly or tend not to open



ALEXIAN
BROTHERS
HOSPITAL NETWORK

A Healthy Community Begins with Alexian Brothers.

www.AlexianCenter.org

© 2009 Alexian Brothers Health System

up. Afflicted with depression, anxiety and/or other psychoses, they commonly opt to “selftreat” themselves with alcohol or drugs and retreat into isolation, Germann says. In the most severe cases, they become homeless. Between 2006 and the end of 2009, the program – one of only three of its kind in Illinois – treated a total of 84 young adults, most of whom lacked insurance coverage. “We’ve waived our fees to provide the service,” Germann says. The 54 individuals who participated in the program during its first two years collectively had logged 115 psychiatric hospitalizations before joining the program. During their two years in the program, they accounted for a total of five hospitalizations. Brzostowski’s dedication and creativity have been driving forces behind the program’s success, Germann says. She uses themes such as movies, music and sports to develop group activities and to foster group discussions, creating an engaging, collegial atmosphere in which young adults feel comfortable talking about their issues and challenges. “There’s no doubt that she has saved lives,” Germann says. In 2008 and 2009, ABCMH partnered with Roosevelt University to conduct a nine-month study of the young-adults program and its participants. The benefits of the program that they cited most often were the social support they received from peers and the development of coping skills, the study showed. Other benefits included increased assertiveness, increased independence and decreased substance abuse. ABCMH hopes to use the findings to win grants to expand the program, Germann says.



Mari Brzostowski who leads Alexian Brothers Center for Mental Health’s outpatient group therapy sessions for young adults, uses themes such as movies, music and sports to develop activities and to foster discussions, creating an engaging, collegial atmosphere in which participants feel comfortable talking about their issues and challenges.

