

## **Mental-health recovery education program heads to Corry March 1**

By Stephen Sears

Gail Cash remembers sitting in the living room of her Erie home and watching a small bird hopping on the railing of her front porch.

Her cat was interested, too, and ran to the window, purring. "I couldn't figure out why that bird kept acting like that," Cash said.

Then she looked closer: The baby bird's parents were teaching their fledgling how to fly.

That unexpected peek into nature's mystery was an epiphany for Cash,

"I wanted to fly, too," said Cash, who suffered from anxiety and depression.

Cash sought treatment and is now recovering from her mental illness. Better yet, Cash, 70, now works as a trained certified peer specialist for the Mental Health Association of Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Cash will bring her personal experience to Corry for a 10-week recovery education program for adults with mental illness, such as depression, bipolar, and schizophrenia. The free Peer-to-Peer program will be held for 10 consecutive Tuesdays, beginning March 1, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Corry Counseling services, 45 E. Washington St.

Peer-to-Peer is sponsored by the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Erie County, Corry Counseling Services, the Arlene H. Smith Charitable Foundation and the Corry Community Foundation, which awarded NAMI a \$6,800 grant to finance the recovery education program.

"We're very fortunate to have this support," said Denise Kolivoski, executive director of NAMI of Erie County. "Funding cuts are always around the corner. There is a great need for mental health advocacy in Corry. This is a great opportunity."

This course offers a holistic approach to recovery through a combination of lecture, discussion, interactive exercises and stress-management techniques. A different topic will be discussed. Topics include psychosis, suicide, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, medications and their side effects, and how the brain works.

Cash will lead the program with fellow trained peer mentor Dave Wooledge, who also is recovering from mental illness. Materials will be provided free of charge to all participants, and the course will be taught in a relaxed setting at the counseling center.

"Everything is confidential," Kolivoski said. "The course creates a professional, but open atmosphere where people don't have to be afraid to talk about their struggles and successes."

Ann Hippely, an outpatient counselor for Corry Counseling Services, believes having the course taught by trained mentors who have experienced mental illness—and recovery—is vital.

“There is nothing like talking to someone who has been through that you’ve been through,” Hippely said. “You see people who have been through it, and are now going forward.”

Cash has taught several Peer-to-Peer courses. Each time, peer mentors like herself come away enriched.

“The members in the class often have insights that inspire us,” Cash said. “We learn a lot from the students.”

She hopes class members also learn that they can recover from mental illness.

“We want to give people hope,” Cash said. “A lot of the time people feel desolate and lack self-esteem. We want them to take responsibility for their own lives and develop a support system.”

The Peer-to-Peer program is meant to be preventative, Kolivoski said. Left untreated, mental illness can lead to unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, inappropriate incarceration, suicide and wasted lives, she said.

With treatment, however, people who suffer from mental illness can lead happier and more productive lives.

“Between 70 percent and 90 percent of individuals who seek recovery see an improved quality of life,” she said.

To register for Peer-to-Peer, call NAMI of Erie County office at 456-1773 or register at [www.namierie.org](http://www.namierie.org). Registration deadline is Feb. 28.

Class size is limited to 25 people.