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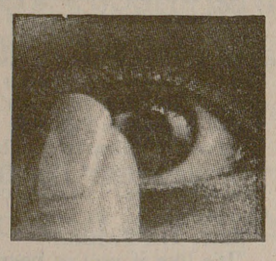

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MHMR helps retarded adults find friendship

ABILENE (AP) — When Donald Baird sinks his teeth into a juicy burger, his face has that familiar look of hunger finally satisfied.

When his mother is hospitalized with heart problems, Donald Baird's eyes betray his worry.

And when Donald Baird meets someone new, he has that slight, stomach-quivering feeling that nervously mixes with the excitement and anticipation of potential friendship.

Normality? Yes.

But Donald Baird is mentally retarded.

Robbye Wilde is the coordinator of volunteer services and public information for Abilene's Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center. Without denying Donald's mental disability, she'll affirm Donald's normality with an emphatic "Yes!"

Then, with combined sadness and anger, she'll tell you about the stereotype — the one Donald is lumped in, ironically, by people who don't even know him.

The category is assigned by adjectives such as "strange," "not-with-it" and "dangerous." The image the word "retarded" conjures people with major intellect loss and no control of bodily functions.

"Ninety-nine percent of people with mental retardation are just like you and me," she says. "And the needs are the major things we share." One of those very basic needs often denied to the retarded she says is simple friendship.

"And to deny them friendship is to deny them the dignity of being a human being," she says.

MHMR finds volunteer friends for its clients, friends that bestow dignity.

Just ask Donald Baird.

Baird, 35, and Michael Holley, 18, sat shoulder to shoulder, Baird clearly excited at the prospect of being interviewed.

"You see, I'm the biggest," Baird jokes, elbowing Michael. "I'm a special friend to him since I'm the oldest."

Baird's attitude sobered as he began shaking his head and reflecting on the days before Holley.

While adequate, life in his providership home, where trained citizens look after him, and work on a janitorial crew did not foster the development of any close friendships.

As the void began to take its toll, Baird's behavior began to change — unprofitable and unacceptable changes.

Robbye Wilde sensed the need for friendship.

Holley, a freshman Bible-society major at Abilene Christian University, sensed something else. Something Wilde might call a spiritual overflow of goodness. Holley acted on it in September 1989.

"I felt like I had a lot of time and resources to give," Holley says. He thumbed through the yellow pages and called MHMR.

"I mean, it was like God sent him (Holley)," Wilde says. "It was that quick."

Baird displays a similar sentiment.

"I thought he was the person God had sent my way," he says. "It just touched my heart when I first saw him ... I was kind of depressed.

"When I see him — it just makes me feel like I'm somebody special to have a special friend like him."

Every week and a half or so, Holley plans something — eating at the mall, video arcades, miniature golf or a concert. And talking all the while.

"Our friendship — it's an equal friendship," Holley says. "It goes both ways. I can tell him anything. In return I've received much more than I've given."

Sherry Griffin, 34, works with the mentally retarded every day as special populations supervisor for the city's Recreation Department. But she stepped outside her job and volunteered her friendship.

She became Darlene Benton's hero.

"I tell her my problems, and she solves them," a laughing Benton says.

Benton, 32, has a simple view of friendship. She calls it "being around someone you like."

"And I like being around Sherry," she adds.

The two like to eat out together and enjoy going to movies.

"I really really enjoy being around Darlene," Griffin says. "It's just like with any other of my close friends.

"I do think there's something within you that you understand and realize about these individuals. I have that understanding that these individuals are just like myself," she said.

Charles Way, 37, acknowledges his shyness.

> **"It just touched my heart when I first saw him ... I was kind of depressed. When I see him — it just makes me feel like I'm somebody special to have a special friend like him."**
>
> **—Donald Baird, MHMR buddy**

"I'm a quiet person," Way says slowly, looking down at his hands.

But Way's volunteer buddy, Keenan Wynn, says that comes in handy when you're trying to fish. And that's what the two like to do.

"We went out to Nelson Park, but we won't talk about that now," says Wynn, 27, smiling. Apparently, the two have yet to make that one big catch to brag about.

Wynn, who is stationed at Dyess Air Force Base, answered Wilde's ad in the base newspaper, looking for a volunteer friend who liked to fish.

"It's just people getting to know people — just another person to talk to — a friend to fish with," he says. "And a popcorn eater," he joked, adding that the two plan to take in a lot of movies together.

Terry Brooks and volunteer friend Scott Todd — another Air Force man who responded to Wilde's ad in the Dyess newspaper — lift weights together at Abilene's Power Shack Gym.

Todd, 27, who works with the base bomb squad, ranks fifth in the nation in his powerlifting divison.

"The good Lord gave me the ability to do what I can do," he says. "The least I can do is share it."

Brooks, 33, is convinced that Todd can do a lot more than lift weights.

"He's a good man," Brooks says. Todd has encouraged Brooks to quit smoking, promising him a pair of stretch pants if he can go without a cigarette for two months.

The two clearly are buddies. Their conversations are peppered with laughter as they continuously joke with one another.

"He's just like anyone else in this gym," Todd says. Except, he adds, Brooks has more drive than the average weight lifter.

"If some guys took the heart that he had for lifting, they could go a long way," he says.

Brooks will test his skills this summer when he and Todd and their wives travel to Galveston for a weightlifting meet. Brooks will compete in the Special Olympics division.

"Terry is a part of this gym," Todd says. "He's a part of all of us."

New cable program spotlights Texas musicians, songwriters

AUSTIN (AP) — Texas musicians are featured on a new, national stage on cable television's The Nashville Network's newest program, "The Texas Connection."

The weekly series showcases Texas musicians and songwriters, said Cathy Lehrfeld, spokeswoman for Group W Communications.

"There's so much terrific country music coming out of Texas," she said. "It's such a vital scene that has a broad appeal across the country.

"We felt this would be a good time to explore it in depth."

The half-hour show, which tapes before a live audience in Austin, is being produced by the team of Bill Arhos and Terry Lickona of PBS's "Austin City Limits." Arhos is executive producer and Lickona producer of the PBS program.

"Terry and Bill have such a great track record with 'Austin City Limits,' " Lehrfeld said. "They have the wherewithal to tap into this whole great scene.

"Austin is kind of the hotbed of the Texas music scene, and we felt that there were a lot of different fields that TNN would like to look into — to show a presence that represents different parts of the country.

"You've got rockabilly, Texas swing, country rock, folk influences ... It runs the gamut."

Lehrfeld said TNN plans 26 installments of "The Texas Connection" in the first year. The shows air Saturday evenings, with several repeat performances during the following weeks.

Among artists scheduled for the program are Robert Earl Keen Jr. and the Austin Lounge Lizards, Lyle Lovett and Austin veteran Jerry Jeff Walker.

San Antonio native Tish Hinojosa is scheduled to perform songs from her debut LP "Homeland" on the program in late April.

May shows are slated to include singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt, Steve Fromholz, and Guy Clark. Austin blues singer Marsha Ball is scheduled for June.

"We want to show a broad range of styles," Lehrfeld said. "TNN's viewers have told us they love country music and want more of it.

"This gives them more, and it zeros in on one real, vital area of the country."

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