

Education and a listening ear help the disabled to avert crises

By Teresa A. Parsons

Perhaps because the world is full of crises, you don't hear very much about the ones Vincent Anderson handles.

Like that of the young man with cerebral palsy who is about to be evicted from his apartment because he doesn't keep himself or his cat's litterbox clean.

Or the woman who is slowly starving because she was released from a state institution knowing even less about what goes into a balanced meal than about how to cook one.

Or the man who needs an interpreter because the doctor who is fitting him with eyeglasses can't understand his garbled speech.

As crises go, these may seem relatively limited in scope. But thanks to the Stresswatch program, there is someone to respond. It is Anderson, the program's social worker, who dashes over to the eye doctor's office, who teaches adults about cooking and nutrition, who explains to a 25-year-old man why he needs to bathe regularly and negotiate with his landlord.

"There's no other program in the state — or even in the country, that I know of — that does what we do," Anderson said. "We are more or less like a family here."

Because many disabled people were raised apart from their families in institutions, they may never have learned independent living skills, such as cleaning or cooking, according to Anderson's supervisor, Lucy Dechaine, who coordinates programs for the disabled at the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry.

"There are a lot of things the rest of us learn while growing up that (disabled people) missed," she explained. "Many of them were thrust into the world when they were released from institutions, and they weren't given the necessary follow-up."

Much of the time, Anderson works one-on-one with clients in their homes, as well as in his office. In addition to regular office hours, he is on call 24 hours a day, five days a week. "We can intervene in a crisis situation first and do the paperwork later," he explained. "Most agencies work otherwise."

When he's not caught up in emergencies, Anderson tries to prevent them. He has organized a support group for clients, who meet on Thursday to help each other cope with various disabilities.

On Wednesdays, he teaches "Micromania" — a class on how to cook inexpensive, nutritious meals using a microwave oven. Thanks to a state grant program, many disabled people have been able to purchase microwaves that often sit idle, unless someone teaches the owners how to use them.

Headquartered at the Edgerton Recreation Center on Backus Street, Stresswatch shares space with the Action Center for the Disabled. Thanks to the Action Center, a Catholic charities-sponsored program that has offered social and recreational activities since 1981, Anderson got a running start with Stresswatch last July.

In the course of helping their clients plan activities, Action Center staff members Adele Carlson and Bill Smouse became familiar with the problems facing the disabled. Typically, such difficulties ranged from a shortage of funds or a lack of transportation to evictions or abuse by neighbors or family members. Before long, Carlson and Smouse found they had little time left for anything other than solving clients' problems.

Realizing the need for someone able to do crisis intervention and teach independent liv-



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Steve Roman watches rice steam in the microwave oven, during a special cooking class for disabled people. The class was held at the Edgerton Recreation Center February 4.



Adele Carlson, left, tests John Bianchi's pot pie for doneness.



Steve Roman, left, adds the finishing touches to his rice, as Gloria Love looks on.

ing skills on a full-time basis, Lucy Dechaine applied for a \$32,000 grant from the state Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

In June, Dechaine learned that the grant would be funded, and by July, Anderson was getting down to work.

Anderson, 33, added eight years' professional experience to the groundwork the Action Center provided. After earning a degree in communications from SUNY Brockport in 1978, he spent more than two years as a training specialist for the Association for the Blind. In 1981, he was hired by the Rochester Re-

habilitation Workshop, where he worked for five years as a production supervisor.

He was attracted to Stresswatch by the chance to deal with people rather than production. "I wanted to get out in the community, to do hands-on work," he said. "This was in-

Continued on Page 12

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