

Mount Carmel senior makes a difference

When Chelsea Tolley first started visiting women with developmental disabilities a few years ago at a group home operated by Catholic Charities' Gallagher Services, the outgoing teen had a hard time making a connection with Joan.

An elderly woman with bad knees, Joan refused to get in on the games, discussions and other activities led by Chelsea as part of a volunteer outreach ministry.

"She didn't want to have anything to do with it," said Chelsea, an 18-year-old senior at Our Lady of Mount Carmel High School, Middle River.

"She just sat by herself."

But after months of gentle cajoling, Chelsea was eventually able to coax Joan into joining the other three women for the weekly free-wheeling visits. Now Chelsea counts her as one of her closest friends.

"She can't wait to see me," said Chelsea with a laugh. "She's like a member of my family."

Chelsea enjoys her volunteer activities because they make a difference in the lives of others, she said. Much of her time is spent chatting with the women.

The blond-haired, electric-guitar-playing youth also makes crafts, plays board games and enjoys fellowship with women who are more than three decades her senior.

"There's something amazing about them," said Chelsea, a parishioner of Our Lady of Mount Carmel who has also volunteered for two years working with pregnant women and newborns at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore.

"They have no evil in their heart," she said. "They hate no one, and they never turn their back on you."

Smiling brightly, she added: "And they can keep a secret."

Chelsea said the Gallagher residents have taught her what love is all about.

"I like making their day," she said. "When I'm there, they're smiling all the time."

With plans to attend Villa Julie College in Stevenson in the fall, Chelsea is considering possible careers in nursing or working with people with developmental disabilities. She thinks more people should reach out to those with mental disabilities.

"People think they're not normal," she said. "But they're really the most normal people in the world. "They are the best friends I've ever had."