

Fresh paint dots the jeans of Palo Alto computer expert Tina Redse, 30, who formerly helped guide Apple Computer's philanthropic programs. The paint that's not on her is being applied to the walls of 3000 square feet of prime office space on downtown Palo Alto's University Avenue—space recently donated to the MIND Project by Palo Alto developer Jim Baer.

The MIND Project, founded by Redse and former Palo Alto journalist Linder Allen, 50, provides mentally ill Californians with a free, 24-hour, interactive, computerized network. The long-term goal, according to Redse, is the creation of an integrated, interactive computerized data exchange service that links clients to mental health resources. "The right information exchanged by the right people at the right time can make a difference in people's lives," says Redse, who now works full-time on the project.

"I have some pretty exciting things to talk about when I get home how," says Beth, a 29-year-old mental health client who is the MIND Project's first employee. Beth credits the MIND Project with helping her find a new perspective on her situation. "It's not like I'm bitching about life all the time anymore," she says.

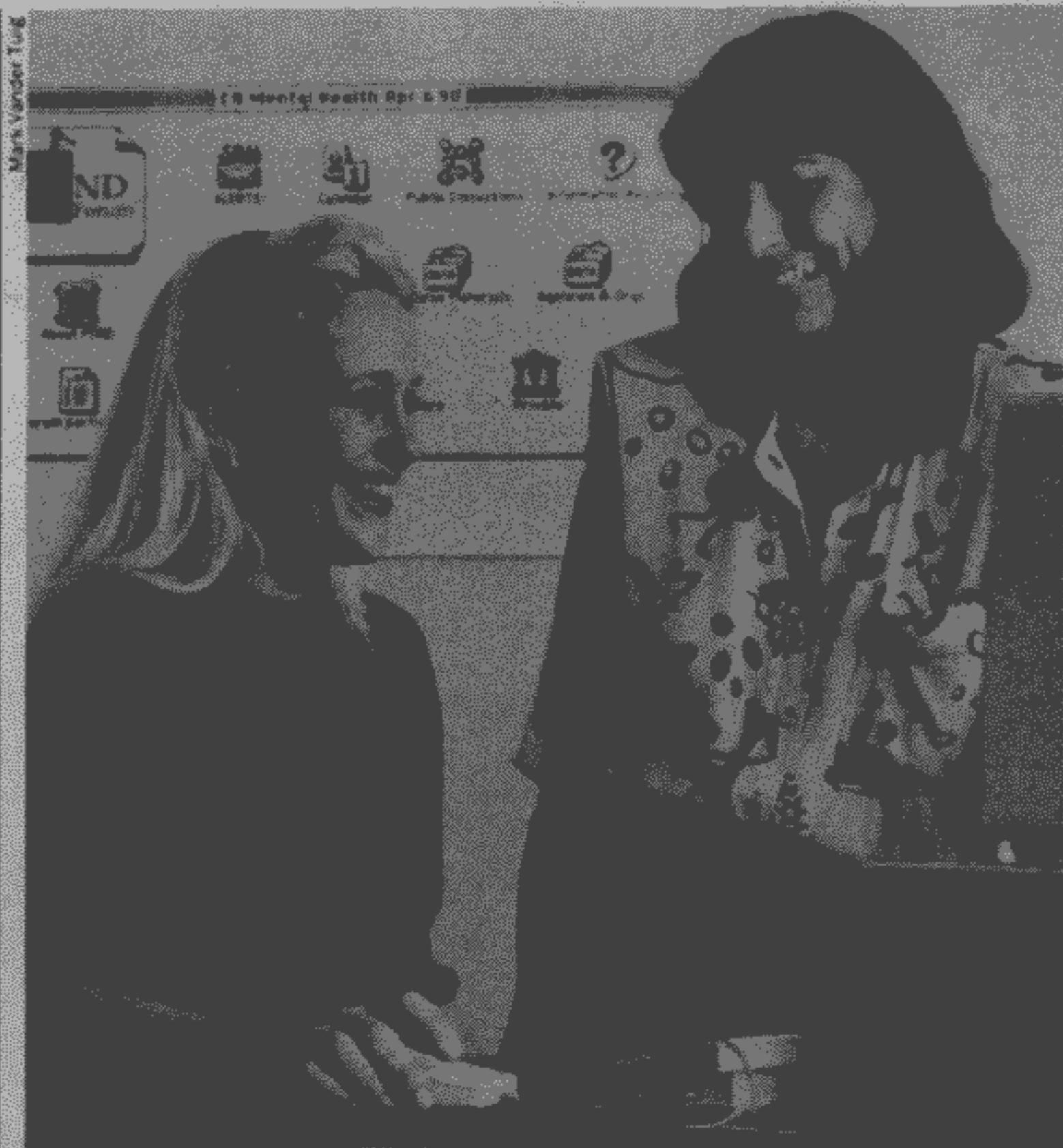
This time a year ago, Beth was a patient at the Crestwood Manor Psychiatric Facility. "You feel like a cross between a child and an inmate," she says. Hospitalized four times for psychiatric ailments between 1985 and 1989, Beth says she "wore out" her family.

"The isolation is the hardest thing," she says. "You feel like you are the only person who has ever felt the way you do, no one seems to understand. They [clinicians] sit there and take notes and nod their heads, but how can they possibly know how I feel?"

Still in its infancy, the MIND Project has already drawn considerable praise. Frustrated mental health professionals, like the County Mental Health Services Bureau's somewhat controversial new director, Bob Martinez, say better communication is urgently needed in the mental health community. "It enhances our ability to shape a mental health system that better serves patient needs," Martinez says.

Officials at the state level also endorse the concept. "It's part of the whole new approach to mental illness that is bubbling up from the community level," says state mental health program director Charles Roppel. "It's very promising," he says. So far, roughly 60 participants, including 11 from within the county's mental health bureau, log on regularly.

MIND Project co-founder Linder Allen, who has a mentally ill son, started the project when she realized that, as a parent of an afflicted child, she knew more



Making Connections: Linder Allen (right) plans to develop her MIND Project into a computerized network that will help clients sort out the state's hodgepodge of mental health services.

about available resources than most mental health professionals. Allen met Redse, a friend of her son's, at the psychiatric trial that might have sent the younger Allen to Atascadero State Prison. Their discussions outside the courtroom sparked the MIND Project.

As the project's technical director, Redse tutors mental health clients in computer skills, while Allen works at getting more support for the project. Both she and Redse lament the fact that computers built in Silicon Valley that can pinpoint Iraqi bombing targets but haven't yet been employed to locate an empty local shelter space or an available mental health resource.

According to Allen, locating such resources, like a customized treatment plan or an available hospital bed, is one of the most pressing problems faced by the mentally ill. Redse and Allen hope the MIND Project will grow into a totally client-run network that can sort out the state's hodgepodge of services. "It's a joke to say we have a mental health system," Allen says. "But if the MIND Project works, we may develop one."

Founded with private donations and small grants from the Zellerbach Foundation and the county, the project is now scrambling for money, especially since its county funding did not survive the most recent round of budget cuts. Director Martinez says he believes the project is "one of the most important things going on here," but he's unsure if the county will be able to fund the project again.

The loss of county funds disturbs

Redse and Allen, but they are determined to persevere. Beth's accomplishments give the two special pride. Since coming to the MIND Project, she's developed an interest in business administration and computers, and she's decided to go back to college. "It's not just manufacturing documents," she says of computer networking, "it's communicating, linking up with people and seeing how they are dealing with problems."

In addition to these innovative, client-oriented programs, Santa Clara County has another resource in its county mental health system: Carole Calkins, executive director of Permanent Housing for the Mentally Ill, a local nonprofit umbrella agency that sponsors the MIND Project, Permhousing and SANE, Inc., three agencies that supply mental health clients with information, housing and guidance.

Calkins' story exemplifies the vital role that citizen activists play in Santa Clara County's mental health system. The mother of a schizophrenic, Calkins, 50, once ran a gourmet food shop in Los Altos. "But I was so enraged by the lack of services for the mentally ill, I just had to do something."

That something was guided by her realization that a primary need of the mentally ill was housing. Active in the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Calkins says she kept hearing variations on the same story. "The biggest issue is housing," she says. "How are we going to stabilize these people and help them live productive lives if