

Role-Playing



Technology With a Heart

CaringBridge, a free online service, helps individuals stay connected with family and friends during times of crisis—and it's easy to use.

BY JIMMY TOMLIN

WHEN IT COMES TO computer savvy, Lisa Fleming didn't know a Web site from a campsite.

"I was so computer-illiterate when I started, I thought that when you turned off the screen, you had turned off the whole computer," the Forest Lake, Minnesota, woman says with a laugh. "I was the self-proclaimed queen of low-tech."

So in August 2004, when a nurse encouraged the young mother to create a Web site to keep friends and family abreast of her 2-year-old daughter Sophia's prognosis, she felt intimidated. Not long after logging on to the CaringBridge Web site, however, Fleming unexpectedly found herself designing pages like a master—a Webmaster, that is—thanks to the site's unique, user-friendly concept of "compassion technology."

CaringBridge, a nonprofit organization based in Eagan, Minnesota, is a free online service designed to keep families and loved ones connected when someone is facing a serious health condition. The service allows individuals to create—quickly and easily—private, personalized Web sites featuring journal entries and photographs; well-wishers can visit a site, read the updates, browse through the photos and leave messages of encouragement.

CaringBridge stands out as an innovative, shining example of how the technology of the Internet can be put to good use.

Most importantly, the service frees up family members to focus on their most important task—caring for their loved one—rather than spend untold hours on the telephone passing along updates.

In Fleming's case, Sophia had been in the hospital for extended periods as doctors tried to get her seizure disorder under control. Fleming was flooded with inquiries from well-meaning relatives and friends.

"Sophia had been in the hospital for about a month," Fleming recalls, "and I was trying to field an enormous number of questions from friends and family. . . . Everybody wanted to know how she was doing. The phone was constantly ringing, and it was taking away from my ability to care for Sophia. I couldn't deal with it."

That's when a nurse at Children's St. Paul, a pediatric hospital near Fleming's hometown, suggested she take a break from Sophia's bedside and visit the hospital's Family Resource Center, where she could go online and set up a CaringBridge site for Sophia.

Here's how it works: Pretty much anyone can go to the CaringBridge site (www.caringbridge.org) and create—free—a private, personalized Web site for a family member or friend dealing with a serious health condition or some other situation in which the person needs to keep others updated. The three-step process for creating a site is user-friendly—even for neophytes like Lisa Fleming—and not the least bit cumbersome. Each site includes a display of journal entries that can be updated daily or even more frequently. Photos can be uploaded to the site. There's also a guest book that allows visitors to the site to send messages of love and encouragement, as well as the opportunity to provide additional links—for example, a cancer patient's site might include a link to the American Cancer Society's Web site.

"I couldn't believe how simple it was," Fleming says. "It's very user-friendly. I had never done anything with computers, but there was no confusion about 'How do I work this?' or 'How do I change my journal entry?' I actually figured out how to upload photos by myself."

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That's exactly what CaringBridge executive director Sona Mehring had in mind when she founded the organization in 1997—a simple, low-maintenance way for individuals facing a health crisis to stay connected to family and friends. CaringBridge came about when Mehring, upon learning that two of her friends were having a baby prematurely, asked if there was anything she could do for them. The couple asked if she would simply help spread the word about their situation, and that's when Mehring—whose background is in technology—hit on the idea of creating a Web site that would allow loved ones to stay informed.

"The real magic was the ability to connect to everybody instantly," Mehring says. "It's so important to stay connected to friends and family when you're going through that stressful life event. I created the site the night the baby was born, and CaringBridge has just grown phenomenally since then."

The uses for this technology go beyond health crises. According to Mehring, couples who are adopting internationally—which often requires them to be in a foreign country for weeks at a time—have created CaringBridge sites to keep family and friends posted on the proceedings. And after Hurricane Katrina struck the U.S. Gulf Coast in 2005, a displaced nursing home created individual sites for all of its residents.

Another popular use for the site in recent years has been creating pages for military personnel injured in Iraq. That's what the family of Lt. Andrew Kinard did when the young Marine was nearly killed in an explosion in Iraq in October 2006. The blast claimed both of his legs, he lost a tremendous amount of blood, and he went into cardiac arrest while being transported to a hospital near Baghdad. He remained in a coma for several weeks. For Kinard's family, CaringBridge was a lifeline to the outside world.

"I can't imagine not having had it," says Kinard's sister, Katherine Gouch of Greenville, South Carolina. "There's a lot to handle in a situation like that. We needed people to know what was going on so they could be praying for him, but you don't want to be spending all that time on the phone. CaringBridge was just a huge, huge blessing."

At a time when the Internet is making headlines for a lot of the wrong reasons, CaringBridge stands out as an innovative, shining example of how the technology can be put to good use. More than 90,000 CaringBridge sites have been created since the organization's inception, and a new site is created every 10 minutes, Mehring says. According to Nielsen/NetRatings, it's the third-largest nonprofit Web site in the world.

“Once an author creates a site, they notify friends and family about the site so they can visit it,” Mehring explains. “You can establish your own level of privacy. Some are open, and some are very private and personal for their unique situation. The author really controls the look and the feel of the site.”

Fostering Hope

Another way that computer technology can be put to good use? Spreading the word that May just happens to be **National Foster Care Month** in the United States. For information on how you can “change a lifetime,” visit www.fostercaremonth.org.

to field so many phone calls and tell the same story a hundred times a day. And that lets me put my focus where it needs to be—on Sophia’s care.”

The technology even provides for notifying visitors when the author has updated the site. “They get an e-mail telling them the site has been updated, and they’re one click away from going to the site and finding out what’s happening,” Mehring says. “We send out over a quarter-million of those every day.”

That was critical for Fleming, who recalls the time in March 2006 when Sophia was in intensive care, on a ventilator, and nearly died. “With something like that, you want people to know what’s going on, but you can’t call all those people,” she says. “The CaringBridge site makes things manageable. You’re not having

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ILLUSTRATION BY MARGARET LEE