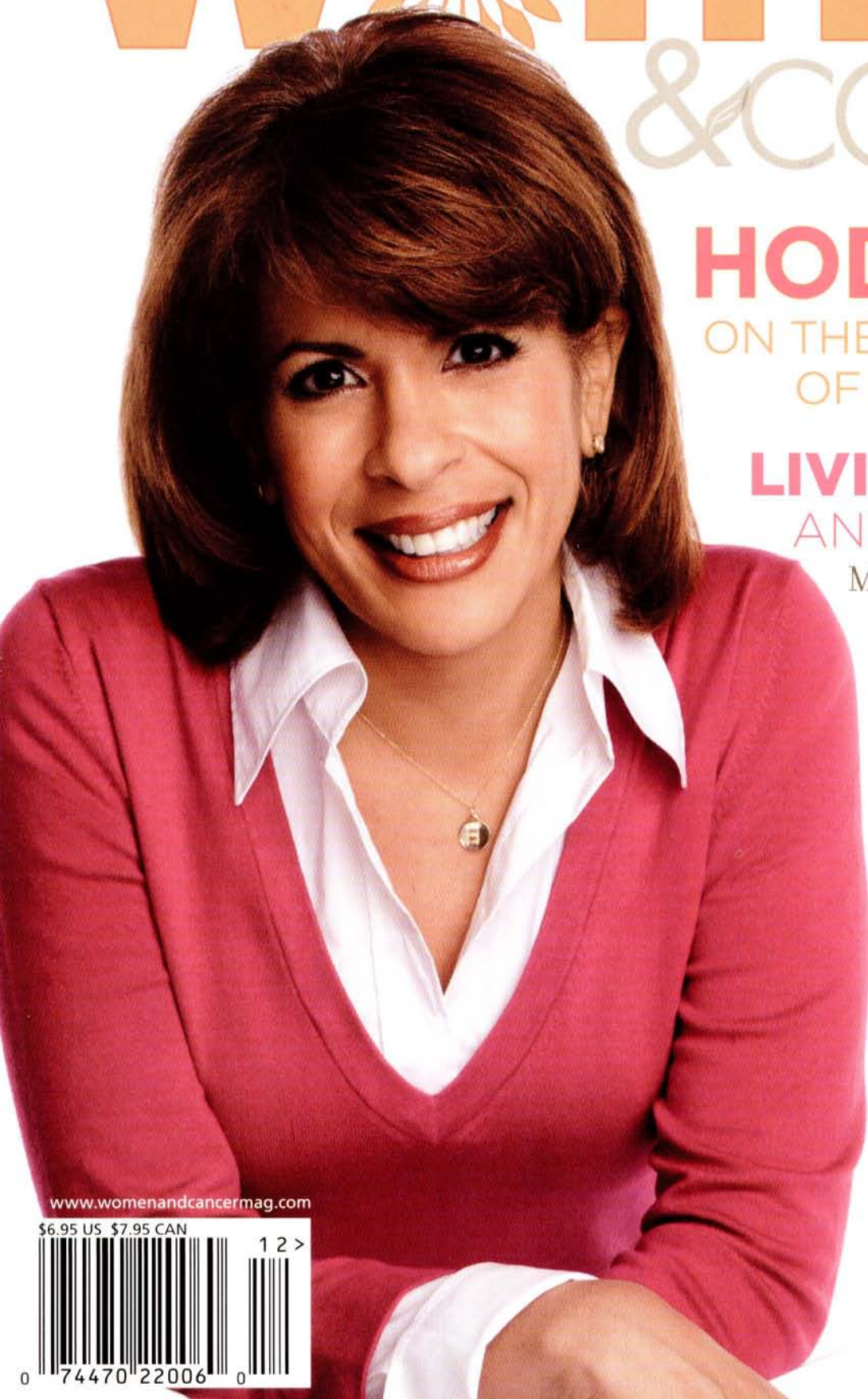


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CARINGBRIDGE



Sona Mehring, founder of CaringBridge

Personal Web sites unite patients, friends, and family to share news, celebrations, comfort, and hope.

By Mia James

The popular adage that there is strength in numbers is never more evident than when a community of family and friends rallies around a loved one at the time of a health crisis or accident. Many times, however, invaluable members of these circles live too far from the ill or injured person to be physically present to lend support and stay updated on treatments, progress, and ups and downs. And for primary caregivers, the task of keeping the larger community informed can be both time-consuming and emotionally draining—resources better saved for the individual in need.

Just over 10 years ago, Sona Mehring confronted this communication challenge while trying to spread word about a difficult time faced by dear friends. Fortunately for all involved, Sona added to her compassion for her friends' plight a fervent belief in the power of the Internet to connect people as well as the technical expertise to make it happen. The result was a Web site that would connect family and friends involved in this immediate situation and the launch of CaringBridge, a free online service that, by building personal Web sites, has connected millions of others during challenging times.

As the 501(c)(3) nonprofit Web service states on its site (www.caringbridge.org), its services include "free, personalized websites that support and connect loved ones during critical illness, treatment, and recovery." Each site is of course personalized by its creators and may include journal updates

and a guest book where visitors may post messages, photos, and links to relevant educational and support resources.

Of CaringBridge's contribution to lives affected by a health crisis, Sona, founder and executive director, explains that these Web sites ease burdens for both patients and caregivers by allowing all involved relief from the "time commitment and the emotional commitment of repeating the story and making all those phone calls." She continues, "They know how important it is to keep everybody up-to-date, but physically doing that, both on an emotional level and just a time level, is extremely taxing."

The more than 75,000 sites created since its launch in 1997 confirm that the service has been well received. As a testament to the value of CaringBridge's Web sites, Sona explains that the organization has grown mostly by person-to-person recommendations, as grateful users encourage others to learn about its services: "It has grown very organically, so as people knew about it, friends would tell friends, family would tell family. That's still the primary way CaringBridge grows—someone who's used it will tell others about it."

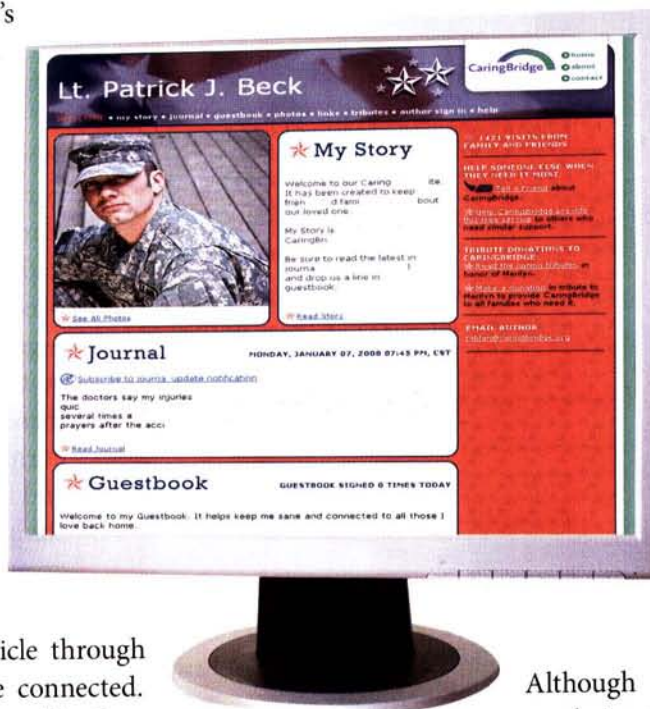
Technology is of course a tremendous component of CaringBridge and the vehicle through which friends and family are connected. "Compassion Technology," created by Sona and CaringBridge, combines the human elements of care and concern with the Internet's ability to connect people. As Sona explains, the concept is "being able to use



technology in a compassionate way." Her initial goal was to "bring together use of technology, use of the Internet—which many people have felt to be cold and careless—into something that really is compassion." The name for this integration of technology and emotion—Compassion Technology—Sona explains,

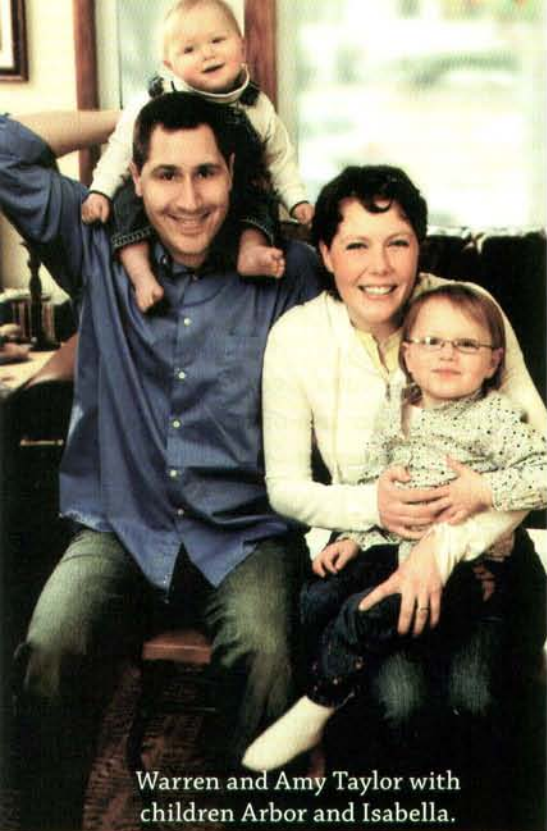
represents a union of "that human spirit element together with technology." In other words, instead of seeing technology only for its cut-and-dried utility, Sona has recognized these vast communication capabilities as a way to share human warmth. Furthermore, even though an online message can't replace the comfort of a human presence, the Internet brings its own share of assets. Photos, for example, are easily shared, and users can send messages at any time, allowing friends and family to share "when they're very present in the moment," Sona says. Because

of this accessibility, she explains, "sharing is at a deeper emotional level."



Mindful of the fact that many people are not as tech-savvy as Sona herself (her professional background is in technology and Web design), she's made the technology behind creating a CaringBridge Web site highly user-friendly. A step-by-step guide to site building can be found on CaringBridge.org, as well as all the other tools and guidance to help a new user get started.

Although CaringBridge sites are used by people in a variety of medical circumstances (for example, premature births, car accidents, and military injuries), cancer patients compose a high number of the community. Sona explains that a personal Web site is



Warren and Amy Taylor with children Arbor and Isabella.

A Closer Look: *One Special CaringBridge Site*

One of the most striking things about visiting a CaringBridge Web site is the sense of hope and optimism that so many of the stories, journal entries, and photos making up their pages convey. Amy Taylor and family's site is one such shining example. The Minnesota-based Taylor family has candidly and tenderly shared Amy's journey, beginning with her December 2005 diagnosis of Stage II ductal carcinoma breast cancer through her current battle as the disease has progressed to Stage IV. But the Taylors' site is far more than a record of diagnoses, treatments, and disease status: Amy, along with husband Warren and their two small children, Arbor and Isabella, shares journal entries and photos that portray a loving, dedicated family whose concern for Amy's health is accompanied by thoughtful reflection, gratitude for the beauty and the love that surround them, and often a buoyant sense of humor and joy.

For a taste of just how compelling a CaringBridge Web site can be, read the following excerpts from Amy's journal. You can learn more about the Taylor family's journey at <http://caringbridge.org/visit/amytaylor>.

Thursday, November 16, 2006

Hello World,

I'm still kicking! It's been an extremely difficult few months, but by God, I am still kicking. According to the cancer books and doctors, I can expect the fatigue from all of the chemotherapy and radiation treatments to continue for another 8 months. My spirit is the only part of me left that unswervingly & unfailingly leaps and bounds and dances. The rest of me constantly tries to keep up with my spirit, but I'm starting to accept the fact that keeping up with my spirit is entirely impossible right now. My body and mind swirl around in an attempt to convalesce.

Friday, February 02, 2007

I've come to realize that knowing my time on this earth, more likely than not, is very limited, and this provides me with so many opportunities that a sudden death cannot provide. I may or may not have much time, but the time I do have will involve a lot of soul-searching. I'll be searching into the souls of my children as well as my own. I'll do my best to share the sacred stories that have the capacity of transcending space and time. I need them to know the sacred stories that will keep me alive in them forever. I have faith that my beauty is and always will be reflected within and around my children.

particularly well suited to those facing cancer: "Cancer lends itself well to really being able to use CaringBridge because of its ongoing treatments and treatment changes."

The beneficiaries of CaringBridge sites number far more people than the individuals who are ill or injured. Among family and friends who can't be at their loved one's side, personalized Web sites ease stress and worry by keeping everyone in touch and informed. Visitors can post messages or view journal entries and photos for a sense of connection. Also central to this community are primary caregivers, who may experience stress and isolation, particular during a long illness and treatment, as is not uncommon in caring for a cancer patient. "We often hear that CaringBridge is therapeutic for the patient but also for the primary caregiver. It helps relieve stress and helps them feel less isolated, and it really brings them hope," Sona affirms.

With more than 15 million individuals per year already connected through CaringBridge, Sona continues in her dedication to reaching out to more people in need. She emphasizes that the organization is there "to help anybody going through a health crisis." And as these connections continue to grow and current members bring more friends and family into the CaringBridge community, it's certain that an even greater number will be united by this terrific resource. ✿

To learn more about CaringBridge and to see how sites are created by taking a no-obligation online tour, visit www.caringbridge.org.