



## Coping with Covid-19: A previous disease flattened him; helping create the Sunset Neighborhood Help Group lifted him up

### Description

Covid-19 has changed everyone's life in some way. But Frank Plughoff's most life-altering experience dates back two years to another disease. It was a bad experience. Little did he know that the disease currently ravaging the world would provide him with a good one.

Two years ago, a rare neurological illness robbed the 63-year-old of his independence, sending him into a severe depression. "Before that I was working, trying to make enough money to move where it doesn't cost as much." After it hit, "I couldn't work, couldn't drive. I don't have family and I didn't have any close friends. The woman I had lived with for 16 years returned to Idaho because it was just too much. I was all alone, scared, just looking at the ceiling."



Frank Plughoff. Photo by Judy Goddess

Things were so bad, he said, “I went on Facebook to ask for money to buy food and pay the rent. Friends, friends of friends and former business associates responded. “The charity I received from other people I can never pay back.”

Like many during the widespread shelter-in-place orders, Plughoff retreated to the Internet. A post on the Sunset District’s Facebook group by Bianca Nandzik got his attention: “If you are scared to go out, because you are in a group at risk, I am happy to help you out and bring you some groceries tomorrow. Just send me a private message what you need!”

Nandzik's Facebook posts received immediate responses, from both volunteers and neighbors needing grocery pick-ups. That evening, realizing they had touched a need, Nandzik, an artist, her husband Stefan, a techie experienced with start-ups, and Plughoff, a serial survivor and maker of things, coordinated to create a Facebook group.

### Neighbors helping neighbors

The Sunset Neighborhood Help Group is a peer-to-peer group, neighbors getting together to address a problem they can control, said Amy Luckey, a member of the leadership team.

It's an informal organization. There are no dues. There is no staff. Residents who need help call a 24-hour, bilingual hotline. Simple requests for grocery pick-ups, dog walkers and rides are listed on the group's [Facebook](#) page, which is checked frequently by volunteers. Requests from other neighborhoods or more difficult requests are referred to other sources. The leadership team's nightly discussions ensure they can quickly address problems.

One of the first issues to come up: the older, at-risk seniors they wanted to reach might not be on Facebook or even online. So, they created a printed flier, translated into Chinese by Celia Wu, another member of the leadership team. Over 100 volunteers distributed the fliers to every house in the Sunset.

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## Sunset Neighborhood Help Group

All of us have to learn dealing with many new situations as we adjust to living with the Corona Virus (COVID-19) in our cities.

You need groceries, but the way to the supermarket becomes too dangerous? Schools & day cares are closed, and your children are without supervision, because you still have to work? House quarantine and the dog needs to be walked?

**More than ever we need to stand together!**  
We started organizing volunteers in the Sunset to assist seniors and families with children.

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| Something from the pharmacy   | Some groceries from the store   | A ride to some nearby place   |

**You are not alone in this!**

To use our free assistance leave a message with how we can help you at  
**(415) 212-8770**

Or email us at [contact@sunsethelpers.org](mailto:contact@sunsethelpers.org)

Or join our Facebook group   
[www.sunsethelpers.org](http://www.sunsethelpers.org)

With Covid-19 shuttering three of four local food pantries, help group members are discovering the extent of hidden hunger among elderly Sunset residents.

“The little old woman living alone who can’t leave the house. She’s struggling to survive. She needs food, maybe she needs medication, but she can’t get out of the house. We aren’t used to seeing that level of need in the Sunset,” Plughoff said. “When we think of hunger, we think of people begging on the street. We don’t see this quiet desperation.”

The group helps organizations as well as individuals. They send eight to 10 volunteers to package groceries at the food bank at the First United Presbyterian Church. “After four hours of heavy labor,

we get the leftovers for our neighbors," he said. They also help staff Sunset District Supervisor Gordon Mar's phone bank, where volunteers are checking in with every senior in his district and offering resource referrals for whatever they need.



Sunset neighbors organizing their next round of food deliveries.  
Photo by Bianca Nandzik

The Sunset was already a close neighborhood, Luckey said. "Many families have lived here for generations. We already had strong church groups and school groups. We hold block parties. There are well-established neighborhood associations, neighborhood and Facebook groups. A lot of good and talented people live in the Sunset. They want to help. We provide the structure."

Plughoff is the only one team member who has experienced the kind of dependency that requires asking strangers for help. Before being hobbled by a terrible personal disease, he had hit a financial wall. For 10 years, he had made a living creating laser light shows at rock concerts and other events. But that business suffered after the attacks of 9/11, before being completely wiped out by the Recession of 2008.

While laser light shows have not figured in Plughoff's current effort, his previous experience in marketing, public relations, graphics and as a community organizer and co-director of the Proposition 37 campaign on labeling organic foods has been invaluable.

### Experience equals empathy

But his personal difficulties are what's given him a unique ability to assess needs, said Luckey.

“He is so empathetic and compassionate. He’s been on the receiving end of so much community support. He knows what it’s like to be angry because you’re feeling helpless. He recognizes when anger is really a plea to be heard and he’ll listen. Often that’s all the person is really asking for.”

Plughoff recognized the despair behind community rallies and social media banter prompted by Covid-19. And he doesn’t want the community to forget the lessons of this experience.

“We’re a temporary group. We may close down after the virus is over,” Plughoff said, but “I want to see a persistent community effort come out of what we’re doing. I want us to see the elders and the hunger in the community. I want us to reach deeper to find our humanity. Together we can create a beautiful society.”

While the Sunset Neighborhood Help Group he helped create may close down, it’s given him something he was lacking. “Instead of lying there and feeling sorry for myself, it’s given me life and meaning.”

Pausing to swallow tears, Plughoff said, “I can’t pay back the help I received from other people, but I can pay it forward.”

### **Category**

1. All Posts

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