

Living through the worst: A personal story of one womanâ??s quest to regain hope and the genesis of â??Senior Powerâ??

Description

default watermark

We asked Senior Power! founder Margaret Graf to tell us about the biggest challenge she has faced and what helped her move through it.

Margaret Graf saved herself by helping her neighbors. She was inconsolable after the deaths of her daughter and her husband. Finding little support in her Parkside neighborhood, where she had lived for 60 years and where she was now among the third of its seniors who lived alone, she began reaching out.



Margaret Graf at an informational session with the San Francisco Police Department. (Photos courtesy of the San Francisco Community Living Campaign)

She worked with the local merchants association, her District 4 supervisor, Gordon Mar, and the San Francisco Community Living Campaign. Mar asked her to serve on the Advisory Council to the Cityâ??s Commission on Disability and Adult Services (DAS). She also serves on its Legislative Committee, reviewing and tracking bills relating to older adults and adults with disabilities.

And Graf, now 82, is still running Senior Power!, a free monthly meet-up she started nearly two years ago to bring seniors together to socialize, practice Qi Gong and hear speakers on subjects of interest. When Covid-19 stopped such gatherings, she started a weekly neighborhood newsletter and a weekly Zoom information session with a University of California-San Francisco geriatrician who could answer questions about Covid-19.

Graf, now retired, became a lawyer specializing in professional liability after her three children were in school. Before then, because â?•the law wasnâ??t an acceptable profession for women,â?? she said, she became a nurse. When her husband developed Alzheimerâ??s, she became his full-time caregiver.

Senior Power! held its first open-to-the-public event under a tent at Ortega and 37th avenues this April. People read poetry and stories. Artists shared their work and representatives from the San Francisco Community Living Campaign were on hand to offer technical advice and transportation tips.



Margaret Graf answers a neighborâ??s question at a Senior Power! event.

By Margaret Graf: A terrible odyssey

Approximately eight years ago, I began an odyssey that so severely wracked my life I was unsure I would ever recover. When things begin to unravel you donâ??t always know that it is only the beginning but proceed as if this is a momentary blip. You function day to day, assuming it is just another â??badâ?• one but you will turn the corner soon. While true, that corner is sometimes miles and years down the road.

It all began with a phone call as so many things do. My oldest daughter, living in Portland, called to say she was in the hospital with pneumonia. Since she is often subject to bronchitis and other respiratory symptoms, this news while unwelcome was not atypical. If only it were that simple. The x-rays were inconclusive and led to further tests and ultimately in a horrible visit post-hospitalization to a specialist office and a diagnosis of cancer.

Just shy of 50 years, my first born was given a death sentence with less than a year to live. I went into a research frenzy, determined that, once more, â??Momâ?? would fix it. All the tests, all the surgeries, treatments, counseling, hospitalizations and midnight runs to the hospital did little to lessen the fears that drove my determination or relieve my frantic pace.

I spent more time on planes than I did sleeping. I took it all personally and felt death was challenging me, the perfectionist, the tenacious, the miserable. My strength was not for me alone but was stretched to her mainly, but also to my husband and her two siblings. We were a close family and none of us could begin to imagine a world without her in it.

â??I was broken and unconsolableâ??

When death finally won and claimed her, I was broken, exhausted and unconsolable, but there was no choice but to be strong for the rest of my broken family. So I would retreat to a closet to let out the stifled screams and beat on the door.

As I began to wind my way past what I felt was impossible depression, I began to notice something wrong with my husband. The time, energy and effort caring for my daughter had blinded me to his retreat from the world as the early signs of dementia. Alzheimerâ??s Disease began to wake me to Round Two of this hideous journey.

default watermark

Many find themselves in this conundrum and no two stories are alike. The hardest thing about losing your lifeâ??s partner to this disease is that it is slow and relentless, like a gaping wound that refuses to heal.

You have good days when your loved one, while not reversing all the symptoms, shows signs of his former self. You have days when you wonder what hell you have entered. Surely Dante did not accurately name them all as you have discovered new unknown levels to traverse. You have many days and they increase in frequency when you think you cannot get out of bed and face another one.

And, yet life goes on and you pretend to live it because for the sake of your remaining children, you must. We â??livedâ?• in this purgatory for nearly six years before the broken shell of my husband left us for good. Once more the grief, this time more of a stunned one as if someone had slammed you into the wall over and over again till your only remaining defense was mind numbing repetitive exercise in a vain attempt to wear yourself out so you could find some relief in sleep.

â??Many things mended my soulâ??

Such was my life. Gone, the Pollyanna, everything-coming-up-roses attitude. Once more, I dug deep inside to save myself because I had to for the sake of my children, each of whom bore their own grief for loss of sister and father.



Margaret Graf at a Valentineâ??s Day gathering.

In the end, it was not one thing that saved me but many little solaces that mended my soul. Kind words from neighbors and friends and daily long walks with my dog all helped. But what worked best was to take the broken bits of energy and give it away â?¦ to others by caring, by listening, by talking, planning and bringing a smile or small joy to another.

Through this, Senior Power was born, and demanding as it sometimes was, its balm was restorative. Initially strangers, these good people became my antidote, little realizing I was using them, as they thought they were using me.

Together we forged a group of neighbors and a community was born. The people of the San Francisco Community Living Campaign showed me the way and nudged me back from any thoughts of self pity by showing me how I could be useful, productive and helpful.

We all come together for different reasons, none of which is of any consequence. The important thing is to realize how much people matter, no matter the age, the circumstances or the status. Worked for me.

Category

1. All Posts

Date Created
04/07/2021
Author
mhunt