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

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Covid-19 has changed everyoneâ??s life in some way. But Frank Plughoffâ??s most life-altering experience dates back two years â?? 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. â??Before that I was working, trying to make enough money to move where it doesnâ??t cost as much.â?• After it hit, â??I couldnâ??t work, couldnâ??t drive. I donâ??t have family and I didnâ??t have any close friends. The woman I had lived with for 16 years returned to Idaho because it was â??just too much.â?? I was all alone, scared, just looking at the ceiling.â?•

Frank Plughoff. Photo by Judy Goddess

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

Like many during the widespread shelter-in-place orders, Plughoff retreated to the Internet. A post on the Sunset Districtâ??s Facebook group by Bianca Nandzik got his attention: â??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! â??

Nandzikâ??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, â??a serial survivor and maker of things,â?• coordinated to create a Facebook group.

Neighbors helping neighbors

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

Itâ??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 groupâ??s Facebook page, which is checked frequently by volunteers. Requests from other neighborhoods or more difficult requests are referred to other sources. The leadership teamâ??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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With Covid-19 shuttering three of four local food pantries, help group members are discovering the extent of hidden hunger among elderly Sunset residents.

â??The little old woman living alone who canâ??t leave the house. Sheâ??s struggling to survive. She needs food, maybe she needs medication, but she canâ??t get out of the house. We arenâ??t used to seeing that level of need in the Sunset,â?• Plughoff said. â??When we think of hunger, we think of people begging on the street. We donâ??t see this quiet desperation.â?•

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. â??After four hours of heavy labor,

we get the leftovers for our neighbors,â?• he said. They also help staff Sunset District Supervisor Gordon Marâ??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. â??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.â?•

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 Plughoffâ??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 whatâ??s given him a unique ability to assess needs, said Luckey.

â??He is so empathetic and compassionate. Heâ??s been on the receiving end of so much community support. He knows what itâ??s like to be angry because youâ??re feeling helpless. He recognizes when anger is really a plea to be heard and heâ??ll listen. Often thatâ??s all the person is really asking for.â?•

Plughoff recognized the despair behind community rallies and social media banter prompted by Covid-19. And he doesnâ??t want the community to forget the lessons of this experience.

â??Weâ??re a temporary group. We may close down after the virus is over,â?• Plughoff said, but â??I want to see a persistent community effort come out of what weâ??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.â?•

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

Pausing to swallow tears, Plughoff said, â??I canâ??t pay back the help I received from other people, but I can pay it forward.â?•

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