

# Sona Mehring, builder of the CaringBridge social network, will retire

Mehring wants to spend time encouraging positive uses of technology.

By Patrick Kennedy (<http://www.startribune.com/patrick-kennedy/10645186/>) Star Tribune

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Sona Mehring, founder of CaringBridge, will retire from the social network she created that hundreds of thousands of people have used to convey their journeys through health troubles and triumphs.

Mehring started the Eagan-based nonprofit organization 20 years ago to help friends share information about a premature baby. Predating Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, CaringBridge is now widely seen as a positive space online for people to gather, communicate and coordinate the care of people they love.

Mehring, 55, will leave the firm at the end of June.

“I have no specific plans after June 30, but I do want to continue to follow my passion of what’s been tapped into with CaringBridge, which is connecting people online in this positive, supportive way,” Mehring said in an interview. “I think that is needed more than ever now and I want to continue to have a voice in that.”

Since 1997, more than 675,000 CaringBridge sites have been created and more than 2 billion people have visited those sites. Today, a new CaringBridge site is created every six minutes, in 2016 nearly 80,000 new sites were created.

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 Retirement has been Mehring’s goal for several years. She’s worked with the board of directors to craft a succession plan that started a couple of years ago. In the first step, Liwanag Ojala, a former vice president of e-commerce at big-box retailer Meijer Inc., in 2014 joined CaringBridge as chief operating officer. She was named CEO in January 2016 and Mehring took the title of chief ambassador.

“To me, one of the greatest contributions has been her willingness to gracefully pass the baton to another great leader, who we are equally excited about,” said Bill McKinney, board chairman of CaringBridge and a vice president of strategic development at Thrivent Financial. “It’s a real testament to her leadership to look out for the long-term health of the organization.”

In recent years, Mehring steered CaringBridge beyond PC-dominated Web access onto mobile apps that could be accessed from smartphones and tablets. She said the site will continue striving to be the first place people turn when going through a health crisis and that its nonprofit status makes it unique in social networking, a business that’s become shaped by advertising and the collection of data about users.

“We are not driven by revenue and data selling,” Mehring said. “Its really about being the best service for people as they are going through these tough times.”

Over the next six months, Mehring will continue to work on the leadership and relationships with key stakeholders. She’ll always have a connection with CaringBridge but she’s been eyeing opportunities after June 30.

“I hope she’ll continue to take on new challenges especially in this realm of how can we use digital tools to strengthen society,” McKinney said.

Mehring has explored the idea of running for political office in the past but she says politics are not in her future. “Running for office is not the way I envision having the best effect,” Mehring said.

She said she’ll focus her time and energy on encouraging positive use of social networking and promoting women leadership in technology.

“Less women are going into computer science today than even when I graduated,” Mehring said. “I want to encourage young women to pursue computer science and technology as a career.”



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She said she also wants to make sure Minnesota's tech community thrives. "There is a great foundation here. We have to feed it," she said.

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