

# CaringBridge founder reflects on 20 years

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## Sona Mehring retiring in June



CaringBridge has connected millions of people throughout the world in a time when they need it most.

The website's free personal, private pages have been filled with words of encouragement and prayers for decades.

It's something Sona Mehring, who is retiring in June nearly two decades after founding CaringBridge, is proud to have inspired.

"It's been a fantastic 20 years," Mehring said.

CaringBridge started as a home business in Eagan well before smartphones and streaming online videos.

"(Eagan) been an ideal location for us to continue to grow," Mehring said. "The city has done a great job with infrastructure."

Now the organization has a worldwide footprint, but its headquarters is still in Eagan supporting a staff of more than 40 employees.

Mehring has seen CaringBridge grow to a place where a new page is created every six minutes.

The internet was just entering into America's conscious in 1997 when Mehring made the first post. Facebook was seven years away from going online, and it was eight years prior to the

launch of YouTube.

“(CaringBridge) was done right from the very beginning,” Mehring said. “It’s always been a protected safe space within the crazy online environment.”

Mehring was inspired to create the website when two of her good friends had a premature baby.

She was asked to make phone calls to relatives throughout the world, but after making a few, she felt there had to be a better way to connect their loved ones together and keep them informed.

“I had a background with the internet and technology, so I knew how to make a website,” Mehring said. “Baby Brigid was born June 7, 1997, but she unfortunately lived a short nine days. From that experience, my mission leaped forward to foster love, hope and compassion for people who are on a health journey and I never looked back.”

The website allows anyone to create their own website to help connect loved ones with the people experiencing some kind of health situation.

It’s grown organically through the years, and remained protected from the “outside noise” of the internet, Mehring said.

A few years after CaringBridge went online, Mehring received a call from a woman in New York, who said the website essentially saved her husband’s life.

“After reading all the comments from loved ones on the site, the woman said it made a huge difference,” Mehring said. “It turned his hopelessness around to hope. She said overnight he got out of this cycle of despair and decided to fight.”

Health issues can last several years.

Mehring recalled two twins who were both born with medical situations who had ongoing needs. Their community was updated along the way more than a decade later when one received a heart transplant.

Mehring feels the company has stayed focused on its core mission.

It’s remained a nonprofit, so it hasn’t relied on selling advertisements or data.

“It’s grown through the power of charitable giving,” Mehring said. “People see the value. It’s a fast-moving environment. We’re constantly keeping up-to-date with the back end of infrastructure and user expectations.”

More and more users are viewing the site via mobile device than ever.

“A few years ago 20 percent of our users were on mobile,” Mehring said. “Now it’s 80 percent.”

She said keeping up with mobile devices was one of CaringBridge’s biggest challenges because as a nonprofit, it was hard to maintain charitable giving via mobile.

“No one gave on mobile the first couple years,” Mehring said. “We worked hard to make sure people were connected but we didn’t consider the giving aspect. It was a hard lesson learned.”

Looking at the next 20 years, Mehring see opportunities for users to connect with others in similar situations to reduce isolation.

She also sees the site integrated into people’s care plans where a doctor talks to patients how important it is to communicate with family and friends.

But those decisions will be made by other people.

Come July, Mehring will officially retire, but she has no plans on slowing down.

Her focus is on fostering women in leadership positions, entrepreneurship and innovation.

“I truly want to retire, but I have a great opportunity to do some speaking and support others,” Mehring said. “I’m 55, and I consider this an early retirement, but I’ll probably be more busy than ever. I don’t have any specific plans but I have some interests in following my passions.”

She’s been planing for retirement for several years and began the transition a while ago.

Liwanag Ojala took over as CEO last year.

“The transition has been positive,” Mehring said. “The secret is to be intentional about it. I didn’t walk in one day and say I’m retiring. I worked with the board to ensure so we don’t miss a beat.”

She said she feels the next 20 years are in good hands.

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