

VARIETY

# Twin Cities social network pioneer built CaringBridge to 'connect people'

Sona Mehring created the site to help families in medical crises. Her next cause: promoting the Twin Cities as a tech hub.

By Sharyn Jackson (<http://www.startribune.com/sharyn-jackson/28538511/>) Star Tribune |

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Sona Mehring can control her Wi-Fi-connected lights and ceiling fan with her voice. Her “smart” home is a far cry from what the internet was capable of in 1997, when she founded one of the first social networking sites.

At the end of this month, Mehring will retire from [CaringBridge](https://www.caringbridge.org/) (<https://www.caringbridge.org/>), a site that’s used worldwide to help families communicate during health crises. It allows loved ones to post updates on a patient’s health to a personal page that friends and family members can read and comment on.

Although the posts can be tinged with tragedy, CaringBridge is an all-too-rare uplifting social media site.

“Every single day, you see articles about how digital is doing something negative,” said Liwanag Ojala, who took over for Mehring as CaringBridge CEO last year. “But this has been around 20 years and is still producing good for people.”

That’s always been Mehring’s goal.

The Appleton, Wis., native was one of only three women in her class at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire to graduate with a computer science degree. After stints doing computer programming for submarines and chicken farms, she realized she wanted to use her tech skills to help people.

“There is power in our ability as human beings to connect,” she said. “Using that in a positive outcome, to me, is a huge thing. There’s so much goodness in being connected.”

She learned that firsthand when her friends JoAnn Hardegger and Darrin Swanson had a premature baby, Brighid. They had asked Mehring to let their friends and family know what was happening while Hardegger was hospitalized and Brighid underwent surgeries.

“After making two phone calls, I thought, “There’s got to be a better way,”” Mehring said.

Twenty years ago, online interaction was limited to bulletin boards, most of which were used only by the earliest adopters of the internet. Many families didn’t own their own computers. Those who did had to dial up via a modem. Still, Mehring built a web page, called her friends to get updates, posted the updates — and people responded.

“I never would have had that connection to my support system if I hadn’t had that,” Hardegger said.

Brighid, for whom the site is named, died nine days later. At the memorial, people said the web page had been a comfort.

After that, “it really became an obsession of mine that anyone going through a health journey needed to have this,” said Mehring.

Today, Children’s Minnesota routinely recommends the site to parents.

“It can really be traumatizing to parents to have to retell that story over and over again,” said Joy Johnson Lind, senior director of child and family services at the hospital. Posting a single update online “frees the parent and lightens the load.” And, Lind said, “it can be therapeutic.”

Since its founding, users in 236 countries have created more than half a million personal



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KYNDELL HARKNESS, STAR TRIBUNE FILE

Sona Mehring will retire from CaringBridge this month, 20 years after she started it to help friends whose child was in the hospital.

pages on CaringBridge. And the site will continue to thrive, as Mehring, 55, moves on.

She plans to promote the Twin Cities as a tech hub and encourage young women to pursue careers in the field.

It's no accident that as one of the few women in her field, she founded a tech start-up devoted to helping people stay in touch.

"I think women are the great communicators, and CaringBridge, at its heart, is based on its ability to connect people," she said. "It's a collaboration, it's a conversation. That's how women think."

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sharyn.jackson@startribune.com 612-673-4853 sharynjackson