

Neighbours of

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Navy Street: No Longer the Road Less Travelled

Meet the Longo Family



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Mary using the portable wheelchair ramp

Navy Street: No Longer the Road Less Travelled

BY JULIE ACHTERMEIER

Sandra Longo's story is anything but common. While many of us may have experienced one traumatic event in our lives, Sandra has lived through numerous accident and medical traumas involving her parents, her brother, and even herself.

When Sandra was very young, her father, Ferruccio Longo, was in a horrific car accident that left him with serious lower body injuries, having been crushed from the

waist down. Unsure as to whether he would survive, the family lived in a constant state of fear for the initial months followed by years of agonizing recovery. A few years later, her twin brother, Mark (age 4), was trapped under a reversing car as Sandra looked on in horror. She still vividly remembers the damage to the side of his face and body as he was dragged. Thankfully, a neighbour and some construction workers were able to lift the car off

and Mark survived, although he sustained serious injuries which also required a lengthy recovery.

While it may be impossible to imagine that anything else could go wrong for this young family, they were unprepared that another tragedy awaited them. When Sandra's mother became pregnant with her fourth child, the family was overjoyed to have some long-awaited happy news. Shortly after visiting her mother and new baby sister, Liana, in the hospital, Sandra (age 9) learned that her mother had sustained a spinal cord injury during the delivery process. Something had gone very wrong with the administration of the epidural and her mother became paralyzed from the rib cage down. Just like that, Sandra's world had changed, again.

As a young girl, Sandra adapted as best she could to her new reality. Her mother, now a complete paraplegic, did her best to raise her family of four children. But doing so from a wheelchair introduced a number of challenges. Sandra, who had once been a carefree child, was now sharing the responsibilities of caregiver, helping to raise her younger sister, and assisting her mother, Mary.

The family immediately experienced many frustrations as Mary was no longer able to easily access their home. They were forced to navigate the eight steps just to get into the home, and the countless stairs inside. Finding ways to adapt to their home and work around the wheelchair wasn't easy. Their frustrations grew as they realized they would not have accessibility to their friends' homes, or extended family's homes, or to



Sandra reflects on the complexities of life

the many shops and restaurants in the community. Mary began to feel isolated and alone, and the family suffered emotionally watching her become more and more withdrawn.

While wheelchair accessibility to offices and public buildings has greatly improved over the last few years, most people are unaware of how often a disabled person is unable to participate in everyday activities simply because they cannot enter an establishment.

Sandra recalls as children not being able to attend play dates or being able to socialize in other friends or family member's homes as her mother could not access the homes. As a family, they grew withdrawn and isolated, often feeling as though they could no longer participate in everyday activities. As Sandra grew up, she knew her calling was to help those in her community who lived with disabilities, as she had lived through so many difficult years trying to help her mother feel included. "How else could I explain everything that has happened to me?" she says.

In 2013, Sandra received another wake-up call. As she drove to work one morning, her car hit a patch of black ice and slid out of control, flipping over and landing in a deep culvert where she became submerged and trapped under water. "In that moment, I thought I was going to die. I gained tremendous perspective as my life flashed before me. I decided if I made it out of that car alive, I would do something to help others," she recalls.

Thankfully, a veteran paramedic happened to pass by and noticed the car in the ditch and called for help. Sandra was seriously injured and her recovery took almost three years.

She had spent most of her childhood being aware of how a freak accident could change your life so drastically. But unlike most people, she was being subjected to this trauma over and over again. Even after growing up and starting her own family, she could not push aside the voice that told her it was all meant to lead to something greater.

In 2016, Sandra launched *Navy Street*, a charitable organization that donates portable wheelchair ramps to disabled persons. The name *Navy Street* means *another street traveled*, and became a metaphor for those who must find an alternate route to enjoying the same privileges as those not confined to a wheelchair. The goal of the organization is to provide individuals accessibility wherever they wish to go, whether in their own home, visiting friends or where wheelchair access is not available. The portable ramps can be used for navigating a curb to several steps and is easy and convenient

to use. Sandra understands the need for these individuals to feel included and as much a part of the community as everyone else. The thought of those living in isolation is what keeps Sandra focused on making this charity a success.

For more information, visit www.navystreet.org.

If you, or someone you know, is in need of assistance, please contact Sandra at www.navystreet.org/contact.



Sandra at home with Copper

Do you know a neighbour who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbour to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at jachtermeier@bestversionmedia.com.