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Neighbors helping neighbors

WHO

Pam Washek

WHAT

The Wayland resident is the executive director of Neighbor Brigade Inc., a nonprofit with chapters in 24 Massachusetts communities, from Winchendon to West Bridgewater.

Q. How did you come up with the idea for Neighbor Brigade?

A. From my own personal experience. When I had cancer in 2002, a friend had it at the same time. Our friends came together and helped us through meal chains, giving our kids rides, house cleaning, walking the dogs. We were very well taken care of. When I was done with treatment, this light bulb came on that said, "I don't know what we would have done without this. Maybe we should keep it going for other people." Jean [Seiden] and I put the word out: Would people like to stay together for other families in need? We were originally known as the Wayland Angels. We kept it going in Wayland, and neighboring communities started calling to ask how we did it, how could they do it? After a couple of years, we had three or four communities. Then Jean got sick. Her cancer came back, and she passed away in 2006. But I really wanted to keep this thing going. In 2010 I launched a new nonprofit, Neighbor Brigade.

Q. What is your mission?

A. Our mission is to grow these informal networks, neighbors helping neighbors. People want to help people, and this is just such a simple way to make that happen.

Q. Who gets help, and what sort of help do they get?

A. Families in temporary crisis, an illness or accident or some other tragic event. It's pretty much any nonmedical day-to-day tasks. Meals are a big one, and we provide rides to and from medical appointments. We've done a lot of dog-walking, light household tasks, all types of errands.



ANNA MELIONES

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Q. What is a specific example of a family Neighbor Brigade has helped?

A. Recently we built a house ramp, a really nice community-wide effort in West Bridgewater where this family has a 13-year-old son with cancer. The West Bridgewater chapter leader reached out into the community to find support through a network of volunteers. She found a builder willing to donate time, someone willing to donate materials. In Medfield, we helped a single mom with three kids, who was battling breast cancer. Neighbors with the brigade provided daily meals, rides to medical appointments and kids' activities, and ran errands to keep the household right-side-up. In Medway, a woman was expecting her fourth child when diagnosed with multiple myeloma. We helped her through meals, laundry, and after school and weekend childcare. In Natick, a family lost their home to fire just as school was starting. Our volunteers supported them with meals, rides for the kids, and numerous errands.

Q. If you want to volunteer, how do you do that?

A. We have our own website, www.neighborbrigade.org, and we're on Facebook. People have become so disconnected from each other with technology. We're actually using technology to bring people back together again. Each chapter has a leader and they share ideas among one another. The leader receives the request for assistance, then posts an e-mail to the volunteer group alerting them that a need has come in, and within a matter of a few hours, volunteers sign up using an online tool to fill every need.

Q. How do you get the word out to families in need?

A. We have relationships with hospitals, hospice centers, and the Visiting Nurse Association. When they have a patient who lives in one of our communities, they go to our website and click on "find a chapter," they reach our chapter leaders and tell us they have a patient who needs help. Or the patient can find us the same way. And the word has spread through our volunteers. We also are deeply entrenched in the schools, so the principal, nurse, guidance counselor knows about Neighbor Brigade in their community.

Q. What sort of feedback do you get from recipients?

A. They all share the same gratefulness because it's more than just this food that lands on their doorstep. It's what comes with the food that the recipients are so touched by. It's the love and the care they're getting from their community. It feels really good to know that people care, that they're not alone.

Q. What are your goals for 2012?

A. We want to continue growing chapters in Massachusetts and will probably extend beyond the borders a bit. Our goal is to hit 30 chapters and to double the number of families we're serving.

BELLA ENGLISH

Interview has been condensed and edited. Bella English can be reached at english@globe.com.