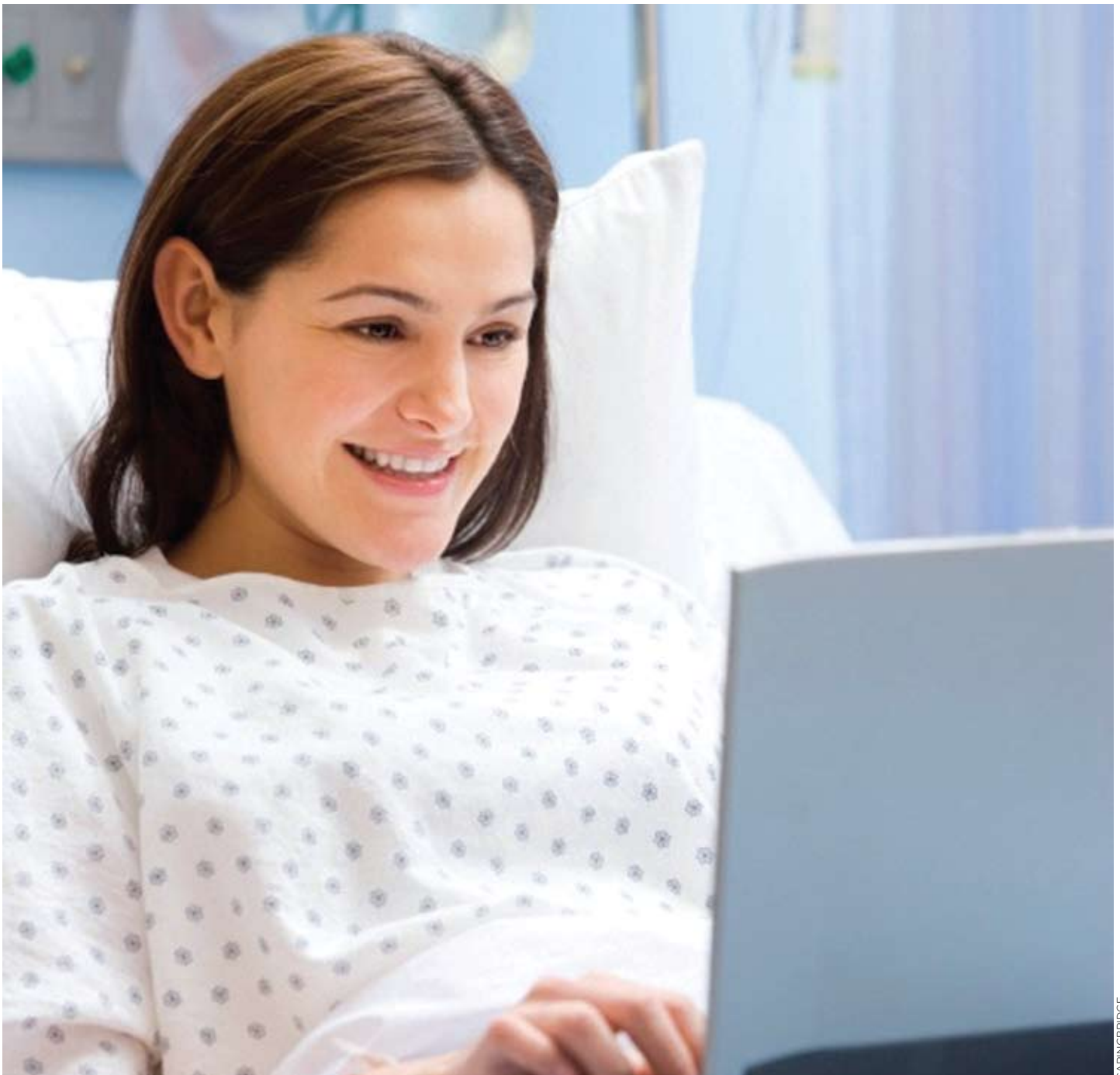


# Bridge Over Troubled Waters

**A website called CaringBridge makes it easy for patients and their families and friends to reach out to one another**

BY LINDA L. MEIERHOFFER



CARINGBRIDGE

Susie Moore's happy world screeched to a halt in 2006 during a routine checkup when her doctor said, "You need an ultrasound immediately." More tests and an eight-hour surgery to remove three tumors followed before the Indian Wells real estate agent faced a formal diagnosis of stage III epithelial ovarian cancer.

As she began chemotherapy, her husband and children struggled to keep close friends and extended family informed of her recovery. Her sister Lynn told them about a way to get the word out to everyone at one time using the CaringBridge website.

"CaringBridge is like a 24-hour source of encouragement, and my courage is strengthened through the words of people who really care," Moore says.

### Something Clicked

In 1997, Minnesota Web designer Sona Mehring created a site to keep loved ones informed of a friend's condition and that of her one-pound preemie, Brigid. Although her baby did not survive, the family received such overwhelming support through messages on the site that Mehring realized others could benefit from a similar resource. A memorial created in Brigid's name funded the first computer at Children's Hospital in St. Paul, Minn. — and CaringBridge was born. Since its inception, more than a billion visits have been made to personal CaringBridge sites. Users are found in all 50 states and in more than 200 countries. An iPhone app makes it even easier to stay connected on the go.

The free, 24/7 service works like this: Users go to [www.caringbridge.org](http://www.caringbridge.org) and click on "Create a Website." They enter basic information about themselves or another person facing a physical or mental health issue, choose a name for the site, and set up privacy options to control access. The patient, a family member, or friend can then post updates and photos and stay connected to everyone with whom they've shared the password. Those who visit the site can make a guestbook entry or receive a patient's status without intruding on their time or privacy.

"Anyone who has had cancer knows that every blood test and doctor's appointment is scary, but I can be strong and face it with the support and healing words from my friends who leave postings on my site," Moore says.

According to Mehring, CaringBridge "allows a level of communication that is not always reached in other ways."

### Soothing the Soul

An orthopedic surgeon who retired from the Mayo Clinic, Don Campbell describes his wife, Jan, as a civically minded spitfire.

"After we moved to Palm Springs in 2006, Jan walked up and down Palm Canyon Drive to meet more than 40 business owners and asked them what needed to be done," he says. She became their advocate. She gave food and blankets to the homeless and also advocated for them. She volunteered to teach students to read at Cielo Vista Elementary School.



As a U.S. 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the CaringBridge service is available for free. Nearly 90 percent of all funding comes from families who use the CaringBridge program. The rest comes from organizations that provide donated services and facilities and healthcare organizations that provide sponsorship revenue.

Then, in 2008, the Campbells' world changed. Jan was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor. "I had a sense of helplessness," says Don, who started a CaringBridge website focused on his wife.

"There's something therapeutic about writing what's happening," he says. "When a person is in crisis and chaos surrounds you, little things that you can do that are organized make it feel like there's more control. CaringBridge gave me that element of control."

He also found it easier to communicate his thoughts. "There's a lot of safety in sitting by yourself and looking at your computer

without sitting across from someone and having to deal with your emotions," Don says. "CaringBridge gave my kids a way of knowing my thoughts without having to talk."

The Campbells celebrated their 41st wedding anniversary a few months before Jan's death. Afterward, one of the gifts CaringBridge gave Don is to understand how deeply his wife touched other people. "One of the remarkable things about Jan is that her high school class stayed in contact for about 50 years. After she died, I learned the extent of her friendships and how much more important she was to these people — some of whom I never met — than I ever realized."

### Positively Uplifting

Cindy Rathbun of Palm Desert says she came through chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation treatment for breast cancer "stronger and more resilient than ever."

"I actually wrote my first [CaringBridge] journal entry the day I was diagnosed," she says. "There was an immediate weight lifted from me for being able to share the news with all my family and friends at one time. CaringBridge made it possible to reach out to everyone ... and to receive their immediate love and support."

As her CaringBridge site became her daily diary, Rathbun viewed the site as a way to eliminate the "gossip mill" about her health and made it clear to visitors of the site that she only wanted positive messages. "What transpired was a means to share positivity for the treatment road ahead," she says. "The give and take of resources, thoughts, and prayers became a roadmap for healing."

"I heard from family far and near. I heard from friends here in the community, from high school friends, college friends, and people I had known during my 35-year career. I heard from friends of friends who simply wanted to reach out. It is this kind of love and TLC that gave me and my husband, Dean, the extra strength and encouragement we needed to come through the cancer tunnel and emerge whole."

Moore's cancer has recurred twice in the form of brain tumors — yet she continues to sell real estate with gusto, travel the world, and poke fun in her CaringBridge post at the latest small tumor she recently had removed: "Mr. Pea is indeed blown to smithereens. Hooray!" She has high praise for the site that Mehring created 13 years ago.

"CaringBridge gives me courage to face each new day with a lilt in my step, because I know that my friends on the Web are rooting for me to continue to be strong and face this chronic disease." ■