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GiveForward.Com: Creating Unexpected Joy for People in Need [1]

Editor's Note: This is part of a series of Patient Advocate Guest Columns and Podcasts, launched as a forum for patient advocates to address a topic, issue, or trend within the cancer community through Cancer.Net, the patient information website of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO).

Patient Access Network Foundation: Providing Financial Solutions for Patients

A patient advocate guest column by: Desiree Vargas Wrigley

In 2005, during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I watched a television interview with a man who was going to lose his job because his car had been swept away. He only needed a couple thousand dollars, and this small amount of money could literally change his life. I remember thinking, ?Why is there no place online where I can go to find *that* man and say I want *my* $50 to go to *him* specifically?? I was working for a non-profit organization at the time and knew first-hand the percentage of donations that go towards overhead costs and to fundraising. So I considered, ?What if there was a website dedicated to helping individuals receive money directly from those who wanted to help them??

Where it all began

In August of 2008, I launched GiveForward.com [2] with my business partner and co-founder, Ethan Austin. Ethan?s father passed away from colon cancer and his motivation to help people fundraise came from spending over a decade running marathons to raise money on behalf of cancer research. What began as a website where people could ?fundraise for anything they cared about? would soon take a turn we didn?t expect.

By 2009, we realized that there was a trend happening on GiveForward. The majority of the fundraisers on our site -- and the most successful ones -- were organized by individuals raising money for a loved one?s medical bills. Any and all fan mail we received was from those using GiveForward to raise money for medical expenses. One such inspiring message was:

" GiveForward has been a huge blessing for my family. We have had people from all over the U.S. give and we couldn't have raised the money for our daughter's surgeries without the coordination provided by GiveForward.?

Making a difference in people?s lives

Realizing that we had the opportunity to shift our focus and address a growing problem in this country, in 2009 GiveForward.com became a website where people can easily raise money to help with their medical expenses or those of their loved ones. Most of our fundraisers are for people undergoing treatment for cancer. The typical person with cancer spends $8,500 on out-of-pocket costs in their first year of treatment, even with insurance. Consider this: The median income for a family of four is $46,000, which means that almost 20% of the annual income of a family who is dealing with cancer will have to go to an unexpected medical expense.

When we look at the amounts our users are raising, we couldn?t be happier. One person raised over $85,000 from donors all over the world. Another family, whose daughter was diagnosed with cancer for the fourth time, raised over $100,000 through multiple fundraisers and was even featured on CNN. What is more thrilling for us, however, is that families who create pages on GiveForward often don?t anticipate the level of emotional support they end up receiving from friends and family through their fundraising page. One person wrote,

?It's been a crazy day. I never in my wildest dreams thought that things would move as quickly as they did. I am shocked and entirely humbled by the generosity of the community that I am beyond fortunate enough to be part of.?

We always say that the number of people you would pick up the phone and call to say ?I?m having a hard day? because of your husband?s test results, or ?I don?t know how I?m going to pay my mortgage this month,? is *exponentially* smaller than the number of people who would want to help you if you just gave them a way to do it. We believe GiveForward is the way.

How it Works

GiveForward pages are about building a community of support online for patients and their caregivers. We want to change the way people think about giving and let them know that it?s okay to ask for help. People who visit GiveForward.com can get started by clicking a single button. Fill-in-the-blank fields make it easy for anyone, no matter what their level of computer

knowledge, to produce a live web page in 10 minutes or less. Then can share the link to their page with friends and family through email or Facebook. On a person?s page, visitors can read about why someone is raising funds, look at photos and videos, and stay up to date through blog posts or status updates. Visitors can contribute either financially (donations can be made securely through PayPal or with a credit card) or they can provide emotional support through virtual hugs and comments of love and support.

GiveForward is about ?Creating Unexpected Joy,? which is our mantra. We asked GiveForward users to tell us through our Facebook page what GiveForward means to them. One person described what it means to Create Unexpected Joy better than we can:

?When my sisters, brother and I first started the GiveForward page for my dad, we didn?t tell him or my mom for a couple of weeks. Finally, on my dad?s birthday, we printed out everyone?s comments from the donation page and put them in with a birthday card. We wrote on the card ?$9,720 and COUNTING!? and signed it ?Love your friends and family.? When we gave him the card at the hospital, before he opened it he said jokingly, ?Oh what?s this? A card full of money?? He was in shock when he opened it and saw the amount of money we had already secretly raised! And we all cried when he read everyone?s comments. Even though he had to be in the hospital on his birthday it was a great day!?

For more information about GiveForward, please visit: www.GiveForward.com [2] or call (312) 322-1200.

If you are a patient advocate interested in authoring a future Patient Advocate Guest Column or Podcast, please contact patientadvocates@asco.org [3] *or 571-483-1358.*

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Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/research-and-advocacy/patient-advocates/patient-advocate-guest-columns-and-podcasts/giveforwardcom-creating-unexpected-joy-people-need
[2] http://www.giveforward.com/?utm_source=www.asco.org&utm_medium=Novarticle
[3] mailto:patientadvocates@asco.org