

Whether Caregiver or Editor, Touching Lives Matters Most

by Jon Caswell



By her own admission Sandy Briggs was *not* the world's best English student in high school. So how did she end up as Mended Hearts' national Newsletter Coordinator? Well, first of all, she loves writing stories and developing ideas into articles. And second, she had the determination to do her chapter newsletter right. This character trait had shown many years earlier, when she became caregiver to her husband of almost 30 years after his open-heart surgery. "That's when I learned to stand up for what I believe in," she says.

A Life-Changing Visit to a Museum

Many Mended Hearts members feel that MHI is a treasure that heart disease has brought them. For Sandy and Dale Briggs, who've been married 42 years, it was literally a treasure that brought MHI into their lives.

"Most people know Dale is very outgoing," says Sandy, "but his recovery from open-heart surgery was pretty hard on him. He went through some rough waters with depression. I tried to get him out of the house as much as possible. One day I took him to our Fresno Museum to see an exhibit of treasure from a sunken Spanish ship. Afterwards he explored another part of the museum that had race cars, while I found a chair. A docent began talking to me, and one thing led to another, and when Dale walked up, he didn't know what to think when the man asked Dale what type of valve he had. That's when he told us about the MHI meeting that night. Well, Dale went to that meeting, and I stayed home looking for peace and quiet." Anybody who knows Dale can appreciate what Sandy means.

"She almost forced me out of the house that day," says Dale, "but without that museum visit and without her speaking to this gentleman — I certainly wasn't speaking to many people at that time — I don't think I would have ever discovered MHI and would probably still be thinking I was alone with this experience of heart surgery."

That was 13 years ago, and they both have grown to treasure MHI more and more. Today Dale is executive vice president of the organization, and Sandy edits Chapter 92's newsletter and works with newsletter editors throughout the country to help them improve their publications. She has been called the "newsletter editor par excellence." She also writes a monthly column called "The Caregiver's Corner."

Sandy has thought a lot about caregiving because she knows from personal experience how scary heart surgery can be. She doesn't want other families to go through the anxiety and fear she experienced when Dale had open-heart surgery.

"Open-heart surgery was the most horrific thing that Dale had ever faced. The thought of it paralyzed him," says Sandy. "I became the strong one, at least in my mind, to help him when I was called on. Whatever past hurts I'd had in my life didn't matter anymore. I wanted to make sure that he got the best care possible."

"Sandy literally became the head of this household during that time," says Dale. "I don't know how people make it through the heart surgery experience without someone by their side. Hopefully, MHI fills at least part of that need in some heart patients."

A Little Background

Sandy's dedication to her family — she and Dale have two daughters and five grandchildren — may be the result of her early family life. "My parents were divorced when I was pretty young," she says, "and it wasn't a friendly divorce. I became one of the original latch-key kids. My mom worked and did what she could to take care of things. I missed my father a great deal but could only see him two weeks a year. Still, we were very close. I was pretty much a daddy's girl, and I still am. He's pretty awesome in my book."

Her mother eventually married a man who was financially successful and life got easier.

Sandy has always liked to sing. When staying with her father, if her stepmother wondered where she was, all she had to do was listen for Sandy singing to herself. In high school she participated in a cappella choir, and her love of singing led her to the love of her life. In her junior year of high school, she was singing in "Bye-Bye Birdie" when she met Dale. "The next thing I knew, we walked down the aisle and said 'I do,' much to my mother's disappointment!"



Dale and Sandy Briggs at the MHI Convention in 2006

A New Love

In addition to her family and singing, Sandy has developed another love — writing and editing. She was appointed Newsletter Chairman by Tita Hutchens in 2004 and continues to hold that post. "Somewhere back when I first started doing the newsletter, I just fell in love with creating stories and developing ideas for articles," she says. "I wasn't great in English in school, but I guess some of what I was taught did stick. Writing draws out the creative side of me, and I think that allows me to say what is in my heart. And I love working hand-in-hand with other editors. We have some talented people who are doing some outstanding things."

Sandy's faith and the sense of purpose she feels in helping others are important components of her life. "My faith has brought me through some pretty rough times," she says. "A couple of years ago I almost died when a staph infection developed after I had total knee replacement surgery. The promises I found in my faith gave me strength to go forward. My faith also gave me the strength I needed to support my family during Dale's recovery?"

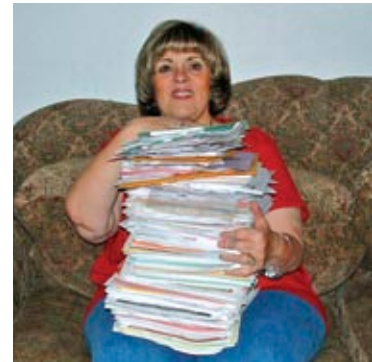
"I had the opportunity to learn what caregivers go through after Sandy's second knee replacement," says Dale. "I got a real taste of what caregiving is all about, and I can say that I was nowhere near as good at it as she is."

Making Others Smile

Obviously, MHI has played a big part in the Briggs's post-surgery life. "Because of this organization, my life is filled with very special friends. The people involved with MHI are caring and giving," says Sandy. "They are the best example of what the Golden Rule teaches us, and they inspire me to strive to be better too."

For the caregivers in MHI, Sandy has specific advice — remember yourself and take time to do what you enjoy. "That doesn't mean you fly off to an island and 'veg' on the beach. There are many ways to restore yourself. Reading and writing articles revives me. It gives me perspective and helps me see the goodness of life. Dale's love and care are also a source of renewal for me. Taking care of yourself sometimes means just taking a quiet moment, or maybe creating something pretty like a bracelet or a card to give as a gift. Giving to others helps me relax. I love to make my family and friends smile. What better way is there?" ❤️

(Read one of Sandy's newsletter columns on the next page.)



Sandy wrestles with "just a few" of her newsletters

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THE NAVIGATOR

FROM SANDY BRIGGS'S NEWSLETTER COLUMN, "THE CAREGIVER'S CORNER"

On a recent trip to Dallas with Dale, I found that Dottie Fernandes is very much like me – navigationally challenged! This led to a lot of laughter, so much that many times we both had tears streaming down our faces. The laughter was a great way to relieve stress and helped us to have tons of fun. It even made shopping more fun.

I'm sure you are wondering what this has to do with caregiving, but I think you'll see after you finish reading this.

When we are in a situation and feel fear, most of us become a little challenged. For me, maps and directions create that sort of challenge. For you, it might be dealing with your mate or family member having open-heart surgery. It is something that we don't want to do. It is outside of our comfort zones.

I hate getting lost. I dislike having to go somewhere without knowing how to get there – unlike my spouse who seems to always have it nailed down. He is good with maps and always knows which coast we are on.

When we are learning something new, like dealing with a sick or recovering person, we find ourselves mapping our way through the problems. We've never been confronted with their specific health needs. It's "please get me this or give me that." It isn't easy; it's a road or path we've never been on before. It's hard to figure out which turns to take or which road to drive on.

Dottie and I were so relieved when we finally got back to our hotel that we began singing a little tune. That is the way it is when our patient gets back to being well again – we find ourselves singing a tune because we've left the uncertainty behind.

In a way I'm glad that I'm not hard wired with excellent navigational skills because part of the journey is to find your way through the hardships. The uncertainty helps us to build a better character and provides us with the knowledge that "I CAN DO IT!" We just needed to step out and experience the challenge.

I don't think my friend Dottie would necessarily care to make a habit of getting lost, but she will certainly tell you we had two great days of fun. She is also a caregiver and experiences many of the same things that you and I do every day. We have learned that each day offers a different experience, and it is what you do with it that counts. There isn't necessarily a map giving all the directions, nor is there a navigational device telling you turn left at the next corner.

So when you start up the engine and put it in drive, move out slowly, get in the lane and just roll with the flow. You'll get there one mile at a time.

