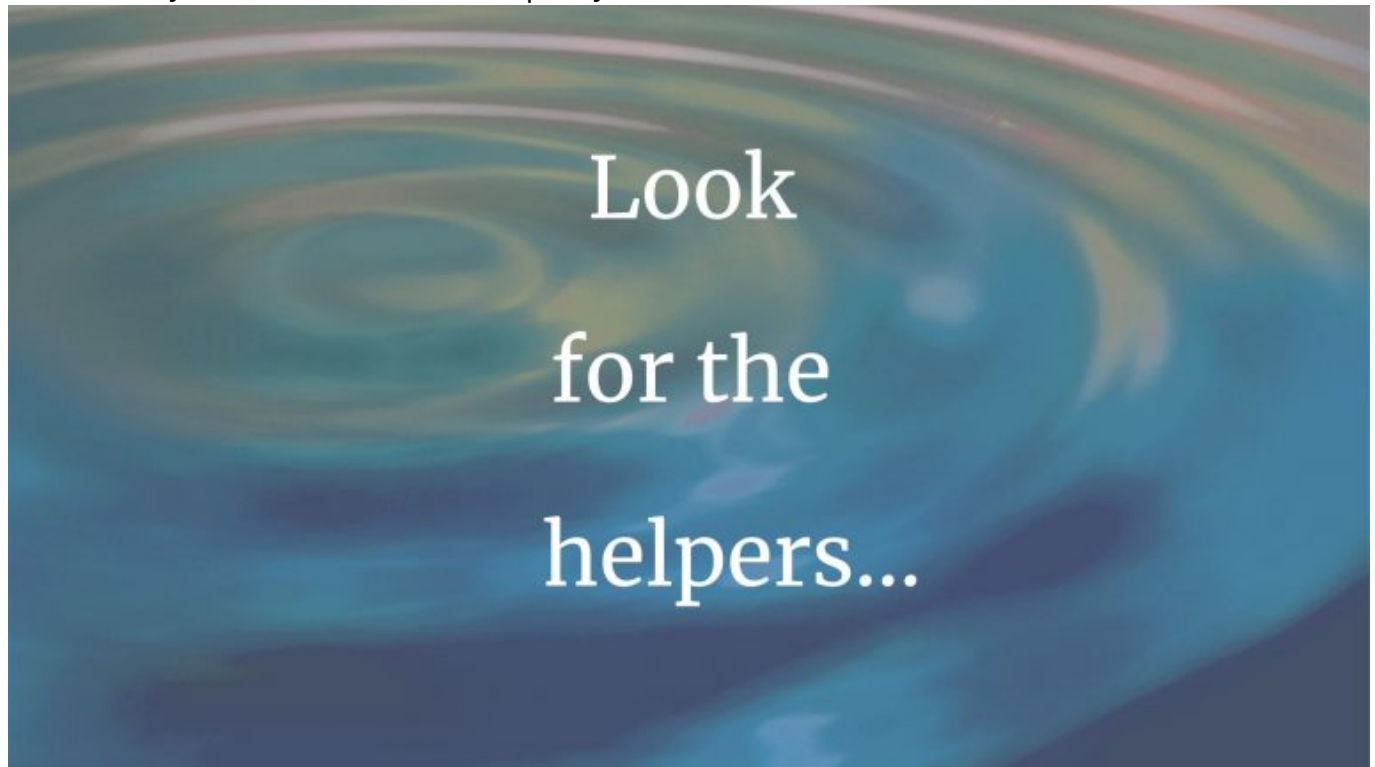


COVID Angels

Category: Stories

written by Melanie Di Stante | May 18, 2021



I work as a registered dietitian nutritionist in a nursing home located in a New York City suburb, not far from the community that was the epicenter of the COVID pandemic in 2020.

For the past two months, I've also been a member of the COVID Angels, a group of volunteers who help senior citizens in Westchester County make their vaccination appointments.

My nursing facility went through two waves of COVID and lost many residents. Some who survived are still suffering from declines in function. Fortunately, when the first COVID vaccines were approved last December, the State gave priority to nursing homes, and most of our residents and many employees, myself included, were among the first people in the country to be vaccinated.

For us, the process was easy. But when I heard stories of people scouring the websites for hours in search of a vaccine appointment, I felt especially bad for the seniors in my community who had to navigate these complex, often flawed systems.

This was also a very tough year in my own home. My family's schedule shifted dramatically. My kids attend in-person school only two days per week; and school sports, after many months, have only just resumed. My parents are still fearful, and my extended family is isolated from each other. We used to get together all the time for holidays and picnics, but we haven't done that in over a year. When a family member died recently, we couldn't plan a service.

My distress over my kids' school district and my family's plight was compounded by "no one to blame but COVID" frustrations—for instance, the time I visited the local library to borrow an audio book for my car rides, only to find that the library was still closed for browsing until further notice. It was a little thing, but amid the throes of the pandemic, it felt huge.

Two months ago, things came to a head. I spent days on end stewing over the countless things I couldn't control. I felt like there was nothing I could do.

Then, listening to the news while cleaning up in my kitchen, I heard about the COVID Angels. This opened up a new sense of possibility: Here was something that I *could* do. That very day, I reached out to them to learn more about their mission and what their volunteers do.

The process is fairly simple. First, the volunteer contacts a senior citizen (from a list of names compiled by the local government). If the senior wants help getting a vaccine appointment, they give consent to the volunteer to collect the personal information needed for that purpose. The volunteer sifts through the various websites for local vaccine availability, then makes an appointment for the recipient.

I completed the volunteer application, and the following week I began calling seniors.

My first phone call was to an eighty-seven-year-old woman named Christine.

"Oh! That's great!" she exclaimed exuberantly when I explained why I'd called.

I asked if she'd like help getting the vaccine, and she said, "Oh, that would be wonderful! God bless you!"

I noticed that she was coughing frequently, and she explained that she had COPD and hypertension.

Asked if she'd need help reaching the vaccination site, Christine said, "I can walk, but I'm going to need a ramp; I can't do no stairs." I made a note of that and asked what days might work best.

"Any day is fine; this is very important," she replied. "Except Sunday morning, I have my church service."

Next I talked with Thelma, age ninety-six.

I introduced myself.

"Hold on, I have to get my slippers on," Thelma said. "My feet are cold on this floor." I heard her get up and shuffle away, then back again.

"I've been learning about the vaccines," she said. "I'm eager to get mine. My son can bring me, but I just can't stand on a long line. I don't want to go to those big centers."

"I'll try to get you into one of the pharmacies, or a smaller setting," I promised.

Asked about her scheduling preferences, Thelma echoed Christine's sentiments: "I like to get up a little later, but I'll do any time. This is the most important thing."

Talking to these seniors, I could almost see them, and I could feel their anxiety and vulnerability.

"I can't wait for this all to be over," Thelma confided. Christine called getting a vaccine "a matter of life and death." Hearing them, I felt my heart soften.

Before signing on as a volunteer, I'd felt so angry and frustrated about the things I couldn't control. COVID was a real and present danger, and life was not normal. Talking to the seniors didn't erase the bad things, but it felt like a dose of serotonin: It made me feel good.

On Sunday of that week, having collected three people's information, I made their appointments. That afternoon, I called Christine to tell her.

"Hello again!" she said. "I didn't expect a call so soon."

We chatted about her church service, and she said, "Oh, it was wonderful." The sermon's message, aptly, had been about the gifts we are given, and miracles.

"I'm calling to tell you that I got you a vaccine appointment," I said. "It's on a Tuesday, when your nephew can bring you."

"I knew this was going to be a special day," she said. "God is good! Thank you so much! You are an angel!"

That's right, I thought, feeling humble. *A COVID Angel.*

True, I'd helped only three people—but they were three very real, very worried and frail people—and they were grateful.

During the pandemic, a series of small, nagging frustrations had created a sense of anger in me. Now, doing a good deed for a tiny handful of people created a feeling of joy.

Since I first joined the Angels, it's become much easier for people to make appointments—and so the COVID Angels have pivoted to a new goal: helping the community reach herd immunity. The Angels are also partnering with local businesses on a marketing campaign to address vaccine hesitancy in the community. Their work continues to expand.

I chose to volunteer for the COVID Angels because my heart was hurting. I have seen too much death and illness at work, in my family and in the world. I have struggled against things that I cannot change or control. Life is not fair, and I never expect it to be.

But the pandemic has led me back to a core truth: When my heart hurts, the best thing I can do—and sometimes it's the only thing I can do—is to help others.