

BY LISA CAMERON AND CHRIS HOOVER SEIDEL



Pre-social distancing game night with Neighboring Volunteers. Now they are virtual.

Photo by Heike Martin

Loving our neighbors cannot be suspended

Bridge of Hope volunteers answer the call of Jesus

On March 28, Kris* stopped by the park for a quick walk to clear her head amid news about the growing coronavirus pandemic. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a sudden movement, and a large dog running loose collided with her. In a moment, Kris was turned upside-down in a world that already seemed upside-down. This mother, who was working hard to hold life together for her children, was suddenly out of commission.

Kris is a hardworking single mother of two middle-school children. She says she never thought she would be homeless, but a series of crises left her family devastated. Fortunately, a friend connected them with Bridge of Hope, a member of Mennonite Health Services, a program agency of Mennonite Church USA. Neighboring Volunteers, a group from Community Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Va., helped them find a new apartment last December. Life was starting to turn around for them. Then a broken tibia and a dislocated knee, coupled with fears related to the novel coronavirus, brought her forward movement to a halt.

Despite the social distancing necessitated by COVID-19, Kris's Bridge of Hope Neighboring Volunteers reached out more than ever. One volunteer knit her a

prayer shawl and collected notes from everyone in the group as a way to be tangibly present with Kris and remind her they were praying for her. They called and texted regularly. Kris could not put weight on her broken leg, so someone brought her a shower chair. The group dropped off partially prepared meals that the volunteers guided Kris's children to cook via FaceTime. Having experienced the loneliness and

Homelessness in the face of COVID-19 is bleak.

anxiety of homelessness, Kris says she has been amazed by this support. "They are like family to me," she says. "I'm not alone.... Somebody's there who cares enough about me to call on a regular basis, even while they are dealing with their own lives and struggles."

Homelessness in the face of COVID-19 is bleak. But even before the pandemic, families facing homelessness lived with trauma and stress at levels many of us can't imagine. Families served by Bridge of Hope across 20 locations in 11 states are marginalized by poverty, race, gender, debt and more. These families, predominantly single mothers with two or three children, struggle to maintain stable employment and reliable

transportation. Sometimes they deal with untreated mental health issues and care for children who have special needs. These mothers are often lonely and depressed, working to make ends meet with little hope of advancement. Center for Disease Control statistics also show that the coronavirus is having an impact on low-income families and killing African Americans much more than others. Our society has created systems over the centuries that result in people of color being more likely to work in service-sector jobs, less likely to own a car and less likely to own their homes. Now, more than ever, vulnerable communities need neighboring and hope.

Bridge of Hope Neighboring Volunteers form an intentional support system for families facing homelessness. Neighboring churches come from within many Christian communities, answering the call to be the hands and feet of Jesus. These people help strangers by creating relationships that demonstrate Christ's love. Neighboring Volunteers, amid social distancing, make meals, drop off groceries, help write resumes and assist in completing essential paperwork. They are helpers—standing on the sidewalk singing "Happy Birthday" to a 6-year-old, casting their social networks wide to find new housing, and making daily calls and sending texts to make sure a family knows they are cared for.

Watching the staff, families and Neighboring Volunteers in Bridge of Hope adapt in innovative ways to continue to implement the mission of engaging Christian faith communities in ending family homelessness through neighboring relationships that demonstrate Christ's love, says Edith Yoder, chief executive officer of Bridge of Hope National, "is like watching a fresh wind of the Spirit move among us as we find ways to observe physical distancing while living more fully into being community with single moms longing for connection and support. Loneliness and isolation is so real, and the church has a beautiful opportunity to love our homeless neighbors through Bridge of Hope."

Neighboring Volunteers from different churches are living out the call of neighboring in three simple ways:

Connecting creatively

To Jesus, neighboring was caring for a stranger by the side of the road. Today, with physical distancing, neighboring is a phone call, a text, a video chat or an online game of Words with Friends. Some volunteers stay in touch with the families through Zoom. Others have participated in their first online trainings to learn how to be effective neighbors. One group of Neighboring Volunteers created a closed Facebook group and are posting regular getting-to-

Jesus' call to loving our neighbors means releasing the tight grip we have on material items and sharing generously with a family on the margins.

know-each-other activities. When family members lack the digital devices needed to connect with work and school, some volunteers are loaning or giving them laptops and iPads. Community is being forged in new ways.

Choosing faith, not fear

Choosing faith during a pandemic is not easy. Faith includes offers to do laundry so a mother doesn't need to take her children to a laundromat. Faith is a prayer of comfort texted at 10 p.m., when a single mom is concerned that her son's cough sounds dry and he might have a fever. Faith is guiding a mom with a newborn who needs help finding someone to repair her backed-up sewer.

One volunteer felt called to help a single mom who had just given birth to a baby girl, even though she needed to quarantine for 14 days before returning to her retirement community in Chester County, Pa. A single mom in Bridge of Hope Greater Denver

says, "What gives me hope during this crazy time is that I know I still have people in my corner who love me and have my back. My support system is made up of some amazing, selfless people."

Helping, not hoarding

Many Neighboring Volunteers across the United States are gratified to be able to share. They leave bags of groceries, along with disinfectant wipes and toilet paper, outside apartment doors and on porches for families in Bridge of Hope. Jesus' call to loving our neighbors means releasing the tight grip we have on material items and sharing generously with a family on the margins. "There's enough for all, if we learn to share it," says a Brian Moyer Suderman song.

**Due to confidentiality and the trauma related to homelessness, this family has requested that their last name be withheld.*



Lisa Cameron is executive director of Bridge of Hope Chester County, Pa., serves on the board of Mennonite Central Committee East Coast and attends Hopewell United Methodist Church.



Chris Hoover Seidel is director of Bridge of Hope Harrisonburg-Rockingham, Va., and is a member of Community Mennonite Church, in Harrisonburg, Va.