



A friend in NEED

Getting by with a little help from your friends sounds simple, but when life takes a turn it can be hard to reach out. Enter Kelly Banks and Janine Williams of Support Crew, who've made asking for help – and getting it – easy for all BY ERIN FISHER

When Kelly Banks' husband Randal was diagnosed with cancer midway through 2015, she suddenly took on the role of chief support person for her partner. Then after reading an article in NEXT that said everyone needed an organiser, a lightbulb flicked on. Together with Janine Williams, the two created Support Crew, an online support platform that helps Kiwis give and get a hand. Randal has now been clear of cancer for 12 months, but this inspiring duo are only just getting started with their mission to educate, empower and support as many people as they can.

SHARING THE STRUGGLE

When life throws us curveballs, it's easy to say that we're fine and try to keep on top of everything ourselves. Having gone through a three-year cancer journey with her husband, Kelly knows this feeling all too well, she juggled all of Randal's treatments, surgeries, transport and meals on her own. Friends and family offered their support, but the challenge was bridging the gap between receiving a phone call and receiving some practical help. "I think fundamentally you're overwhelmed and on autopilot – you don't know what you need," she says. "And also,

we're not good at asking for help."

At first Kelly didn't want Randal's cancer to burden other people, but she soon realised that by letting others help, she was actually giving a gift to those people. She could see it was deeply rewarding for people to assist in a way that was truly needed, and it gave them a special part in the journey too.

Close friend and colleague Janine also had her own experiences with cancer in her family, as well as a premature birth. They know there is a need for help, but both agree that actually asking for a hand isn't easy, no matter who we are or

what we're going through. "You'll be in a heap before you say, 'Can you come cook a meal?'" Janine laughs.

Janine and Kelly had become friends while working together at manufacturing company 3M, but both were searching for a greater sense of meaning in their work. This is how Support Crew was born.

The website allows you to easily set up a page for yourself or someone else who may be dealing with a life-changing event, add as many people as you like to the crew, and then organise whatever help is needed with the click of a button.



Photographs Supplied



The page can be as private or as public as you like, with as few or as many people as can help. From meals and lawn mowing, to transport, picking up the children and walking the dog, nothing is too much to ask. Not only does this lighten the load, but it strengthens relationships and creates a sense of community.

They have seen pages set up for not only cancer journeys, but also to support people going through bereavements, multiple births, sobriety, accidents, depression, dementia, Alzheimer's, motor neuron disease and premature births. Beyond providing practical support, the website has also become a powerful tool for raising awareness around the reality of

*'There is no hierarchy of life events.
The need for help is universal'*

CHANGING MINDS

Understanding that reaching out can be a struggle in itself, the two have made changing that mindset a key part of their mission. "I think that's our biggest challenge with Support Crew, is just trying to empower people to ask for help and to let others help." They're both able to laugh about being perfectionists, but say that the digital age of social media doesn't help.

For many, social media is a show reel that can portray an unrealistic image of perfection. Thinking that everyone else is handling life just fine makes it even harder to reach out. But when the duo did some research, they found that in reality, four out of 10 people were going through something big, and five out of 10 knew someone else who was. We also have a tendency to compare our struggles to others in worse off positions, and feel we shouldn't complain.

"There is no hierarchy of life events," Kelly says. "The needs are the same. The need for help is universal, irrespective of the life event."

"The desire to help hasn't gone. It's how we're wired."

THE BIG PICTURE

Kelly and Janine have collaborated with a number of charities and organisations, and are well on their way to achieving their goal of helping another 1000 Kiwis by Christmas. But their vision is even bigger: going global. "We've got big plans. We kind of see it as something that can help people no matter where they are in the world." Already, people from 18 countries and more than 120 cities have signed up to use the platform, and Kelly and Janine are keen to see this grow. And they've heard plenty of stories that make the project so rewarding.

There's one woman with breast cancer here in New Zealand, but a lot of her closest support resides in the UK. Support Crew has allowed her to stay positive by creating a virtual community of her loved ones, and she's received assistance and meals that have been organised from the other side of the world.

"Janine and I have been at this for two years, but every time I chat to someone, I'm like, 'This is why I do it,'" Kelly says. "When you've immersed yourself in going through something similar for the past three years, you just don't want other people to go through that same level of burden. I know you don't get to completely take it away, but you can make it that little bit easier." ✱

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