



United Way



Support during hard times

Premji turned to a United Way agency when his wife Shanta was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. What he didn't expect was to also find community for himself.

"My wife, Shanta, has Alzheimer's. Before I found United Way, it was very difficult. She's the patient, but I was the sufferer—she didn't know what was wrong, but I did, and I was in misery.

We moved to Canada in 2003 to join our children. We lived in a beautiful seniors' home; my daughter was close by and my son was in walking distance. I would say the two-and-a-half years we spent there were some of the best times in our lives.

But I noticed Shanta's behaviour had become erratic. Years before, the doctor said she had some anxiety and depression, but this was different. One day, she told me, 'The police came and dropped me home.' She had been walking along the highway. This happened three or four more times—the police would find her and bring her home.

I was dealing with my own health challenges during this time, and I didn't understand what was happening to Shanta. I was exhausted from all the doctor's appointments to figure out what was wrong. But then the doctor told us it was Alzheimer's. We saw neurologists and psychologists and they told me, 'You have to get ready.' They meant



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that I was now a caregiver and I had to be prepared for what was coming. They strongly recommended that we find some support.

I gathered my strength and started looking for an adult day services program. Thanks to United Way, I found one to help treat Shanta. She started going two days a week, but soon she went six days a week. What I didn't expect was that it would also help me. I became a member of the senior wellness group at the United Way agency that ran her program. I got good contacts, and I went to classes. And when I felt overwhelmed, they helped me.

The agency helped me understand how to help her, and how to be a caregiver. They even gave me a 'Hero at Home' certificate. That was my recognition, and I was very happy. Eventually though, it became too much for me to handle. We had to find a nursing home for her. That was hard, too, because we have been married for 55 years and now, we were to be separated.

But the agency helped us find a nursing home, and even housing for me. I told them I just wanted to be close to her. Within a week, they found me an apartment in the same area. In fact, it was just adjacent to the nursing home. Really, they were doing so much for me.

But then, Corona. My wife was scared. I was scared. My son decided Shanta would stay with him during the pandemic. As for me, I am still meeting with the senior wellness group. But now we are online. We connect on a daily basis, and on Wednesdays, we meet on Zoom.

Before, I was looking for ways to help my wife. But it is God's design that I landed with these people, too, because I also found connection and culture. The impact on my life has been very significant. Thanks to United Way, Shanta and I have had five good years—and we are looking forward to more.”

A personal revelation led to a commitment to giving back

Sumant didn't always feel invested in giving back, but the tenth anniversary of 9/11 shifted his thinking.

“I've never been more committed to supporting United Way as I am right now.

I started my career in New York. I'd gone to grad school in the States—my degree was in public policy and international affairs—and after I graduated, I got a job working for the city government there. My building was a block away from the Twin Towers. I was there on 9/11.



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When something like that happens, that brush with mortality, bearing witness to a tragedy, it does change things. I wanted to be close to my family, so I took a job that brought me back home, even though it wasn't in public service. I also found myself on a path where I wasn't that focused on giving. Eventually I started working at a bank with an organized giving program. A lot of people make their contribution decisions after they've received their year-end bonuses. Well, the second year I was there, it wasn't a great year and my bonus was smaller than the year before, so I ended up making a smaller donation. Oddly, in the weeks that followed, I didn't feel great about that—I was raised in a family where helping neighbours, friends or new immigrants was an ongoing and not at all unusual thing, and reducing my giving wasn't in line with that—but the feeling eventually passed.

The next year was the ten-year anniversary of 9/11, and I think I finally realized how lucky I was to have survived and granted a second lease on life. When I looked back on the previous years and the path that I'd been following, I realized that I wanted to do something more with my time and the good luck and good fortune I have. There's more to life than just working to make money, so I decided from that point forward that I was always going to make my giving decision before I got my compensation numbers.

After that, I started to pay closer attention to who and where and how I was giving money. Over the years, I've gone on tours of different agencies and gotten more exposure to the different things that United Way does. I came away with a sense of awe for the people who work at these organizations who are doing everything they possibly can to make other people's lives better. It made me more committed to supporting United Way.

I guess it shouldn't be surprising, but I didn't expect giving to become something that I was doing because I wanted to. I actually feel the joy of giving. It's a satisfaction that I don't get in many other places. It's funny. Giving is almost one of those selfish things you can do, because it makes you feel great."