Love in the Time of Corona

When the full force of the pandemic struck in March, this feeling returned to me. We discussed the situation as a staff, and decided that we would remain open to do all that we possibly could to ease the immense suffering that was descending on the students and families we served, as the great majority of them were losing their jobs and their ability to house and feed themselves. Most of them do not qualify for unemployment since they had worked in the cash economy as housekeepers, caregivers, landscapers, food service workers, and day laborers. We also decided to help as many other people in the community as we could, since most of the other social service organizations in our area are closed and their clients now are coming to us. We also decided to keep up our support of the community clinic physicians of our MED program who now find themselves on the front lines of fighting the virus in poor communities, and shockingly, some without the equipment and safety supplies they need.

As our little band of a dozen staff members decided to devote itself to loving service, we have been met with a huge outpouring of support from the community, as hundreds of people, as well as many of our foundation partners, have followed the promptings of the better angels of their nature, and contributed generously to our efforts. A former coworker, Jesus Sanchez, who now runs his own nonprofit, Gente Organizada in Pomona, asked us to create a regional emergency fund for those who had lost their jobs and did not qualify for unemployment. We did so and as of this writing, have been able to make 272 grants to desperate families in little over a month. Gente Organizada and another area nonprofit, Pomona’s Promise, have endorsed and helped to publicize the fund.

We have turned our farm program into an expanded food pantry, giving away our organic produce to anyone who comes to our door hungry. Thanks to your generous donations of nonperishable food, we have been able to expand our food bank to include staples like beans and rice. In addition, many community members are answering our call for the excess fruit from their garden trees, or are letting us come...
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We are so very grateful to our foundation and healthcare partners whose grants and contracts have allowed us to continue our support of our heroic MED program doctors who are working in the community clinics on the front lines of the coronavirus, bringing essential healthcare to the poorest of our brothers and sisters.

We are doing our best to help our students navigate the chaos of the education system as it tries to convert to online education. We are guiding our high school seniors through the confusing maze of college and financial aid offers from colleges that are not even able to guarantee that they will be offering anything other than online education in the fall and are proud to report that every single one of them will be going to college either in person or virtually, in the fall. We are assisting our younger students who are struggling with the technology (or lack of it) necessary to participate in online learning. Together with students from the Claremont Colleges, we are developing creative ways to keep our kids engaged in learning so that the education gap between the rich and the poor does not widen even further as a result of the school shutdowns.

In this issue we will share with you the stories of the beautiful “helpers” as Mr. Rogers would say, as well as the grateful voices of some of those who have been helped. It is with very full hearts that we thank all of you who have made our emergency response work possible, and through your generosity have demonstrated the best that humanity can be. We had planned a celebration for Uncommon Good’s 20th anniversary. But being part of a great uprising of human compassion, together with you, together with our community, is, in the end, the very best way to celebrate our twenty years of service.

The People You’ve Helped

We thought you might like to see the faces and hear the stories of some of the people you have helped through your generous donations to our emergency fund. These are the people who were already living just one payday away from ruin. They are the caregivers and manual laborers who often feel invisible and forgotten by the rest of society, even though they provide our food, take care of our children and elders, sew our clothes and keep our factories producing the necessities of life. In this time of their greatest need, you have been the light of hope for them, showing them that in fact you do appreciate what they do for us and recognize the humanity we all have in common. Here are some of their stories and portraits:

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Anthony and Lizeth received two of the youth grants donated by Judith Favor in memory of her husband. The children plan to use their money to buy glasses so that Lizeth can see, and to help their mother, who works so hard that she gets by on only four hours of sleep a night.

Mr. Miron and his wife have two children in Uncommon Good’s education program. He was working two jobs in food service and his wife was working one food service job and taking care of the children. They lost all of their jobs because of the virus shutdowns. Their only current income is the bread that Mrs. Miron bakes and tries to sell on Amway and door to door. They were evicted in January because the owner of their rental decided to move back into it. Mr. Miron suffers from diabetes and his wife has hypertension. When we gave the family an emergency grant, Mr. Miron volunteered to help us glean fruit for our food bank while he looked for a new job. His two children, Andrew (age 17) and Mia (age 15) also received grants of $80 each from donor Judith Favor, who wanted to give some help to the young people in our program, asking only that they do a good deed for others in return. Mia passed her money on to her parents to help the family pay its bills. As if in a present day version of the iconic film “Babette’s Feast” here is how Andrew, who shares an interest in cooking with his chef father, described what he planned to do with his funds:

“I will buy fresh healthy produce to cook my parents a delicious meal. Since the closing of schools and workplaces due to the coronavirus, my father no longer works all day and my mother has not worked all night. As a small gesture of gratitude towards my parents I want to share with them a delicious meal to enjoy together as a family.”

Spectacular children indeed are God’s consolation prize for the poor!!
Mr. and Mrs. Venegas have three children in our education program, Christopher (age 16), Maria (age 13) and Brandon (age 11). Mr. Venegas, a welder for heavy machinery, called us, weeping, when he was laid off from his factory job where he had been employed for five years. If that were not enough trouble, the family’s car was stolen and stripped twice. While he is looking for a new job, he has come to Uncommon Good to help us glean fruit for our food bank. Also, the family invested some of the money we gave them into cloth and elastic. The parents and three children started an in-home mask making business and managed to triple their funds, selling the masks online, to former co-workers, to their classmates at their English language class, and through word of mouth. They even gave away some of their masks to charities such as Uncommon Good.

Mrs. Toro has been the victim of a terrible violent crime and her husband abandoned her with two young children. She and the children moved in with her sister’s family of five in a two bedroom home to make ends meet. She and her sister worked cleaning rooms at a Motel 6. Mrs. Toro also sent money to support a sick family member in Honduras. But when the virus struck, her sister’s husband lost his jobs in a warehouse and restaurant. Mrs. Toro and her sister had their hours reduced to 5 hours a week. Mrs. Toro is using the emergency grant we gave her to pay for rent and food, and to buy a mattress so that she has something to sleep on.

Valeria and her brother, Angel, stayed at our office when their schools closed and their parents still had jobs. Now their parents are unemployed.

Jasmine and Leslie are sisters in Uncommon Good’s education program. They received two of the youth grants funded by our donor Judith Favor. Here is how they described what they would do with the grants:

“We will use this money to help our parents out with rent or food because our dad is disabled and our mom was our care giver bringing money by working, but was recently found with breast cancer. So we will use this money for the benefit of our family. Thank you so much. God bless you.”

Mr. Ku, who lets Uncommon Good use his yard as one of our farm plots, lost his restaurant job as a result of the virus. He is the sole support of his wife and four children. Here he picks up some food from our pantry and an emergency grant check.

Mrs. Ramirez is a 61-year-old widow and violent crime victim whose immigration case for a green card fell apart when her husband died last year. She lost her job in the virus crisis and has no other relatives able to help her.
"We have had several cases of Covid 19 at this clinic. Today, I examined a sick three-month-old infant in the tent outside the clinic. It was raining hard. The stethoscope I was provided with was a disposable one; one that made it extra challenging to hear the tiny breath sounds that were nearly overshadowed by the sound of the raindrops pouring on the tent above us. All I had with me to evaluate my patient was my stethoscope of poor quality, and a portable pulse oximeter. My nurse, who would otherwise normally assist me, could not be with me in the Covid tents. With little resources, I had to make a decision: should I hospitalize this patient or not? It felt very Third-World, to say the least. I have slowly come to terms that this is going to be my new normal for these next few weeks months."

"The most egregious situation out of all of this has been the shortage of PPE (personal protective equipment). All masks, gowns, gloves are backordered. I currently have only 2 N95 masks that are to be reused. Disposable goggles/face masks are disinfected and reused as well. Gowns are rationed out to the all the providers. We are considering using plastic parkas as gowns once we run out of the disposable ones. Again, I have never seen anything like this in my medical career. It definitely feels like we are on a medical mission in a Third World country with no resources. It’s nerve wracking and very disconcerting to be on the frontlines, especially as we start to hear of the stories of physicians and healthcare workers who have lost their lives to Covid19."

"One night Dr. Hagbom and I went to pick up a medication for one of our patients and delivered it safely to a patient’s home, which was humbling and really helped me realize that it is going to take a village for us to all stay healthy. And now I am at home sick, but doing well, and my community has shown up for me and helped me tremendously."

"Two weeks ago the LADPH asked us to provide medical services at a COVID-19 quarantine/isolation center in a hotel in Pomona. We didn’t hesitate to do this because the patients and community needed these services. It involved a large amount of overtime, late night calls, and unexpected weekends at the center. Recently they have asked us to take over the center for the remainder of this public health crisis. I feel that it’s the right thing to do and have rallied our organization to take this challenge on. We are currently working on the transition and it has become a major passion project for me.

The last 3 weeks have been a marathon, and though we are probably not even halfway through it, my spirits are still high because this is what I’ve trained to do. I must make sure I wake up extra early the next morning to get some bonding time in."

"The levels of anxiety have risen — among the staff, providers, and at home. Personally, my family has moved to Bakersfield temporarily (staying with in-laws). It has been almost 5 weeks since they left, so I do miss my wife and my two kids. I face-time them all the time and see them play in the evenings. Since we know so little about the virus, I didn’t want to expose them in any way when coming home."

"In dentistry, many procedures we perform produce aerosols and because the coronavirus can spread easily through aerosols our profession is among those at the highest risk for virus transmission in the healthcare field. On one of my first days on rotation after the virus hit, I had an elderly patient who presented with a fever of 100.2, but she had severe pain (pain level 10). We were unsure of how to handle her case because of her fever, but since she was in severe dental distress I could not turn her away. I ended up completing a limited exam on her, prescribing medication and immediately sent her for coronavirus testing. As a mother and a wife, I worry about my exposure to this virus when I am at work. But, I know that the patients that we treat are those that are in severe pain and have nowhere else to turn. Although these are scary and unprecedented times, I am grateful I can still serve my community."

"There is a major cost - at the end of these long days, I rush home, thoroughly decontaminate myself, and try to catch a moment with my 7-month-old infant before he goes to bed. The majority of the time I miss this small window, but I make sure I wake up extra early the next morning to get some bonding time in."

"We ran into a lot of issues with the supplies of personal protective equipment shortage and other sanitary supplies in the market. There was no N95 mask in the market for purchase. We had to get up early in the morning to call our suppliers to get a minimum amount of supplies sent to us if we were lucky."

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“I truly feel lucky that I am able to be here and take care of this community. I cannot emphasize enough how helpful having your loan repayment assistance is. At least that is one less thing off my mind and I can instead focus on taking care of patients, myself, and my family.”

“Unfortunately, one of our local patients recently tested positive for COVID, and he is currently recovering in the hospital. His daughter called to request refills for his wife’s medications, but the entire house is currently under quarantine. I decided to make our first hand delivery to this family to prevent potential exposure to the clinic, and I personally delivered the medications to them.”

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“We are short in PPE (personal protective equipment) so we have to reuse our PPE when seeing patients which is scary because we don’t want to infect other people and of course we don’t want to infect ourselves. Everyone here at Altamed is upbeat though and working as a team to get through this. Sometimes the weather makes it more difficult, i.e when it is raining or when it’s very hot, like today, especially if we have to wear our PPE and are fully covered. We are all overheating without a fan outdoors to cool our machines or ourselves! I use a wet napkin over my head to prevent me from getting heat stroke while seeing patients outside under the tent in the parking lot.”

“As a doctor who is married to another doctor who is an hospitalist, we are a bit scared. But the work needs to be done. We have a 21-month old daughter and we are fearful that if we get sick we might infect her, too. My mother-in-law who is our helper with the baby is also a registered nurse, so she is at the front line, too.”

“We are currently open for emergency exams and procedures only and I am the only dental provider. Due to limited amount of patients, we reduced our work day to one session only and the rest of the day I volunteer to screen patients and staff who arrive in the medical site, I check their temperature and ask for symptoms consistent with possible corona virus infection.”

“Our staff morale has been on high alert, high anxiety, and you can sense that a lot of staff are on edge. We have daily huddles as a whole group to discuss anything new or any change in protocols. We start and end each huddle with a prayer, which I know has helped me each and every day.”

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One of the most heartening developments to come out of this difficult time, is the number of people who have volunteered in creative ways to help others. Some of these have been young women. We thought you might like to hear what they have been doing.

Hayley is a tenth grader in our education program. Here is her description of her food gleaning project:

“As the current COVID-19 pandemic progressed, I realized that many communities would be negatively affected. Since my school transitioned into remote learning, I had more time to brainstorm ways that I can help provide for my community. I have two brothers that work at Starbucks and they told me their store had many extra sandwiches and pastries left over at the end of each day. I was distraught and knew there had to be a way to redirect the leftover food to families in need. I made an excel sheet listing all the open local Starbucks locations and their contact information. I reached out to each location, spoke to the store manager, and asked if they would be willing to donate their ready-to-eat surplus food at the end of each day. I managed to get five stores’ commitments the first day. They each asked me to pick up the food items at closing time, which all happened to be at the same time. I coordinated with my family and assigned each family member a different store to collect the food items from. Once home, I sort the daily donations and then drop them off at Uncommon Good. I have been able to collect 100+ ready-to-eat meals daily, which is helping to feed families through this pandemic.

“I am currently working on expanding the network efforts. I am contacting stores in different communities asking if they would like to participate and make food donations. Once I get a commitment from a store, I am asking my family and friends if they are willing to help with the pick up process. I have created pick-up routes for each volunteer. With continued Starbucks participation, I hope to continue growing the network and provide nourishing food for more families during this difficult time.”

Katherine Mayer is a Claremont College student who was a volunteer in our Weekly Writing Workshop (3W), a creative writing group for our Uncommon Good students. When the schools were shut down, she created an online writing contest for the children. Here she talks about her motivation, and gives an excerpt from one of the contestant’s entries:

“I’m a sophomore at Scripps College from New York City. I got involved in 3W as a mentor my first semester of college, and have been a coordinator for the past three semesters. Working with the amazing 3W students has confirmed my desire to work in education after college. I am so grateful to Uncommon Good for bringing together the 3W students and for supporting me in running 3W, and to the student’s families for bringing them to class every week before the pandemic. Here is how one of our young writers, also coincidentally named Katherine, describes her recent experience:

“During our break from school the governor and superintendent announced that we would not be going back to school for the rest of the school year. I was devastated when I heard this news. Everything that I had planned for 5th grade was ruined. I was not going to go on fieldtrips, not having a promotion ceremony, and I was not going to see my brother walk down the aisle graduating from highschool. Today March 14th, instead of writing this story I was suppose to be on my way to the ocean for my fieldtrip of the Ocean Institute. But, because of this tragedy that is happening right now I am quarantined at home with my family. I hope that in the future this virus will end and everything will be back to normal so, we can all reunite together as a big family! All of this that we have gone through makes us better human beings by forcing us to adapt to the changing situations and taking care of each other.”

Leonarda, a Girl Scout from Claremont Troop 6884, organized with her fellow troop members to raise money for our emergency fund and donations for our food pantry. Thank you, Troop 6884 members Leonarda, Penelope, Nathalie, Carolina, Jennifer, Taryn, Selfie, Reyna, Tassidit, Ruth, Sojeong, Leonarda, and troop leaders May May and Kristine!
Thank You, Friends!

It is with overflowing hearts that we thank all of you who have responded so generously and lovingly to our request for support for our Pomona Valley Coronavirus Emergency Fund. You have enabled us to give emergency grants to 272 families, and that number grows with each passing day. The below list contains the names of all of the donors to the fund as of this writing. If you made a gift since this publication went to press, please accept our deepest thanks, and we will publish your name in our next issue.

$220,000
The California Community Foundation

$50,000
The Rose Hills Foundation

$35,000
Ben and Emily Hunsaker

$20,000
Michael and Emily Fay
Gente Organizada

$10,000
The California Wellness Foundation

$6,000 to $9,999
Charles and Wendy Bayer
Norma and Scott Grannis
Jenny Kattlove and Sung Ohm

$1,000 to $5,999
Alison Anderson
Elise Ferree
Bob and Katie Gerecke
Michael Krebs and Katherine Irvine
Daniel Livesay
Beatriz Martinez
Rebecca Newman
Nora Quinn
Claudia Strauss and James Van Cleve
Ellen Webster and Shirlee Bromley
Darryl Yong
Ann R. Zenger

Artist: Uncommon Good student Ariel (7th grade)

Artist: Uncommon Good student Amir (5th grade)

Artist: Uncommon Good student Raquel (12th grade)
Artist: Uncommon Good parent Vanessa.

$500 to $999
Eleanor Ash
Mary and Christopher Caenepeel
Monika Chitra
Elizabeth Crighton
Steve and Amy Duncan
Pierre Englebert
Judith Favor
Sarah Gilman
Daniel Gluckstein and Akemi Chang
Thomas Hellwell and Bernadette Busenberg
Jeanne Hollander
Jennifer Jaffe
Colleen Lewis
Jean and Mike McKenna
Linda and Joseph Michon
Marsha Moutrie
Katherine Muller
Ross Pringle
Sheri Pym
Tahil Sharma
Anthony Shay and Khosrow Jamali
Margaret Waller
Heather Williams
J. Chris Westgate
Kenneth Wolf

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