

## **Fighting Against COVID, One Act of Kindness at a Time**

Meet Jai and Sharda Rajput, my grandparents. On the surface, they may seem like typical grandparents; they spend the majority of their time gardening and talking with friends. But they are unique in many ways. My grandfather served in the Indian Air Force for 40 years, and this military experience has ingrained a deep passion for health and fitness in him. Just a glance at his garden can tell you this. Most gardens contain radiant roses and vivacious zinnias. My grandparents', on the other hand, has flavorful, green chilies and fresh mint leaves. They're obsessed with organic, homegrown foods, but they don't have enough space in their apartment for a large garden, so they grow smaller plants instead. They also go on walks on nature trails in their neighborhood twice a day. This way, they get the exercise that they need while enjoying the lush greenery and famously vibrant flowers of India around them. As they walk, they call my family in the US. They have done this since we first came here, so though they live on the other side of the world, it feels like they've been with me my entire life, from my first step to this very day. They're an essential part of my family.

That's why my parents, sister, and I got so worried at the beginning of the pandemic. My grandmother has diabetes, and even during ordinary times, she has to be very careful and maintain a strict diet and hygiene routine to avoid infection. COVID further complicates things. My grandparents aren't very good with technology, so they can't order groceries online. And Indian marketplaces are notoriously crowded, allowing COVID to spread quickly. If they had to go out for groceries weekly, it wouldn't be a question of if, but when they'd catch COVID. Their old age and preexisting conditions

combined with the disease itself make their chances of survival very thin, so even the simple act of getting groceries becomes a life-threatening experience.

Luckily for my grandparents, my dad was able to order groceries online from the US. But there was still a problem: the delivery boys were only allowed to drop groceries at the apartment complex gate, and even the short distance between the complex gate and my grandparents' apartment was risky because of the multiple COVID cases within the complex. Just as they began to despair, heroes started rising up and helping them: their neighbors. Calls came to them like bears to honey. Everyone wanted to ensure that my grandparents were safe during the pandemic, so they grabbed the groceries for them. The only thing they asked in return? Don't go out. This act, which may have seemed small or insignificant to their neighbors, truly changed my grandparent's lives by preventing them from contracting COVID. And they were grateful for it. I vividly remember talking to my grandmother the first time her neighbors delivered her groceries. You could hear how touched she was from how her voice shook with emotion and relief that she no longer had to worry about risking her life for groceries every week. Though I wouldn't say that my grandparents had no difficulties with the pandemic after this, a huge burden had been lifted off their shoulders, all from something as simple as grocery deliveries.

After seeing how beneficial even simple acts of kindness can be during this pandemic, I was eager to help others just as others had helped me. I soon got a chance to help out when one of the families in my apartment building contracted COVID. Word spread fast through our highly sophisticated communication system of moms. The family

came to our complex a year ago from Italy, and they didn't have any nearby relatives to help them during this difficult time, so everyone in our apartment building decided to take turns providing meals each day the family was sick, as they were all too exhausted to cook for themselves. Our building has Indian, American, Egyptian, and Chinese families, but no Italian families other than the one that was infected, so when our turn came to provide meals, I suggested making pizza. My mom glared daggers at me and told me to go to my room. She later told me that trying to persuade her to make pizza for the Italian family wouldn't get me any and that she was planning on making something healthy. However, she did end up making pastina with Pecorino Romano cheese and pepper seasonings, an Italian dish, because she agreed that the family would probably find food from their home country comforting. An Egyptian family made molokhia soup (an amazingly delicious dish that was served to pharaohs) with pita bread and a Chinese one made chicken congee, with spinach and ginger on the side. The American families made the classic: chicken soup. While the moms were responsible for making the food, I volunteered to package each meal and keep the food next to the infected family's door in disposable containers (under my mom's watchful gaze, of course). The family recovered within two weeks, and soon after, I realized that everybody in the building had begun to feel like family. We knew a lot more about one another's cultures from the different dishes we chose to make and got to really know one another through our collaboration.

In both my grandparents' case and the case of my neighbors, the actions done for them weren't very big. It's not that difficult to make meals for somebody or deliver their groceries. But they had a profound impact on the people helped. And the effect becomes

greater still when whole communities band together. If communities continue to have solidarity and humanity throughout this pandemic, we will surely prevail against COVID, one act of kindness at a time.