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TEDxEastVan: Dr. Alexandra Greenhill will show how easy it is to ask for a helping hand

by Gail Johnson on April 20th, 2016 at 2:52 PM

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My Best Helper CEO Alexandra T. Greenhill says that it's sometimes difficult for people to seek assistance—even when others are willing to step up.

There are two extremes facing people who are trying to do it all, says Vancouver doctor and mother of three Alexandra T. Greenhill: either lean in or bow out. But there is another option for people juggling work, family, and all of life's demands, she says—and it's one that can help make the world a better place.

“One of the things that frustrates me...with all the messages out there like lean in or the opposite, bow out, is that it means putting yourself in one of two categories: you either give up on your dreams or you work

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harder than you ever thought possible,” says the former emergency-room physician in a phone call. “I think there’s a third way. It has to do more with leaning on each other for assistance.

“When people are asked, ‘Can I give you a hand?’ our default answer would be ‘No, thank you; I’m alright,’ ” she says. “Each individual task may seem manageable, but when you combine all the things you’re responsible for, it comes to weigh more than 100 percent. I personally started saying ‘Yes’ when I had my first baby....Now my default answer is ‘Yes.’ ”

Being open to accepting help from others does more than just make her busy life a little easier. It also sends a message to others: if it’s okay for her to take a helping hand, that might encourage other people to do the same rather than end up overwhelmed to the point of being burned out or even ill. And saying “Yes” to help gives other people a chance to lend a hand, which has positive effects and health benefits in its own right.

Greenhill has high hopes for harnessing the power of help: she believes that by leaning on each other—and using technology to connect people who need it or can offer some—we can bring back the sense of community that seems increasingly elusive in the modern world.

As the founder and CEO of My Best Helper, a web and mobile service that connects people with child care, home care, and elder care, Greenhill will be among 12 speakers at the upcoming TEDxEastVan on Saturday (April 23). The third annual daylong event is based on the theme “Move”, which organizers say represents change, intense emotions, performances, and art and culture.

Greenhill has also developed a free app called myCrew that lets you ask for and provide help, whether you’re a parent running late and you need another mom to

bring your kids home from school or you are able to do a quick grocery run for someone who is housebound. You can simultaneously ask friends and trusted people in your networks for help using your phone's contact list, but unlike a group chat or email thread, each receives the request individually. You can then see all your options, who is available when and where.

Greenhill got the idea for the app after a friend of hers had to go to work and was desperate for last-minute babysitting. Greenhill posted about it on Facebook, and within minutes, dozens of people had offered to take care of the woman's kids.

What struck her was that people genuinely wanted to help and didn't expect anything in return. And although it still takes a village to raise a child, it also takes one to help people throughout their lives.

"I think it's important to know that a whole bunch of us will help each other just because we can," Greenhill says. "By knowing that, we're stronger. I view tech as the ability to reveal there's an army full of people willing to help each other. It's a true win-win. So why can't we make that possible?"

At TEDxEastVan, Greenhill will talk about seven reasons people are reluctant to accept help and how to, essentially, get over them.

"It sounds simple, but it's a new habit, a new perspective on how you interact with others," she says. "We've been socially trained that the strong ones never ask for help, never show any signs of weakness. When so many of our leaders are models of that behaviour still, it makes it very difficult for anyone else to adopt it."

And people may be reluctant to offer help for fear of insulting someone, implying that they can't handle everything they've got on their plate.

Greenhill's myCrew app was the first Canadian venture to win the Cartier Women's Initiative Award, a global entrepreneurs' competition that had more than 1,700 applicants.

In her work and travels, she says, she has come to the realization that all over the globe, people are increasingly overwhelmed by the demands of life while they are lacking a sense of community that existed in decades and centuries past. That's especially true in Vancouver, which some newcomers have described as a place that is isolating and where it is hard to make friends.

"People are so fragmented; so many have moved away from family and their social networks," she says. "We really need to start talking about new social habits, to make it easier for people to not feel isolated. Imagine feeling that way on top of having a major illness or when you have a new baby.

"Imagine if people would be willing to become a block volunteer so that if somebody in a wheelchair needs to get milk on a rainy day in Vancouver, they can say: 'Can somebody do this for me?' and there will be thousands of people willing to do it."

TEDxEastVan will also feature Tima Kurdi, whose advocacy helped shift public opinion in favour of admitting more Syrian refugees.

Also speaking at this year's event are bioresource pioneer Christopher Bush, physicist and writer-filmmaker Domini Walliman, and Syrian-Canadian refugee advocate Tima Kurdi, among others. So is scientist Samuel Wadsworth, a PhD in respiratory-cell biology and who cofounded a biotechnology company that specializes in 3-D bioprinting.

"This rapidly developing technology is going to transform the way we treat aging

and disease by enabling us to 3-D–print personalized organs on demand, drastically reducing the wait time for organ transplants and removing any chance of immune rejection,” Wadsworth tells the *Straight*. “Bioprinting will also fundamentally change how we develop drugs by reducing the reliance on animal testing. Drugs tested on printed human tissues will have a greater chance of success compared to drugs tested in animals.”

TEDxEastVan takes place on Saturday (April 23) at the York Theatre. More information is at the TEDxEastVan [website](#).

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