

# A GF lifeline created online

By Maureen E. Stanley



**M**y celiac disease diagnosis threw me for a loop until I decided to take a bold step into cyberspace. With an Internet connection and a magical flip of my computer switch, I found myself in the middle of a vast gluten-free community. Suddenly I had a huge support system right at my fingertips.

I now have gluten-free friends in nearly all 50 states as well as Canada, Australia, England, and Ireland. For one person, living gluten free can be daunting. However, armed with the support of countless others experiencing the exact same condition, it can be life changing in the most positive ways.

What a warm reception I received. I immediately felt welcomed and a part of this amazing virtual gluten-free family. Access to this community certainly made learning to live and thrive gluten-free so much easier. We may have come from different walks of life, and we each had a uniquely different story of diagnosis, but every one of us was gluten free.

Online help from others with gluten intolerance was priceless, and I decided I wanted to help others in return. I created my own blog and podcast. By blogging, I was able to share my story, my accomplishments, and even my frustrations. I wrote about the lessons learned on cross-contamination, the heartache felt in learning my young daughter possessed the celiac gene, and even my exploding gluten-free calzone incident.

Pre-celiac I loved calzones, so I decided to try my hand at creating a gluten-free version. It was only after I put the calzone in the oven that I took the time to read all of the directions on the package of gluten-free dough I was using. Apparently, I was supposed to separate the dough into four equal parts and make four calzones. Too late! I had already made one gigantic calzone. It was ugly and pretty much exploded in my oven. To my surprise, I wasn't alone in detonating a calzone. Like a group therapy session, readers of my blog confided their gluten-free mishaps and offered encouragement.

Boosted by the response, I started a podcast, which is like a personal radio show on the Internet. Again, I was amazed at the response. Angela, a gluten-free truck driver, wrote in asking advice for "on the go" lunches. Pamela, a dedicated mother of an autistic son, sought gluten-free, kid-friendly foods.

## Social networking

But I still wanted more. To connect with an even larger group of those who follow the gluten-free diet, I eagerly joined various social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace.

In each and every network, I discovered an abundance of gluten-free users. I got to know a fascinating variety of people including grandmas, hippies, crafters, bakers, and students. However different we might seem on the outside, we are all connected because we are gluten free and tech savvy.

The gluten-free community has a resounding voice. Together, we excitedly work towards a future filled with gluten-free food labeled clearly and accurately, a bountiful choice of gluten-free groceries, and a restaurant on every corner offering a gluten-free menu.

For me all this was a big change from the early days when I left my gastroenterologist's office clutching two outdated pamphlets as though they were my life preservers. I did not have any gluten-intolerant family or friends to turn to for guidance. Like everyone else who is newly diagnosed, I started reading labels and contacting manufacturers for the information so vital to keeping me gluten free and healthy.

You can easily experience and benefit from this virtual support system. To start, you can Google the term "gluten free" and you will receive literally millions of links in return.

Get your feet wet by visiting a message board or blog, virtual places where people share their personal thoughts, experiences and recipes, sometimes through questions and answers and sometimes in a kind of computer journal. Don't be hesitant to ask a question online. You will be amazed at how helpful and thoughtful the replies will be. Just keep in mind that anyone can write or talk online. It may take some time for you to decide who you really trust when it comes to the gluten-free diet. Sometimes you'll get opinions, other times facts.

If you read a blog that interests you, don't be afraid to comment. Try "twittering" the latest delicious gluten-free food to hit the shelves (just go to twitter.com and set up a free account). Start a gluten-free Facebook or MySpace group. Share your knowledge as well as learn from others. From the comfort of your own home, you too can discover the enormity of the online gluten-free community and gain quite a few amazing friends along the way.

*Maureen Stanley was diagnosed with Celiac Disease in 2005. She lives happily gluten-free in New Jersey with her husband, two children, and a dog that has a fondness for her gluten-free baked goods. For more information on her "Hold the Gluten" blog and podcast, visit [holdthegluten.net](http://holdthegluten.net). You can also access Gluten-Free Living online at [glutenfreeliving.com](http://glutenfreeliving.com), which includes a link to our blog. We also twitter as [gfliving](https://twitter.com/gfliving).*