

Sandy From the Mountains dies from COVID-19, leaving a message to the unvaxxed

Sandy and her husband lived in a cabin nestled into a mountainside in a small town in the Rockies, next door to my daughter Sarah. I met Sandy last March, when my husband Larry and I and our daughter Carly visited.

On a snowy Saturday last December, Sandy's husband allowed the staff in the ICU to turn off her life support, and COVID claimed yet another victim, one of the [million-plus Americans](#) who have succumbed to the relentless and ever-changing coronavirus. And like many of those who have died, Sandy's concern about whether or not to be vaccinated was the driving narrative. She didn't think it could happen to her. Here is her story.

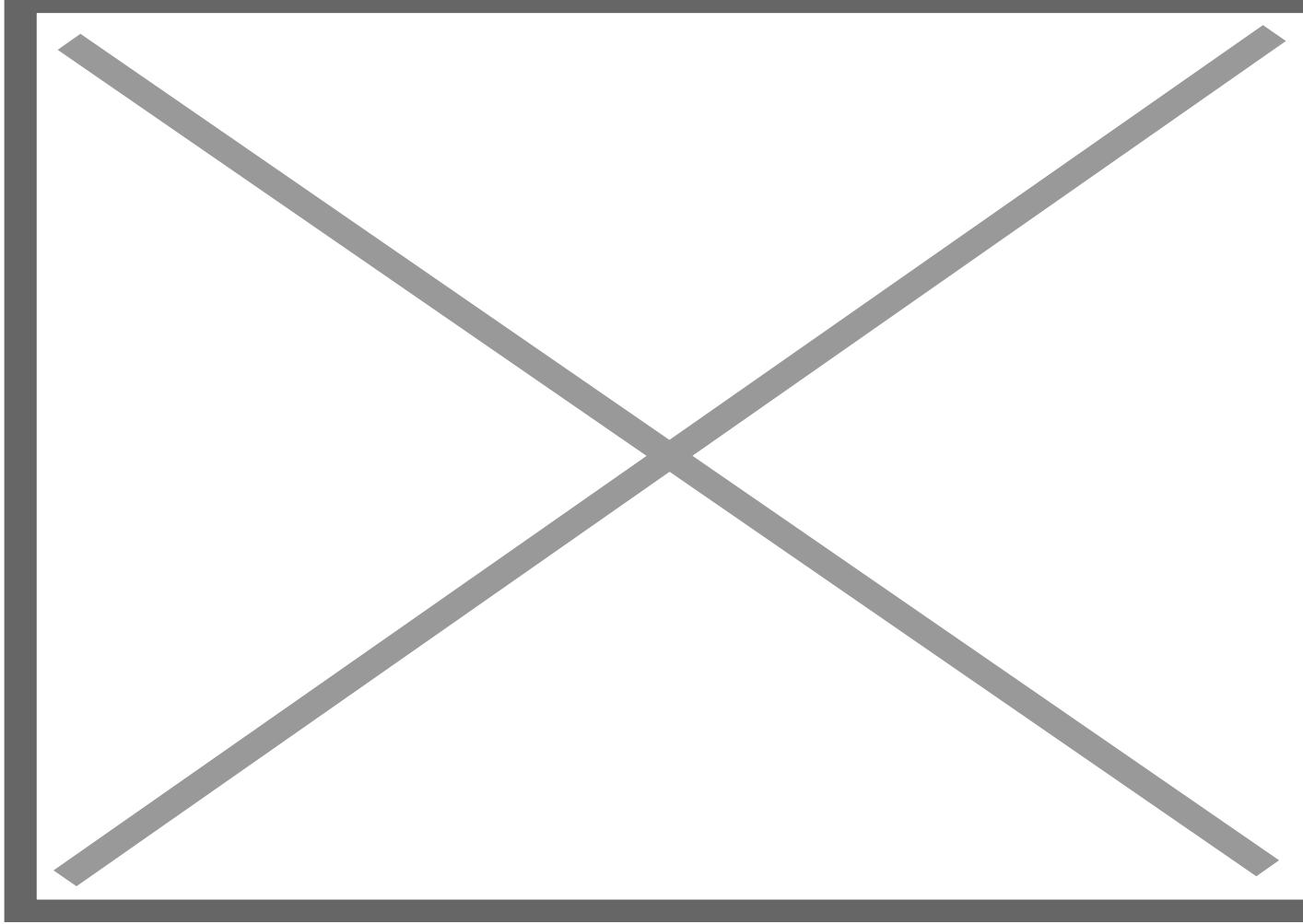
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I had heard about Sandy since late summer 2020, when my daughter moved in and didn't know how to prepare for encroaching wildfires. Sandy had become like a second mother to Sarah. But when I finally met her, she wasn't what I expected.

Sandy looked younger than her 70+ years and remarkably like Stevie Nicks, pretty and vibrant and warm, with glimmering white-blond hair and beautiful permanent makeup that accentuated her eyes. She was owl-like. Her husband reminded me a little of a rumpled, flannel-shirted Eddie Vedder, or James Taylor with much better hair, an aging yet striking rock star couple.

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Stevie Nicks. Credit: Kevin Winter/Getty Images

We all clicked. Two friends dropped by, and we held an impromptu seder on that first night of Passover. We sang the traditional songs to our new Christian friends – Dayenu, Let My People Go – then inexplicably listened to Led Zeppelin’s “Ramble On” playing on repeat. It was a strange but, in retrospect, memorable evening.

It had been oddly exciting to gather after months of lockdown. Vaccination had just begun, and so my husband and I, our ages a risk factor, were the only ones who were fully protected. The neighbors weren’t, tragically believing their isolation would keep them safe, although Sandy’s husband went into town for work.

We all tried to warn them

Sandy knew I was a biologist and wanted to know more about the vaccines, so I explained how they work. I told her that I couldn't imagine how a vaccine could be more harmful than the threat of what the virus could do. She asked insightful questions, many of them, but still looked skeptical.

And that triggered my younger daughter.

Carly tried to hold it in but couldn't. And so, she tearfully poured out what she had seen from her sixth-story window in Astoria, Queens during those horrid months as winter turned to spring in 2020. White-shrouded bodies had stacked up at the ambulance bay of the hospital right next door, like bleachers of death. It's an image she nor the rest of our family can never unsee.

But to Sandy, in her cabin in the woods, an inner-city hospital must have seemed a million miles away. In March 2020, the mantra *"it can't happen here"* was still playing in many parts of the country.

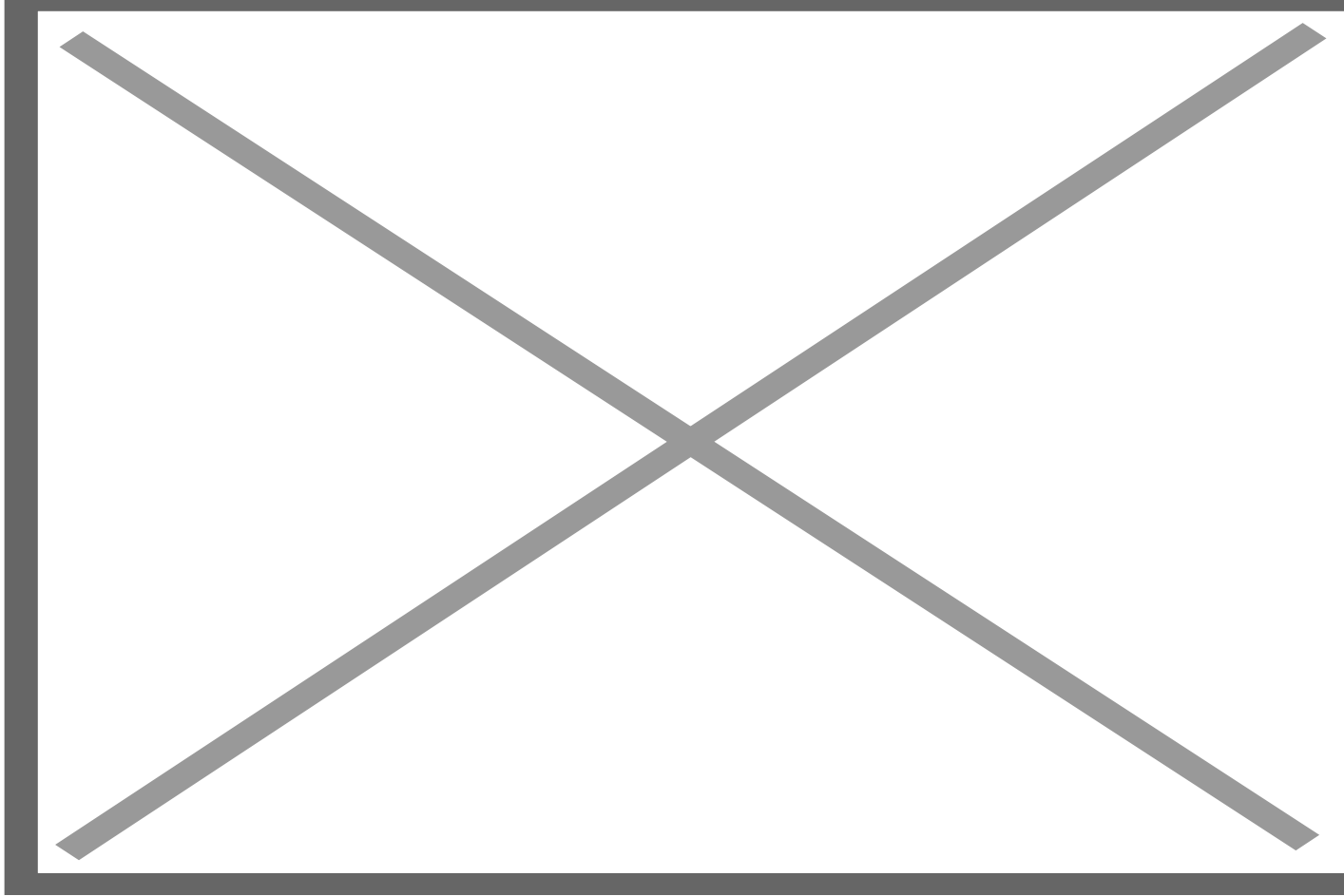
Sandy remained unconvinced. *Unvaxxed*. I can only imagine where she got her information. Sarah kept offering to take her to get vaccinated, through the summer. But then Sandy cut her off completely over the issue. Until then, Sandy and I had talked and texted. We liked the same books, bands, and TV shows. I considered her a friend.

Then in early December, just about when Omicron was emerging to overtake Delta, Sandy got COVID. Her husband had brought it home.

I knew that Sandy wasn't stupid and that she knew biology – during the conversation on Passover she'd mentioned mitosis, cell structure, DNA. I see now that when it came to vaccination, she was simply scared. And her fear and denial cost her her life.

Statistics on the never-ending pandemic become obsolete almost as soon as they are compiled these days. Yet is undeniable, more obvious every day, that most COVID deaths are among the [unvaxxed](#). Still, an astounding percentage of the overall US population refuses vaccination, the percentages distributed unevenly among the states, perhaps driven more by politics than understanding the science.

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Credit: Our World in Data

I'll admit that I never saw this coming, the vaccine hesitancy that has catalyzed COVID, not only enabling a deadly virus but giving it room to evolve. The pandemic wasn't a surprise, as I suspect it wasn't to many other biologists. And I've always thought herd immunity – not a new idea – was more a theoretical ideal than an achievable goal in the real world. But I never imagined the politicization of a national public health crisis stemming from an infectious disease, nor the fear that spawns willful ignorance.

I'm trying now to understand why Sandy died, why she thought the government was trying to take away a "right" by offering, at no cost, something that could prevent her death. It's too late for Sandy, but perhaps someone will read this post and go roll up a sleeve. I can't wrap my head around the glaring fact that thousands have made the same stubborn choice as Sandy.

But Sarah found some closure the day after Sandy died. She and a friend were hiking in the spectacular mountains that are the backdrop to the log homes, some built onto cabins going back a century. She texted us images of a tree with a small, perfect, owl sitting on a lower branch.

Last night! It was so beautiful, little, white, we got really close to her and she just stared right back for awhile. I know this sounds crazy but it felt like Sandy coming to see me! I really felt

that and cried and said everything I wanted to say to Sandy, that I was sorry she was misled, sorry she suffered. And when I finished, she flew off.

So RIP Sandy from the Mountains who looked like Stevie Nicks.

And I saw my reflection in the snow-covered hills

'Til the landslide brought me down.

May your story save lives. We have the tools to hold off the landslide.

Ricki Lewis has a PhD in genetics and is a science writer and author of several human genetics books. She is an adjunct professor for the Alden March Bioethics Institute at Albany Medical College. Follow her at her [website](#) or Twitter [@rickilewis](#)