

## Maintaining a sense of community

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When strangers start acting like neighbors ... communities are reinvigorated.

? Ralph Nader

Our sense of community has changed over the decades. Our lives are quite hectic these days and we have to contend with many stresses.

When times are tough, or at least a little complex, we need the comfort of friends and neighbours.

The sad fact today in some areas is that few really know their neighbours.

What has happened to make it so?

Ok, few of us have either lived or experienced the "Leave it to Beaver" scenario, where everyone knew their neighbours and care for their well being.

Growing up in Etobicoke I remember a friendly, safe community where a kid could ride his bike all day long and not come home until dark. We arrived home when we were dirty, tired and hungry - the sign of a good day.

Yes, neighbours looked out for one another and even if you didn't know them by name, you knew something about them. People waved, said "hello" and came to the door from time to time.

Moving from Etobicoke to small town Ontario, the sense of closeness never left us, but we moved to a rural area north of Bolton, so our neighbours were spread out. Without a bike, a kid wasn't going anywhere. And the gravel roads took their toll on our two-wheeled conveyances.

But house warming parties were still commonplace, and I remember people showing up at the door with food on many occasions.

Once we became mobile with driver's licences, the world was our oyster, yet we didn't venture very far from home.

I imagine that places like Nobleton, Schomberg and King City have retained much of their "small town" feel and spirit. It's something you can't really put your finger on, but it's a sense of belonging, of paying attention, of caring.

So while our urban counterparts may make jest of us in this part of the GTA, we know the true secret.

Call us "hicks" or "country bumpkins" we don't mind. In fact, many of us wear it like a badge of honour on our Sunday suits as we go to church with our friends and neighbours. If being a "hick" means knowing the server at the coffee shop, so be it. If being a "bumpkin" means gathering at the ballpark on a Saturday afternoon, that's okay.

Some in our neck of the woods can't wait to get out of Dodge and explore the big city. I'm sure most of us have done that. While the hustle and bustle of cities like Toronto and New York have their appeal, give me fresh air and rolling hills any day.

My eldest daughter recently returned from a school trip to New York City, visiting the sights and sounds of that huge metropolis.

Being interested in performing arts, she loved Broadway. For a teen, I imagine it's quite the magnet.

Maybe an appreciation of suburban living comes with age and a family.

In our first townhouse our little neighbourhood was quite close-knit. Since we were on a self-contained court, we regularly gathered

at neighbours' homes or on the street for impromptu gatherings. We watched out for one another's children and pets. We told our neighbours their car windows were open when rain was coming.

We always made it a point of trying to be friendly with the neighbours on both sides of our subdivision and we did the same in our current home. Neighbours have come and gone.

Yet, it doesn't matter who's out walking their dog, jogging or cycling by, I always make it a point of smiling and saying "hi." It's the neighbourly thing to do.

Of course, our lives are busy at times, almost too much so. Almost every night of the week there are Brownies, sports, school commitments, homework sessions, birthday parties and part-time jobs. There is a seemingly endless to-do list and errands pile up faster than they can be addressed.

I think I spend more time doing, preparing and cleaning than enjoying.

When it comes to neighbours, we see them more in the summer, and smell the neighbourhood BBQs. We hear kids splashing in backyard pools and see our neighbours doing lawn chores. Again, there is always something to tend to, to improve, perfect and maintain.

Since I lack green thumbs of any kind, I have to rely on others for advice and options. Everyone has an opinion.

There's still a certain amount of keeping up the Joneses, but I think most of it centres around just keeping the property decent and in keeping with the community.

This winter did take its toll - we lost a downspout and several slabs of stone came loose from our front steps. A small bush may never recover.

I love emerging from winter and stretching my legs in the summer sun. Some may be a little blinded by my colourful attire, but it's my way of celebrating summer. In my spare time, I simply love being in a constant state of "vacation mode."

I missed a family vacation last year and never took any time off. This year, while a trip is out of the question, I'm doing my best to find a cottage for the family at a reasonable price. We used to vacation at the Delawana Inn until it closed. This resort, too, had a sense of belonging, of community.

Humans are social animals, whether we admit it or not. We need contact, whether it's a wave, smile or "can I take your order?"

Just as we dedicate ourselves to raising our families and working hard, we should also work hard to forging bonds and being part of our neighbourhoods.

It's a win-win scenario.