

A Sense of Community

- by Debra L. Percy, *Meeting the Challenges* Reader

I am all of 39. But as I perform my morning ritual, of three miles spent out around the clubhouse and tennis courts of my apartment complex, in pursuit of the elusive 12 minute mile, my muscles feel ancient. On this foggy morning in the Central Valley, I am joined by my neighbors, out for their constitutional. Some with walkers, some with dogs, solitary, or in groups of twos, my neighbors, many whose years double mine, join this informal morning walking club. And as my energy ebbs, their morning greetings, full of comment on my swinging arms and deliberate stride, make me smile and push me onward, with my mind full of thoughts of how I happen to call this community home and what it means to live here.

When I found myself looking for an apartment 6 years ago, I wandered in almost by accident and was greeted by Joyce, a trim woman of indeterminable years, a neat white bun atop her head and a disarming smile. The liberal pet policy, mature trees and mostly Joyce's assurance that "This is a real pleasant community, you'll like living here" sold me.

And so I moved in, not quite realizing that most of my neighbors would be closer to my grandmother's ages (94 and 97) than mine. At first I found it merely reassuring that there would be people around looking after things while I was off working. It was convenient to call Charlie, my downstairs neighbor and a retired fighter plane mechanic, and ask him to check if I'd left the iron plugged in. Or to have Grace, another of my octogenarian neighbors feed my cat when I was off visiting family on the east coast. But over the years I have come to know what a treasure my neighbors are and the true sense of community that abides here.

Giving runs deep; each from their own storehouse. During Marie's recuperation from successive hip and knee replacement surgeries, neighbors took turns doing her laundry, shopping, and watering her impressive patio of plants. As I fought with changing her support stockings, she shared stories of growing up with bobcat pups on a ranch in Nevada. And although I lost a fake fingernail to those stockings, I now know the stories behind those incredible photographs on her wall. Fully recouped these days, Marie runs an occasional "cocktail" hour hot line, which turns up neighbors and whatever they may have to share from their wine cupboards and pantries. She also passes on her back issues of Smithsonian Magazines to me, with a gentle reminder to pass them on to others when I've finished reading them.

Sometimes I think the concept of "Paying it Forward", (returning a kindness done to you by doing something good for someone else), was developed here. When I gave my old car to a neighbor who didn't have one, I was surprised to find out months later, that she routinely shops for Lou, her downstairs neighbor who no longer drives. Maybe it's just that kindness is part of the routine of daily life here. When I go on vacation these days, I loan my new car to Grace in exchange for looking after my cat. When I recently returned from my Thanksgiving vacation, not only was my cat fat and happy, but my refrigerator held a pot of home made turkey



To read the latest issues OR to order a CD of over 8 years of informative articles,
please go to: <http://www.vitalco.net/magazine.htm>

soup. During my summer vacation, she even took Marie out one evening to see fireworks. All this from the loan of a simple car.

The sense of community here goes deeper than just one neighbor doing for another. Neighbors have come together to sponsor and organize weekly card parties in the clubhouse. Monday nights it's poker, Wednesday's pinochle and Thursday afternoons are reserved for bingo. And from time to time, they even welcome a non-card playing neighbor who can't live without watching her favorite sports team on TV to join them in the clubhouse! There are art classes, bonsai-tree growing clubs, and aqua and indoor aerobics, all sponsored by neighbors for neighbors.

Carol, an active member of the local parish, organizes monthly home masses at the clubhouse, for her neighbors that can't routinely go to church. As a lay minister, she regularly brings communion to her housebound neighbors. You might say she is our local saint, adding the names of those sick or in the hospital to the church's prayer list and remembering all her ailing neighbors in her own prayers.

The management also contributes to the sense of community here. Maintenance workers are available to install hand railings in tubs and showers or security screen doors. Gates have been installed in recently renovated patio fencing to assist older residents in getting from the parking area to their apartments. Little things that make daily living here easier. It's no wonder that people chose to call this community home.

Making my way through my final lap I wonder what kindnesses I can share with my neighbors today; and what kindnesses may be in store for me. Perhaps I'll take Grace shopping or maybe Marie will call with an invitation to sample a piece of her famous lemon pie. Whatever today holds, Joyce was right, this is a real pleasant community to live in. With kindness given freely, any neighborhood can be.

© 2005, Partnership to Preserve Independent Living for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities. All rights reserved. This article may not be reproduced in any manner without permission.

Meeting the Challenges is published quarterly (four times a year) by the Partnership to Preserve Independent Living for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities, 6296 Rivercrest Drive, Suite K, Riverside, CA. 92507. The Partnership to Preserve Independent Living for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities is a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation organized for the purpose of improving or preserving the independence and dignity of the elderly and persons with disabilities and their families. **The educational programs of the Partnership to Preserve Independent Living for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities are supported by grants and the charitable contributions of individuals and organizations.** Visit us on the Internet at www.LivingPartnership.org or through *Vital Connections* at www.vitalco.net.



To read the latest issues OR to order a CD of over 8 years of informative articles, please go to: <http://www.vitalco.net/magazine.htm>