

Good neighboring project from *Living City*, December 2012

## **Strangers becoming friends**

*A good neighboring project*

By Raya and Miguel Novak

**Miguel:** We were initially inspired through our local parish to join a citywide ecumenical movement in Arvada, Colorado, called the Art of Neighboring that encouraged all Christians to live Jesus' Commandment: "Love your neighbor." Guidelines were given that basically encouraged those interested in participating to organize events with their neighbors to provide opportunities for everyone to become better acquainted.

We were new in the area, and we saw in this project a challenge and an opportunity to live more fully our spirituality, the Art of Loving. We live in a lovely community that surrounds a lake. There is a paved walking trail that enables neighbors to literally "cross paths" with one another on a daily basis. Later, we began discovering neighbors, who despite living in close proximity for years and often directly across the street from one another, had never met or conversed, in 20 or 30 years!

**Raya:** We began the project last year with a potluck BBQ where 40 people attended and continued it with monthly meetings of various kinds throughout the year — including an ice skating event, a game night, a progressive dinner, watching the Super Bowl game together, and enjoying families' personal slide shows. A perpetual challenge in the planning of each of these events was to strike a balance between simply "being active" and actively "being" with one another. Consequently in each meeting, examples of how one becomes a "good neighbor" were given and ice-breaking games were played that required the sharing of personal stories to further stimulate the process of turning strangers into friends.

At Christmas time, instead of encouraging the traditional exchange of material gifts, we asked that names be drawn for the exchange of the gift of each other. The participants agreed to have a one-hour meeting with the neighbor whose name they had drawn for the sole purpose of becoming better acquainted.

We started to notice more tangible fruits from some of these efforts when some neighbors started reaching out to others more spontaneously. One day, for example, while walking around the lake, a woman stopped me and asked if I was the lady who had once come to her door with an invitation to one of our events. She had not yet participated but wanted to know about future events and even went so far as to volunteer to invite others. Another evening, Miguel and I were invited to the home of a retired couple who are active in their Baptist Church and with whom we soon discovered a mutual interest in southwestern artifacts and international travel.

**Miguel:** Another time, I was busy working inside my garage when I heard the words, "Hi neighbor. Just wanted to see how you are doing." Raya and I had invited Jim and Sue for dinner just a couple of weeks before and although we had enjoyed a nice dinner together, it didn't appear that we actually had that much in common with one another. So Jim's visit surprised me. Our conversation in the garage somehow "spontaneously" moved into a "serious topic." This neighbor shared his present experience of the "empty nest syndrome"

since the last of his three children had just moved out. Something deeper clicked between Jim and me.

A few days before Christmas, we were paid a surprise visit by one of our neighbors, a Mormon Bishop, and his family. They had been at one of our events. They brought us cookies and a video of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir Christmas concert. A lovely encounter. A few days ago, I found a very positive article on Mormons and their tithing and volunteering in one of the Catholic magazines, America. I sent it to him. His reply: "Miguel, we need to continue our dialogue."

**Raya:** As in any endeavor, there were challenges. Initially, the challenge to acquaint all of the 253 homes in our community with our project was a logistical one that repeatedly called for renewed perseverance and patience.

As we began to offer ourselves in charitable service to our neighbors, we sometimes found ourselves in situations requiring more effort than we originally expected — as when I volunteered to feed pets while a neighbor left for vacation. It unexpectedly extended to three weeks, and a normally nice big German Shepherd became ill and disagreeable and the cat disappeared.

There is the perpetual challenge of finding the time to be consistent in our commitment to this project. I have found that actually planning a specific day and time to meet with at least two to three neighbors at the beginning of each week helps to keep me focused on my intention to love. In reality, these numbers easily double as opportunities to meet with others inevitably appear during the course of the week.

**Miguel:** The whole experience has been primarily an effort to live the Art of Loving first among ourselves — I mean Raya and me — then with those people with whom we interact. We are planning on doing projects and activities to build a better community, but above all deep down, Raya and I want to be God's instrument of unity in our little corner of the world.

Captions:

Uncovered treasure. Some neighbors finally met after living near one another for 20-30 years!

Becoming true neighbors. Barbeques, games and family slide shows are just some of the ways this group of neighbors tries to get to know one another better