

NRI Corner



Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative

By Winston McGregor

I am lucky in that I got to choose my neighborhood, Sunset Hills in Greensboro, N.C., with great intent. And I love it. I love the old houses and the sidewalks, the funky little Spanish Colonial home we call the “Taco Bell house”, and the knockoff 20-year-young Victorian nestled between the 1920s bungalows. I love the creek that meanders through the park in the shade of the giant oak trees and the Moravian church one block over that has an annual candlelight tea. I love that I can walk two blocks to a cozy, cool corner and pick up some Homeland Creamery milk at the little throwback Bestway Grocery Store, and then grab a fish taco or an organic oven-fired pizza at one of four locally owned eating joints.

And I love my neighbors. Some in that “know them, seen them at their best and worst, there for them through thick and thin” kind of way. Others more in the “Jesus loves them so I love them” way, meaning the ones who drag their old sofa to the curb three days before trash day, or the ones with a militaristic, 0-dark-hundred, crack of dawn Saturday morning leaf blower.

What got me thinking about all of this was a question at our board retreat about our “A World of Hope: It Starts at Home” fundraising campaign. We were asked to complete the following sentence: “Wouldn’t it be great if . . .?” And I said the first thing that popped into my mind: “Wouldn’t it be great if everyone loved his or her neighborhood as much as I do?”

And that’s what it boils down to for me and for many others who make up the Habitat family.

In our affiliate, working in neighborhoods has always been a byproduct of our ministry. We’ve been involved in the revitalization effort in the Eastside Park Neighborhood in Greensboro for more than 20 years and even helped build a community center there.

But beyond our work in Eastside, we just popcorned around a bit — building a playground here, sponsoring a neighborhood night out event there.

That changed a few years ago, after we set out to spend more time listening to our homeowners — those who had just moved into their homes and those who had been there for years. What we heard was a deep and abiding sense of gratitude for their homes, but also real frustrations and unrealized dreams for their neighborhoods.

So we committed to making this work of building thriving neighborhoods a priority. Today we’re working on a variety of fronts, because what works in one neighborhood isn’t right for another. It’s changed how we structure our staff, how we allocate dollars, how we measure success, how we focus on homeowner training and education, how we organize projects, and how we buy land. It is calling us to take an honest assessment of our past 25 years and cast a new vision for what we want to see 25 years from now. We’re learning as we go. And we’re keenly aware that the process matters as much as the progress, because the building of a neighborhood is the work that is never finished. It knows no end. Just like that “love thy neighbor” kind of love that Jesus spoke about — and by His spirit enables us to so freely extend, even to the guy revving up his leaf blower at 7 o’clock Sunday morning. Gosh, I love that guy. And I really love my neighborhood.

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