

Community Building 101

An Eight Part Series by Ryan Lundquist



Community Building 101 is an eight-part mini-essay series written by Ryan Lundquist, a proud resident and neighborhood activist within Rancho Cordova, CA. The series is geared toward generating discussion about neighborhood life and providing practical tools to help our neighborhoods thrive. It was originally published online at The Rancho Cordova Post in August-September 2008 and then The Sacramento Press in February 2009. All Rights Reserved ©

Part I: Mamma, what happened to the neighborhood?

One of the constant themes that *Home Depot* commercials hit on is the idea of building the ultimate backyard. Have you seen these ones? A family turns their typical rear plot of land into a haven full of Trex decking, bright flowers and fresh sod, with a gleaming stainless steel grill to bring it all together. The concept is to create a space to relax—a refuge from the rest of the world and a post-5pm retreat after a tiring day.

I'll admit that these ads strike me in two ways. One, I want that backyard. But Two, on a deeper level I wonder if there is something here for us to consider. Has our culture become used to a world where we spend the bulk of our time confined to our parcel lines while having little meaningful interaction with our neighbors?

There used to be a day and time in our society where kids played outside more often, where families knew and relied upon households next door, and where it was a norm to feel a sense of connectedness amongst neighbors. In thinking back to when you were a kid, did life in your neighborhood seem a bit more interactive and relational than your experience today? Did people trust each other more readily? Did passersby wave? Did you play outside without worrying about Megan's Law registrants?

Let's face it, after the commute home from work it's easy to find ourselves so tired and busy that the concept of getting to know our neighbors seems unrealistic, impractical or even inconvenient. So we get home from work, shut the garage door quickly to avoid others, stay behind our fences, and then turn on one of our screens to zone out. Sure, privacy is essential to a healthy lifestyle, but if life's standard posture is to have very limited interaction with neighbors, then our communities will suffer.

What happened to our neighborhoods?

Part II: Finding Treasure in the Front Yard

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Not long ago on a Friday I drove home after a long and tiring week of work and found my neighbor Queen bringing in my trashcans. While getting out of my truck Queen grinned sheepishly and told me I was not supposed to catch her in the act. This was a small deed of kindness on her part, but I gave her a big hug and thanked her for making my day.

In essence what made this act so meaningful was that my neighbor stepped outside of the confines of her parcel lines into a "front yard dynamic" where we could connect over something so simple. Had she not dragged in my trashcans, I would have just done it myself. But since she took the initiative to do something thoughtful for my family, an opportunity for connection emerged. The truth is that basic expressions of neighborliness like this serve as the foundation for finding treasure in the community - stronger relationships and a more connected neighborhood.

Over the past two years my tract has been rediscovering just how wonderful it can be to experience life together in the front yard. Come along for a glimpse into what has been taking place.

- Last year ten residents brought meals to a neighbor with cancer to help ease her burdens
- 30-40 neighbors painted a 3400 square foot section of neighborhood wall that was prone to tagging
- Residents went Christmas caroling on a flatbed truck
- Jamie & Ruth & the Scott Family landscaped two entrance corners to the tract
- Mark & Sarah started a monthly neighborhood prayer meeting
- Clark began a bi-monthly neighborhood walk
- Janel planned a neighborhood-wide garage sale
- 25 residents attended a meeting to discuss problems with the local park
- We had two American Idol BBQs on the night of the season finale in '07 and '08
- We started a blog, website, email list, and an e-Group

Something is happening here. We are finding a sense of community that was once prevalent throughout our neighborhoods but seems to have been lost in the past few decades. Great neighborhoods are not about big and fancy houses, income level, or perfect lawns, but rather residents who believe in their community and take ownership for shaping the values of the neighborhood.

What sort of "front yard" dynamics would you like to see happen in your neighborhood?

Part III: The Starting Line

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Improving a neighborhood can feel like trying to resurrect the Titanic, but in reality it's more like flipping a burger with a family next door. When our prime focus is only on the problems in a community, it can start to feel discouraging and we give up, thinking "I don't have the time or energy," or "I can't do this by myself", or "I don't even know where to begin." I'd like to suggest though that the beginning point for strengthening a neighborhood is really about small every day choices rather than planning big events or programs.

Strengthening a community simply recognizes that relationships rather than high fences are what is most important. The truth is you do not need ample time, money, grey hair, or incredible leadership skills to make a difference in your tract. You only need to be attentive to your surroundings and intentional in some very practical ways. This is about a mindset, a lifestyle, a paradigm to live from.

Connecting with neighbors can be something very natural and it happens over time. It is not something that you have to plan for per se or worry about adding to your busy schedule. Below are some practical tips to connect (or re-connect) with neighbors:

- Sit out in your front yard or on your porch
- Wave to passersby and say "hello" to people
- Introduce yourself to new residents
- Find a resident to exercise with
- Volunteer to collect mail while your neighbor is gone
- Borrow a tool or ask for advice
- Keep your yard well kept
- Invite a few neighbors to holiday parties or have someone over for dinner
- BBQ in your front yard with one other household
- Say sorry when you need to
- Do an Easter egg hunt for your street
- Take regular walks (with your dogs and kids too because they are conversation magnets)
- Exchange phone numbers with your neighbors in case of an emergency
- Talk to another resident about your desire to see neighbors connect
- Consider parking in your driveway so that you are visible outside more often

Most of life in a neighborhood consists of non-glamorous regular moments, but these small instances present opportunity for connection and are the building blocks for the future. Mother Teresa once said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." Now go and do small things.

What tips do you have to connect with neighbors?

Part IV: Re-Believing in Community Participation

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I recently attended a funeral of a local man. He raised four kids, stayed married for fifty years, knew success in his career, and had many remarkable traits. His eulogy was full of all the great stuff we often hear, but there was something more mentioned that was a very high compliment: he was a good neighbor. Story after story was shared about how he was known to say hi to others, pay attention to people around him, find ways to care for folks next door, talk to passersby, befriend local teenagers, and even share his roses and vegetables with neighbors.

The notion of being a contributor to the health of a community is seldom on the radar in today's society. Somewhere along the way we lost the value for connectedness and are now more isolated and self-reliant. If we can re-believe though that it really does matter to have residents involved in neighborhood life, then our communities will thrive.

Whose responsibility is it anyway to help a neighborhood grow in the right direction? Is it the City and its programs? Council members? An HOA? Apartment managers? Local Business? Police? Code Enforcement? The answer is all of the above, but most of all it is the privilege of residents to shape the values of their tract. Just as each of us needs to eat certain foods to yield a healthy body, in neighborhoods individual households help to nourish the overall wellbeing of their area. Not everyone has a desire to be social or get to know others, and that is understandable, but as more and more residents choose to be intentional about their community, we will experience a vibrancy that no HOA fee could ever create.

When we begin to put effort into the stream of subdivision life we will see stronger relationships and a greater sense of communal vision, not to mention having a whole lot of fun. This is not about taking on big neighborhood projects, but instead buying into a belief that our individual contributions and giftedness are valuable for the soul of the neighborhood. Let's begin to re-believe that each household has something to offer for the health of the community and then act accordingly.

You are important for your neighborhood. Do you believe that?

Bonus Material: The following are thirteen examples of residents who believe in community participation.

1. David the Photographer: He has taken pictures at neighborhood events several times.
2. Elaine the Host: Elaine has invited groups of residents into her home.
3. Janel the Garage Sale Queen: Janel planned a neighborhood garage sale.
4. Ruth, Jamie & The Beatification Posse: They grew tired of seeing two neighborhood entrance corners looking unkempt, so they pulled out plants and got to work.
5. Gary the Painter: Gary takes the initiative to cover tagging in inconspicuous places.
6. David the Woodworker: He cut, sanded, and painted new letters which say "Cordova Towne" for an entrance corner on Mather Field Road
7. Brandon & Jen The Organic Pool Couple: They have shared from their vegetable garden multiple times and they hosted a pool party this Summer
8. Clark the Walker: Clark likes to hike, so he asked a few people to begin walking the neighborhood 1-2 times per month.
9. Mark & Sarah the Prayer Duo: Last year they invited residents into their home to pray together over a series of months.
10. Swansea Way Heroes: A number of residents on Swansea Way are putting effort into helping their street communicate more regularly through street events.
11. Donna & Jerry the Weed & Seeders: They both sit on the Weed & Seed Steering Committee (a federal program) which directly impacts the neighborhood.
12. Christian the Activist: He was not happy when the City added a median to block off a neighborhood street so he passed out flyers to do something about it.
13. Helen & Lee the Pillars: They have both lived in the neighborhood for many decades and are active in the local police zone meetings.

Part V: A Legacy for our Children

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Fred had a big problem. He and his next door neighbor were in the habit of heated arguments, squirting each other with the water hose, and even on the verge of fist fights. These two men despised each other. Fred was in the thick of a worst-case scenario situation where moving to another neighborhood seemed inevitable. He clearly had some issues to work on, but the real question I wonder about was what his three daughters were learning from their Dad as they watched his belligerence toward the man next door.

What type of neighbor do you want your children to be one day? What are your hopes for them when they plant their roots in a community?

It's easy to think of our children's success in terms of academics, sports, a college education, and a good job. Certainly these are gauges for accomplishment, but let's make sure that no matter what our kids do in life, that we teach them to be good neighbors for along the way. Passing on a value for neighborliness will give our sons and daughters an edge in the world because they will learn to grasp the importance of enjoying life with the people around them, solving problems, being considerate, and building social networks in the real world beyond Myspace and Facebook. If our kids watch us being friendly to residents, grilling steaks with people next door, taking in mail when neighbors are on vacation, or calling the police when seeing suspicious activity, they will discover something valuable: that relying on others is important, that people can be trusted, and that being connected to other residents is a dynamic part of what makes home feel like home.

At one time children readily learned to be great neighbors because there were different expectations. Kids were expected to be participants in their community, to be visible in the neighborhood, be outside until dinner was ready, and even be polite to other adults and families in the neighborhood (otherwise they'd discipline you too). But these days our society is increasingly more disconnected and people tend to not trust each other. Nowadays parents need to monitor closely where their children are and practically interview other households before letting their kids play together. Today's children are often found inside glued to video games, television, or doing homework, all while getting less exercise and spending fewer moments outside in the tract. Overall it seems more challenging for parents to impart a lifestyle of neighborliness today because it goes against the grain of our society. But what will happen if we don't? That's the bigger question.

It's rarely too late to pass on values or start over. Maybe your kids are nearly out of the house, long gone, or you are just getting started. No matter how old they are, think of the impact you can have while your kids or even grandkids watch you interact with people next door or hear about how you are finding simple ways to be involved in your subdivision. I think of two residents in my community, Georgia & Paul, who are 86 and 83 years old respectively. Six months ago they showed up for a neighborhood beautification project where residents painted an expansive wall to help curb tagging. What do you think Georgia and Paul's children and grandchildren thought of them when hearing about the painting project? What values do you think Georgia and Paul were able to amplify for their family?

What will your legacy be?

VII Finding Like-Minded People

Part VI Finding Like-Minded People

It's nearly impossible to win with only one great player. Even megastar athletes like LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, and Tom Brady have all needed good players around them to succeed. The same is true in our neighborhoods. Experiencing a more vibrant community requires a sense of teamwork that bonds residents together and goes beyond unrelated efforts by a few individuals. Finding like-minded people who want to help your neighborhood become more connected is the key in getting things started.

How do you begin to piece together a team for the neighborhood? There is no exact science toward discovering the right people, but below are some principles to begin with. Pick and choose what will work best for your situation and don't feel you have to do everything at once.

1. **Take your time:** Change won't happen quickly and it takes time to connect with people and build trust, so pace yourself as you meet residents.
2. **Ask Questions:** The best way to find out what people think the neighborhood needs is to ask questions and then really listen to what people are saying.
3. **Pay Attention:** In your conversations with residents, who is talking about wanting to see change in the neighborhood? These are like-minded people to join forces with.
4. **Tell Your Story:** Share with residents your desires for the neighborhood. This can be at a formal event, but mostly occurs in the course of every day conversation.
5. **Do Something:** People are attracted to a sense of direction and positive vision rather than complaining. Decide to do something and make it easy for others to join in.
6. **Start Small:** Rather than taking on every issue that needs attention in your neighborhood or doing a huge project, think about practical goals that are doable. Build in success by meeting smaller goals and then take on larger projects as more people come along.
7. **The Word on Flyers:** If you pass out flyers, keep in mind that people generally don't respond to flyers on their doorstep without personal interaction. If possible, it's best to knock on doors and introduce yourself while handing out flyers.
8. **Start with a BBQ:** Do a potluck-style BBQ for your street. Make a flyer, find someone to plan it with you, and delegate details to other interested residents. While at the event, have a sign-up for a phone tree, email list, or a future community gathering.
9. **Be a Chief:** Many people don't want to be a chief, so step up and be the leader for a time and then watch the domino effect as others begin to find ways to lead in the neighborhood. People are more likely to join when they realize that they are not being asked to commit their lives away or be the point person.
10. **Volunteers Come and Go:** Life gets busy and people come and go. Thank people for their time and don't expect that volunteers should or want to give as much as you do. Remember too that not everyone wants to be involved.
11. **Keep People's Best Interest in Mind:** Encourage people to do things that they want to do in the neighborhood. When people do things they are comfortable with or passionate about, there is a better chance of success because they feel respected and empowered.
12. **Find a Simple Communication System:** Consider starting a blog, newsletter, e-Group, e-mail list, phone tree, or some sort of forum where residents can begin talking more regularly. Whatever you do, first get a few people on board to launch it and then invite others to join. Be creative and do what is going to work for your neighborhood.

Our society is aching for community leaders who will find ways to bring their neighbors together. These people do not need to be experts either, but only willing to set the pace. There are likely quite a few residents around you already who are hungry to see your neighborhood come together. Many times though people are simply waiting for someone to get the ball rolling, someone to be a leading voice for your street or tract – someone like you.

What does a community leader look like? Go to the mirror.

Part VII Bringing in the Reinforcements

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"I'll have my people call your people." Have you ever known someone who could get anything done because he had all the right contacts? The wheelers and dealers of the business world know all about this. They build networks of people to get results and solve problems. They are good at what they do for their companies, but the art of networking is not something exclusive to commerce – it is useful for neighborhoods too. Finding allies for our tracts who will help foster community and reinforce the change we are working toward is critical for success.

Thankfully there are a plethora of potential partners for neighborhood growth and it's just a matter of tapping into relationship with some of these people. Below is a list of suggested groups to begin networking with. Remember that the best relationships are authentic and mutual.

The City: First off, make sure that the city knows what you are attempting so that they can support you with resources and ideas (or maybe even funds). Go ahead and introduce yourself by phone and email to certain departments – start with Neighborhood Services and Housing. It's okay to ask the city for help, rely upon their expertise, and let them know what your subdivision needs. Keep the city up to date with your efforts and especially success stories – maybe a first BBQ, the beginning of a neighborhood blog, or a community painting project. Hearing of your accomplishments may encourage and fuel city workers to work harder for neighborhoods – and maybe even your area. Remember that many people try to get results by complaining, and there is a place for that, but a positive attitude, listening, persistence and saying thank you sometimes gets the job done more quickly.

City Council: Invite Council Members to BBQs, neighborhood walks, or whatever you are planning, and ask them for advice and ideas on community building.

Neighborhood Watch: This organization began as a national campaign in 1972 and is a strategy to bring residents and police together to "take a bite out of crime." See www.usaonwatch.org

Police Department: Find out who your neighborhood patrol officers are and invite them to events and to talk with residents about crime prevention. Let them know right away by phone or email when there are problems in your area.

Neighborhood Associations: Contact local neighborhood associations who have experienced success. Ask for advice and learn from their victories and challenges.

Local Nonprofits: Which local nonprofits in your area are relevant for residents? Ask around about organizations, grants, churches, and groups that could assist your efforts.

Business: Ask local businesses to sponsor an event. They will gain publicity and you won't have to pay out of pocket.

Local Media: Let the local newspaper know about your efforts and events. Maybe they could write a story or at least publicize your gatherings in the community calendar section.

Maybe your rolodex is much thinner than some of the savvy entrepreneurs in town, but building a network of people over time who are experienced in community building will profoundly affect your neighborhood. You will be able to connect residents to resources and help bring some of the change needed in your tract. This makes you even more valuable to your community.

Which of the above suggested resources resonate with you? Why?

Part VIII The Art of Hospitality

Part VIII The Art of Hospitality

What is the best dining experience you've ever had? A few years ago I ate at a joint in San Francisco called Asia De Cuba. This fusion restaurant had spectacular ambiance and the feel of a hip club with its dim lights, pulsating beats, trendy décor, and exotic menu. Our group enjoyed four hours of eating and sitting together and we were never rushed to leave. The bill was substantial, but the unique experience was worth the high cost.

When guests leave my house after dinner, I want them to feel something similar. It would be great if they complimented the lavish food, stylish decorating, and festive atmosphere. That would be nice. I have a feeling though they'd more realistically say they'd eaten good non-gourmet food and felt mostly comfortable even though there were energized toddlers running around. Dining at the Lundquist home is not anything like an upscale restaurant, but that's a good thing because practicing hospitality does not necessitate a gourmet experience.

There is something significant about welcoming others into our homes. When we ask people over we are giving them much more than a meal – we are inviting them into our lives. In an age of birthday card emails, drive-thru dinners, and brief cell phone interactions, it's refreshing to sit down together for an unrushed hour or two and really get to know others. Sometimes though we think that being hospitable means we have to prepare the most scintillating dishes and spend all day cleaning the house. But it's okay if the walls are not acid-washed, if toys are visible, and if there's a stack of bills on the countertop. True hospitality is not about offering our guests perfection, but relationship. Sure, it's nice to clean the house and spice up dinner a bit, but let's remember that our guests are not customers to please but rather participants in a family meal. One of the most respectful things we can do is invite people into the life we really live. Besides, if we put so much effort into a meal we might exhaust ourselves and also cause our guests to feel intimidated about inviting us to their house.

Life is busy, so where do you find the time to eat a meal with others? Thankfully dinner is something that most of us do every night, so it's just a matter of coordinating our schedules. If my household is eating dinner anyway and yours is too, it doesn't seem all that overwhelming to combine efforts to dine together – especially on a weekend night. It always helps too to ask guests to bring a side dish or assist with preparation somehow.

The practice of hospitality is about sharing meals, but is more broadly about sharing our lives with people. This might seem like an odd topic to end a community building series, but by taking the initiative to invite other residents into our daily routines we can profoundly impact our neighborhoods. When we get intentional about helping our tracts become more connected like they used to be, we will begin to taste something wonderful – a sense of community.

Are you open to the challenge?