

# GOOD NEIGHBORS MAKE GREAT NEIGHBORHOODS

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**May Where You Live Be  
Better Because of You**



**Tim DeTellis**

## **Introduction**

This journey began when my wife Sheryl decided she wanted to live closer to her mom. At the time, we lived in my wife's childhood home in Altamonte Springs, Florida. We had already paid off the mortgage, and had no intention of ever moving. But I was willing to make the move, and we found a house in foreclosure—which we soon bought at an auction.

This is a story about what happened after we moved into that house and made loving our neighbors our mission.

## **A Confession**

To say that I travel a great deal is an understatement. I serve as the president of New Missions, a non-profit organization that helps families in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Frequent work trips make the time at home with my wife Sheryl all the more special.

Back when we lived in Altamonte Springs, I used my home time to refresh and recharge. The property is beautiful—the backyard is an oasis. On days when I was tired or worn out, I retreated to a quiet place by the pool, sat back, and relaxed. Within that beautiful setting, I found serenity and peace.

As I relaxed by the pool in the afternoon or worked on a house project, I spent my time exactly how I wanted. I never stopped to think that my spare time could impact my neighbors' lives.

## **A Move**

On a flight home from Haiti, I was thinking about Sheryl and wondering if she was having a good time with her mom. They had planned a mother-daughter day that was filled with shopping, eating out, and whatever else they decided to do.

I called Sheryl when the flight landed in Miami. While we were talking, she began to cry. I asked her what was wrong, and she

said she didn't know, but it felt like she needed to live closer to her mom. Sheryl's father had passed away so her mom was living alone, about 50 miles away from us.

Sheryl's answer took me by surprise. We were happy in our home and had never talked about moving. Now, I love my wife and I love my mother-in-law, so I quickly said that maybe we could rent a home near her mom to see if a permanent move was the right thing to do. We decided to discuss it more when I returned home later that evening.

The flight from Miami to Orlando seemed to end as soon as it started. My mind was filled with all of the complications of moving from one house to another one that was 50 miles away. A move like that meant my commute would take longer, and living so close to Sheryl's mom could cause other situations that neither of us could foresee. Deep down, I was also wrestling with the idea of leaving my backyard sanctuary.

That night, Sheryl and I spent several hours talking through the prospect of moving. We prayed together. And, bit by bit, this notion of "doing things differently" began to creep into our conversation. If we moved, we wanted to really know our new neighbors.

## **A Journey Begins**

Sheryl's sister-in-law told us about a home in her neighborhood, near my mother-in-law, which was in foreclosure. We checked it out, and the moment we walked in the front door we knew we were home. We bought it.

Moving day arrived and we were ready—well as ready as we could be. We were excited about this new season and about getting to know our new neighbors. Since the properties in our neighborhood were several acres, we knew that would require immense intentionality from us.

I decided to take a stroll around the neighborhood to see if anyone was outside. When I turned the corner, I saw one of my new neighbors working in his yard. As I walked up to him, I stretched out my hand and introduced myself. Immediately, he shook my hand and said his name is Robert.

Wow! I had just met my first neighbor and it hadn't been difficult! Robert hadn't sworn or run me out of his yard. He hadn't turned and dashed into the safety of his home. Instead, he had simply shook my hand and told me his name.

After chatting with Robert for a few minutes, I texted him my phone number and told him to call if he ever needed anything. I returned home and continued moving furniture. As I worked, I thought about how simple it was to meet a new neighbor. I decided then and there that I would try to walk every day, with the goal of meeting at least one new neighbor.

Sheryl often joined me on these walks, and we were both blessed by how walking on purpose changed the value of our time together. It wasn't long before we had a sizable collection of our neighbors' phone numbers.

One of the first invites we made to our new neighbors was to come over for a mid-week s'mores fest. Out back, we gathered around our fire pit for conversation and treats. I have since learned that when you go outside, conversations open up. Around the fire pit, we discovered that many of our neighbors had not met each other before.

For Easter, we invited our neighbors to join us on a sunrise walk. Together, we watched the sun rise and talked about the newness of life that spring ushers in. It seemed as if the birds were singing extra loud, the flowers in bloom were more colorful, and the air was so clean and clear that you could see forever.

As time went on and we met more of our neighbors, we began inviting them to more and more get-togethers. One night, we went

to the movies and decided to get ice cream afterwards. We had so much fun just trying to figure out where to get ice cream so late at night. We finally settled on McDonald's and had a wonderful time talking and laughing with each other.

Getting to know our neighbors better also meant that we learned how to love them better. For example, my neighbor Tim loves ribs. When I discovered this, I knew just what I wanted to do. A local church barbecues ribs for the weekend and sells them on Fridays and Saturdays.

So one Saturday, I picked up ribs from the church and drove straight to Tim's house. He was on his riding lawn mower cutting the grass when I walked up, plastic bag in hand. "I have your lunch ready for you when you're done," I told him. He smiled from ear to ear.

Sharing food is so simple and shows your neighbors that they aren't alone. I wish I knew how many times my wife has made Rice Krispy treats and delivered them to neighbors. Who doesn't like Rice Krispy treats?

## **A Journey Deepens**

One weekend, my neighbor asked if I could help him repair his fence. Now, I am far from a "fixer upper" kind of guy, but I am also not afraid to learn or to help. I showed up early, and for two hours we made the much-needed repairs.

While the repairs were important, the morning had much more significance. Our conversations went far beyond the superficial as we talked about our concerns for our daughters' futures. We talked about helping our daughters live with moral convictions, and with respect for themselves and others.

This conversation meant the world to me. My neighbor's wisdom was an incredible gift that has helped me better relate to my daughter. To receive this gift, all I needed to do was put on a pair

of gloves and go help my neighbor!

Helping our neighbors invites us into community, and humans are intended to be in community with each other. We see this design unfold throughout history.

As the poet John Donne lay dying in 1631, he penned the meditation, “No Man is an Island.” It remains as relevant and poignant today:

*“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*

*“If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”*

Here is the part that speaks volumes to me: “...*any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind...*” We are not alone. We are part of a much larger human family that thrives on relationships.

Have you ever noticed your life is better when it is shared with people you love? I know this is true from my own experience, but I also realize this may sound outrageous to someone whose family is very dysfunctional. Nevertheless, I can truthfully say that when I am among people I love and respect, I like myself better! There is something about being surrounded by people who care about me that changes my perspective and centers my heart.

I experienced this recently with my neighbors. A group text began with, “Want to meet for dinner and bowling this Friday?” Come Friday night, 17 of us met for dinner and 21 neighbors went bowling together. It was a fantastic time, and our conversations ranged from family issues and work demands to deeper questions

about life. This time was an incredible gift to both my wife and me.

Now, I find myself wondering what life would be like without my neighbors!

## **An Invitation**

For seven years, I lived in a community surrounded by neighbors, and yet I lived in isolation. The only thing I knew about my next-door neighbors were their names. I did not socialize or go out together with them, and I had no real understanding of what was going on in their lives. I did nothing to initiate any kind of meaningful relationship that went deeper than a wave, or the cordial “hello” or “goodbye.”

Like I once did, many people use their busy lifestyle as a reason to insulate themselves from anything that would encroach on their precious few moments of downtime. Likewise, many people also use it as an excuse to avoid doing things they do not want to do. So what’s the difference?

Here are two definitions that are important to consider:

*Reason:* Explanation or cause for why something did or did not occur.

*Excuse:* Explanation or cause for why something did or did not occur accompanied by a statement of justification or establishing fault for why something did or did not occur.

Understanding the distinction between these two words is invaluable toward helping you discover what motivates you. How do you respond when someone asks for help? Do you give a real reason for not helping, or do you provide an excuse because you would rather not? If it is an excuse, why are you reluctant to help? Is the “mountain of busy” a genuine reason for you, or does it form the basis of an excuse that can be used to get out of a situation?

Although life can be busy, time invested in a neighborhood community is time well spent. In our neighborhood we have Together Time and Table Time. Together Time is getting together because it's just fun and we like to enjoy life with one another. This can also be a time when we help each other with a project or simply hang out together at an event, such as a movie or bowling.

Table Time is when we gather around a meal and have deep conversations. Often a group of neighbors will meet out back for some grill time together or meet inside for a shared meal. This time takes us to a level of trust and deeper relationship. Because of these times together, our neighborhood now shares a thriving community. And I believe your neighborhood can too.

It starts by being you—the unique person you were created to be. Then, celebrate those around you. Listen to them. But don't let it just end there. Try to do something special for the person that shows you were listening and demonstrates how much they really matter. Encourage them, and help them when you can. Take your strengths and use them to make a difference. Take your weaknesses and welcome others to support you where you are not strong.

Will you be nervous? Maybe. Will you make mistakes? Probably. Will people respond to your intentional investment in a community? Absolutely! But imagine what our world would be like with caring neighbors in neighborhoods.

It starts with you and me. We can be the difference makers. At the end of the day, my hope is that more communities will experience what life is like when good neighbors come together to make great neighborhoods.

## **Epilogue**

At the beginning of this book, I confessed that I did not always love my neighbors. Right now, my wife and I are still in the middle of this journey. Why? Because we are still living, and if we are living



we should still be loving our neighbors. This is our life mission. It can be messy. It's real. And we are growing and being stretched during the process.

People often ask me: What's next? My response is always: What's now? That is what is next, because whatever I do today will lead to what happens tomorrow. With God's help, I want to be passionate, faithful in the little things, true to my word, and add value to the lives of the people in my life.

I look forward to meeting you. Until then, I look forward to hearing from you. Call or text me at 407-487-2972.

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P.O. Box 6  
Eustis, FL 32727*

## WHERE DO YOU LIVE? HOW'S YOUR NEIGHBOR?

For years, Tim DeTellis would say, "Your mission field is right where you are."

But he was not practicing what he preached.

Tim confesses he did not always love his neighbors as he should. He made excuses: He didn't have enough time to invest in new relationships. His neighbor was probably equally busy. He wasn't sure if they'd have anything in common.

Tim ignored the people living closest to him until recently—when he and his wife, Sheryl, relocated and decided it was time to get to know the neighbors.

In this book, Tim shares how important community is, and how we're called to serve and fellowship with our neighbors. You will be encouraged to reach out to those living nearby, and discover life is better together.

Today, Tim and Sheryl cannot imagine life without their neighbors.

This book is a story of their journey that continues today. That journey has taught them a priceless lesson: good neighbors make great neighborhoods.



Tim DeTellis serves as the president of New Missions—planting churches and schools on the island of Hispaniola. Tim is a frequent speaker at churches and conferences.

[TimDeTellis.com](http://TimDeTellis.com)

@timdetellis

