

# hello, neighbors

THEY'RE THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE  
WITHIN VIEW—WITHIN FEET, YARDS,  
AND CUP-OF-SUGAR-LENDING DISTANCE.  
AND JUST LIKE THAT SUGAR, THEY  
CAN MAKE LIFE SWEET. ALL YOU NEED  
TO DO IS GET TO KNOW THEM.

## *how sweet...* DRIVE-BY DANCING

EAST LOS ANGELES During last spring's stay-at-home order, singer-songwriter Jasmine Ash called on her neighbors for help making a music video for her song "Same Sun." At the time, she was new to the City Terrace neighborhood—having only lived there five months—so she posted on Nextdoor, the social network for neighborhoods, to find willing subjects. "I knew it was going to be a shot in the dark, but I was surprised by how many people responded," she says of the dozen-plus volunteers. Soon, she and her filmmaker husband, Brendan Walter, were driving around, filming people dancing in windows and on porches. The final product (search "Jasmine Ash" on YouTube) is a beautiful compilation of people connecting in the midst of isolation, illustrating that we truly are, just as Jasmine's lyrics suggest, "under the same sun." After filming, "some of the people we shot have become good friends I see while walking the dog," she says. "It's so nice to have good neighbors!"

Jasmine Ash is a musician. Her husband, Brendan Walter, makes movies. Just add a neighborhood and you've got yourself a music video!



*how sweet...* THE ICE CREAM MAN

TUSTIN, CALIFORNIA José Ortega had been driving his ice cream truck through Tustin neighborhoods for seven years—bringing friendship and happiness in the form of Drumsticks and Choco Tacos. But last August, Mike and Allison Hatcher noticed that José's sister was driving the truck, and José was in the passenger seat. He'd suffered a heart attack a week before. José had extensive medical bills and no insurance, and the Hatchers couldn't let the man who'd brought so much joy (and Emoji Ice) to their cul-de-sac suffer. They started a fundraiser and spread the word on Nextdoor. In just four days, 185 neighbors raised nearly \$11,000 for him. "I know how beloved José is," Mike says. "I knew if I got the word out, many people would help him in his time of need."



The celebrity of every cul-de-sac is the ice cream man. José Ortega (center) is flanked by the Hatchers: (from left) Allison, Francesca, Deacon, Mike, Georgie the Frenchie, and Ruby.



*how sweet...*  
**If you want to  
know your neighbors,  
say "good morning"**

**I**N LAURA INGALLS WILDER'S *These Happy Golden Years*, Laura spends her weekdays boarding with a wretched frontier family while teaching in a one-room schoolhouse. On the weekends, she goes home to Ma and Pa and Carrie and Grace.

In one scene, she identifies a major difference between the two homes: Her own family says good morning. "Laura had never noticed before that saying 'good morning' made the morning good," Wilder writes. And though I live more than 130 years later, very far from the South Dakota prairie, here's the thing: It's still true!

Many years ago, when I was on the Bright Angel trail in the Grand Canyon, I realized it's hikers' etiquette to say good morning to every single person you encounter. It's so cheerful, and so radically simple: On this entire planet, you and I happen to find ourselves together at this one spot. Why not acknowledge the goodness of it? So I brought the practice home with me. When I ran in the park on weekdays before work, whoever passed in the opposite direction got a "good morning." People were taken aback at first, but after a few weeks, my repeat "customers" started reciprocating. I say good morning on my block every day. In fact, there is one guy on my street who I see so often, whose face is such a muscle-memory trigger, that I sometimes say good morning to him when it's twilight and my family and I are walking to dinner. He obviously says good morning back to me, and we laugh. Because that's what neighbors do!

A few weeks ago, while we were walking our dog, my daughter pointed out that I have a system. Anyone we pass on our block or on the way to school gets a "good morning." As soon as I turn onto an avenue, though, I switch to just "hi." I hadn't realized that I'd codified my personal rule of civility, but I'm glad she did. And I only hope she takes it with her wherever she goes.

—Rory Evans is Real Simple's executive editor

*how sweet...*  
**SIMPLY WALKING  
TOGETHER**

NASHVILLE Shawn Dromgoole's family has lived in the 12 South neighborhood for 55 years.

But after the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, the 30-year-old noted on Nextdoor that he no longer felt safe walking the nearby streets, because of an uptick in violence against Black men and women across the country. So began his movement: More than 300 neighbors commented to apologize, offer support, and volunteer to walk alongside him. Last June 4, hundreds of people showed up to walk two miles with him. The route, he says, "was a symbolic choice. They were the streets I walked as a child and no longer felt safe on." Seeing the crowd behind him, he recalls, "was overwhelming and amazing. I was speechless, and in some ways I still am." (He especially loved hearing that people who'd lived on the same street for years were meeting for the first time.) Since that walk, he has coordinated 30 more in five states. "It's so important to unify one step at a time."



## If you want to know your neighbors, get a dog



**T**HE FIRST GUT PUNCH of grief hit me when I realized that 4 p.m. had come and gone unnoticed. Every day, a few minutes before the hour, my cute mutt, Jake, used to stare at me, nudging me to get his dinner. Now Jake is gone, and the disappearance of the comforting cadence he brought to my days is like a minute-by-minute reminder of my loss. Friends and family console me by telling me I saved him. But a rescue organization did that. By the time I met him, at an adoption event in 2013, he had already been saved, just not settled. The real story is that Jake saved me. Before Jake, I was separated from the world by a pane of dirty glass. Me on one side, everything and everyone else on the other, obscured by streaks and hard-water drips. I kept to myself. I avoided socializing. I rarely reached out. I assumed the worst in people and figured they saw the worst in me.

### how sweet...A BOY'S HOMECOMING

**LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY** Until November 2019, Jordan Young was active on his school's basketball, football, and swim teams. But when he was diagnosed with aplastic anemia, he and his mom, Julie Hamilton, had to move to Cincinnati to get medical care. After 307 days in the hospital, Jordan, now 13, finally returned home...to a "Welcome Home" parade, featuring more than 50 neighbors in cars and golf carts. "It was an eye-opener for Jordan to actually see so many people rooting for him," Julie says. "Seeing people take time out of their lives for him, my heart was so full. This was, hands down, the most beautiful thing anyone has ever done for us, if that's even a word." It should be.

Then I started walking this little black-and-tan creature around the East Village in Manhattan. His confident strut made people smile, even stop to chat. This undeniable proof that people want to connect and be kind shattered the glass. I became lighter, friendlier, more at ease.

Jake never rushed. He sniffed everything. If I tried to move him along, he'd plant his feet and pull back on the leash in protest. Once I let go of the idea that our walks were about getting somewhere, my internal ticking slowed down. I started to notice, to see the same people, to understand the rhythm of the neighborhood. I'd exchange hellos with the supers at the buildings on my block. I joked with the barber down the street. I tried out my Spanish with the handyman who rode his Huffy from job to job. And I started making small talk with my neighbor, who I'd lived across the hall from for seven years with barely a word. Eventually we developed a real friendship.

Jake was 2 when I adopted him, I was told. In truth, said the vet, he was between 4 and 6. He'd had a full life before me. Whatever had happened in that life left him anxious and skittish, had depleted his well of trust in humans. I met him too late to save him; the damage was done. Trusting me was a matter of survival. But I like to believe that his trust evolved into something else—that this scared little dog learned to be loved, same as me.

—Lisa Arbetter is a writer in New York City

### how sweet... A GOOD LOST-AND- FOUND STORY

**ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA** While cleaning out her late mom's old trunk, Ann Cameron Siegal came across an unfamiliar U.S. Army uniform decorated with ribbons from World Wars I and II. Hoping to get it to the owner's family, she posted about the uniform on Nextdoor.

After more than 100 comments—"some from sleuths, some from cheerleaders," Ann says—including help from a military historian, she had the answer: It had belonged to Colonel Royal L. Gervais, who'd died in 1967 at the age of 73. ("I could almost feel the virtual high-fives and hugs" on Nextdoor, Ann says, when the mystery was solved.) She tracked down Gervais's great-grandchildren and a grandson. Over the summer, they had a socially distanced handoff of the uniform in her backyard. "I still smile about the connections made with history, the community, and the colonel's family—all at a time when connections were much needed," she says.

**ABOUT NEXTDOOR** Nextdoor is an app for neighbors. Members use it to buy, sell, share, and donate items; organize events; and stay in the know about community happenings. To join in your neighborhood, download the free app or go to [nextdoor.com](https://nextdoor.com).

### how sweet... SIGNS OF INCLUSION

**DALLAS** Flying in front of a house in the Eastwood Hills neighborhood was not just one Confederate flag, but four. And the nearly 400 comments about them on the local Nextdoor board were starting to feel divisive. Gabe Navalta, the board's "lead" (akin to a moderator), yearned to hit reset on the conversation. He suggested creating a separate board, where people could talk civilly and find ways to build a positive community. Several dozen neighbors joined, and they decided that a sign representing inclusiveness would be a great way to share their message. "We wanted to show that while one person might not be welcoming, the neighborhood at large was," he says. Gabe's sister, Jo Halverson, designed the "Better Together Eastwood Hills" placard, with four fists of varying skin tones raised in unity. Demand for the signs was so high, Better Together expanded into other Dallas neighborhoods. "When my husband and I walk, we see so many signs," Gabe says. "It makes me proud to live here, knowing that one sour apple won't spoil the bunch."

### how sweet... INTERSTATE DONATIONS

**MISSOURI CITY, TEXAS** Living in a suburb of Houston, Susana Knight has weathered her share of hurricanes. (After Hurricane Harvey in 2017, "all my furniture was on the second floor," she recalls.) So when Hurricane Laura hit Lake Charles, Louisiana, last August, she felt blessed and spared—and inspired to help. She kicked into high gear, setting up a supply drive for essentials, like food, diapers, water bottles, work gloves, and cleaning supplies. "What a beautiful community I live in," Susana

says. Her neighbors and nearby churches and schools offered up so many goods, "I couldn't walk in my downstairs." In fact, she had to rent a 20-foot moving truck to bring the haul to Lake Charles, though she had no experience driving a vehicle like that. "You gotta do what you can do," she says. "I figured I'd just drive real slow." As it happened, she didn't need to: A friend offered to drive for the entire five-hour round trip. Despite the mountain of supplies they dropped off in Lake Charles, she says, "I got back more than I gave."





## If you want to know your neighbors, find your park

**f**OR ALL THE HARDSHIP and isolation of quarantine, it was also an opportunity to think about the details that define community. Here in my adopted city of New Orleans, my immediate community is Bayou St. John, a neighborhood named for the natural channel of water that winds through it. Across the bayou and just a few blocks from my house is City Park, more than 1,300 acres of public space and reportedly home to the world's largest collection of live oak trees (some of them over 600 years old!). It's a beautiful park, and partly why I've wanted to live in this neighborhood since I moved to New Orleans, long before my husband and I were able to find a (small, unrenovated) house we could actually afford.

Being close to the water and to so much nature in the middle of a city was a gift I felt and appreciated. But when quarantine began, it was something I truly depended on. New Orleans is normally full of distractions, and the park always competed with several other ways for me to spend my free time. Then suddenly, solitary outdoor exercise was the only activity permitted—and riding my bike through the park and along the bayou became my one source of solace and sanctuary amid the turmoil of the world.

I also realized another reason the park was such a comfort: Whenever I went there, I wasn't alone. Riding my bike might be a solitary experience, but there were always other people in the park with me, having solitary experiences of their own. I imagined them coming from all over the city, dealing with difficulties and stresses brought on by the pandemic but, like me, seeking sanctuary. I saw them walking through the fields of wildflowers on Marconi Drive, or reading on benches near the entrance to the closed art museum. I saw women pushing toddlers in strollers, teenagers whipping past on skateboards, older couples with fishing poles sitting in lawn chairs by the banks of the bayou, while brightly colored kayaks drifted along the water. Once, I rode by a man in jean cutoffs playing the trumpet as he sat alone in a gazebo near the tennis courts. A few times, I saw people on horseback, hooves clattering on the pavement as they passed me.

City Park abounds with natural beauty, but what was most beautiful to me was that it was shared. In some ways I felt connected to everyone I saw there, moved by the knowledge that even though we were experiencing the crisis differently, living very different lives, the park was a place where we could come together, taking comfort in nature and also one another's presence. It reminded me that, however isolated I sometimes felt, I was not going through this alone.

—Ladee Hubbard's latest novel, *The Rib King*, came out in January.

### how sweet...SHARING

**OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA** As many of Melissa Bookin's neighbors moved away during the pandemic, they piled still-useful belongings into dumpsters. Donating the items to local families without homes, Melissa met three women and asked them what they needed. Specificity is key, she says. Because they requested tents, sleeping bags, and pillows, "that night three women were out of the cold." She's since founded the Oakland Compassion Project, which connects neighbors with locals in need: "The power of community never ceases to amaze me."

### how sweet... HANDWRITTEN LETTERS

**BOSTON** Throughout the pandemic, 19-year-old Shreya Patel and her 17-year-old sister, Saffron, had been keeping in touch with their grandparents in the U.K. with near-daily video calls. Inspiration struck them when their grandmother, who lives alone, showed them a letter she got in the mail. "She was just beaming!" Shreya says. "She told us about it for a week straight." Realizing the power of a handwritten note, the sisters reached out to nearby care homes

to see if elderly residents wanted letters. Within a week, 200 seniors were awaiting pen pals, and Letters Against Isolation, as the sisters' organization is called, got to writing. By January, more than 10,500 volunteers in five countries had sent out 115,000 letters, alleviating a very 2020 challenge (quarantine) with an age-old balm. "One woman told us it reminded her of getting love letters when she was young," Shreya says. "And this time, she won't lose them."



Shreya (left) and Saffron Patel show off some handwritten cards.