

I'm a country boy. I grew up on a small farm in southern Pennsylvania. Five other people lived on our road, and they were all farmers, most of them had my last name. Building relationships with my neighbors was never a challenge in my hometown. But when I got married, my wife suggested that we live in the city. Although the thought terrified me, love brushed my hesitations aside.

For the first year of our marriage, Katie and I lived in Baltimore City. We spent most of the year fixing up our house. Painting the walls, refinishing the floors, replacing old corroded pipes kept us busy days (and nights). Over the year we had met a few of our neighbors. Yet our conversations and thoughts of them usually consisted of,

"Hey, what's that guys name again who lives beside us?" I'd ask.

"Ummm...I think it's Ron...yeah, his name is Ron." Katie would reply.

"Oh. I saw him the other day." I'd say, because it was quite unusual that we would even see our neighbors.

"Did you talk to him at all?" Kate would ask.

"Nah, not really. I said, 'hey' when we walked past each other at Home Depot. Does that count?"

"Nah. Not really." She'd say.

After a short year of living in Baltimore City, Katie and I moved to Lancaster City. I took an Associate Pastor position at a white suburban church just outside of the city. At my final interview, the Sr. Pastor told me he was looking forward to me bringing the suburban and the urban populations together. Kate and I were excited, and so we immediately moved into the predominately Hispanic city of Lancaster, surrounded by a mix of suburban, rural and Amish communities.

Katie and I were optimistic. Moving into the city, we immediately began building relationships with our neighbors on our street. We found the Hispanic culture surrounding us to be especially friendly and communal. Katie and I would go for long walks at night down our street, stopping along the way to talk with our neighbors sitting on their porches. Getting our suburban congregation on board with the idea of building relationships with those in their neighboring city would prove frustrating tedious. I began to wonder if the only way to get the folks in our suburban congregation to intentional build relationships with those in the city was for them to fall in love. After all that's what broke me out of my comfort zone.

Being quite discouraged, a friend of mine recommended the book to me, "Peppermint-Filled Piñatas." Just a few days after ordering it online, I dove into the book and found myself buried in the book, breaking the silence in our living room every now and then saying, "Yeah...that's right...Amen...preach it!"

I especially enjoyed the chapter, "Partying to Expand our Influence." Since Katie and I both were raised as Pastor's Kids, the idea of showing our neighbors that us church folk knew how to have a good time seemed to resonate with us. But most of all, by this time I was tired of creating programs and strategies to motivate our congregation to build relationships with those in the city. I was beginning to become convinced that I was going to have to lay the foundation myself for such a ministry initiative, reaching out to my neighbors myself in a way that was tangible and practical.

So we threw a party. A block party. Over a period of a couple of months we saved up a few hundred dollars for supplies. I went to a rental company and got a Moon Bounce and snow cone machine. A friend of mine came over with his DJ equipment and pumped some tunes. We took an old piece of poster board and hung it in front of our house the day of the party and wrote on it in huge letters, "BLOCK PARTY TODAY AT 4:30PM. EVERYONE WELCOME." Then, as the kids were getting out of school and walking down the street, they noticed the snow cone machine sitting in our yard and the Moon Bounce. I shouted to them, "The party starts at 4:30. Come on over, and bring your parents and friends! Anyone can come, it's totally free!"

Within an hour our tiny yard was packed with over a hundred people. People were introducing themselves, laughing and telling stories about the neighborhood. A lady from the church donated pulled pork sandwiches and hotdogs, and members from our church small group each brought some sort of side dish. I'll never forget the things that people said to me that night. One person asked, "Why are you doing this?" Another person commented, "I've lived on this street my entire life and nobody has ever done anything like this before for us." One couple that lived a few houses down from us came and admitted, "We're so glad you are doing this...we're Christians and we've talked about doing this for a long time, but never got around to doing it."

Over the next several months, Katie and I continued to reap the benefits of the block party. Our neighbors new our names, and we knew theirs! Kids started coming over to our house after school, offering to help Katie plant flowers or walk our dog. Guys from the house next door came over one night and had a poker night in my dining room, and we invited a family down the street to come over for dinner one night, and later discovered that they moved to the city ten years ago from a small African country. "We've been here for over ten years," they said, "and no one has ever asked us to come over for dinner."

About six months ago, there was a tragic shooting on our street. A man was shot right in front of our house, and a few families on our street were evicted days later. The bloodstain from the shooting marked the road and sidewalk directly in front of our house. The next night, Katie and I hung a big piece of poster board on our front porch. This time it read, "Prayer For Our Neighborhood Tonight. 7pm. Everyone Welcome." I was shocked when people gradually started showing up. It wasn't long before we were all sitting in a gigantic circle in our yard, right where the Moon

Bounce had been sitting months before. I thanked everyone for coming, and opened in prayer, encouraging others to talk to God either silently or out-loud. Their response and participation was amazing, and I knew that for several of them it was the first time in their lives that they had ever talked to God.