

The Village With a Caring Heart

North Riverside, Illinois



Citizens and politicians around the world are focusing their efforts on renewing their cities, towns and villages with the spirituality of unity. This new monthly section will highlight success stories as inspiration for action.

BY CAROL SPALE

IN 1979 OUR FAMILY MOVED TO THE VILLAGE of North Riverside, a suburb of about 6,000 near Chicago. During this time, our son David, who was severely disabled, required constant attention, including an involved physical therapy program that required three people at a time in order to move his arms and legs so that he could be able to walk.

We were overwhelmed by the natural goodness of our neighbors. A core group of about 20 neighbors alternated coming seven days a week, twice a day, for six years. Even the firemen from our town helped out on weekends and holidays.

I felt such gratitude that I asked God

to show our family a way to give back to this town and its residents.

Not long after this, the mayor of North Riverside, Richard Scheck, wrote a letter to all residents asking for ideas for his new Committee of Neighborhood Services program. I answered, and soon afterward the mayor asked me to be its coordinator.

There was no blueprint for our program. There were 72 block captains, each responsible for one block of North Riverside. I proposed that the block captains try to make each block like a family, where no one would feel alone. The mayor liked my idea.

At that time, Chiara Lubich had begun talking about the “art of loving.” It seemed that these principles could be a basis for creating a sense of family in North River-

side. I adapted the art of loving into four points, which I called the Art of Caring:

1. Be first to reach out to others.
2. Reach out to everyone.
3. Care concretely.
4. Be one with joys and sorrows.

My plan was that during each captains’ meeting, I would take one of the points and illustrate it by using an experience that one of the block captains had shared with me. At first, I had to use stories based on my own experiences and those of my husband Frank, or quotations from famous people like Mother Teresa, or stories from magazines or newspapers that told of people living the Golden Rule. After a couple of years, however, some of the block captains themselves started sharing what they had done.

One of the first experiences shared by a captain was about a new resident of the block whose dogs were left outside barking. Instead of complaining to the police, the captain and the neighbors tried to “love their enemies” by reaching out to the dog owner, baking cookies for her and even helping her retrieve her dogs when they



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to new residents, sometimes with homemade cookies, and small live decorated trees at Christmas. One block captain decided to give one of these trees to a man who had just been sent to a nursing home. When his wife brought him the tree from the mayor and the village, he could not believe he had been chosen for this gift. Two months later, this man died, but the wife told us how much the little tree had meant and how serene his departure had been.

To “reach out to everyone” the captains knock on everyone’s door on their block, even those hard to get along with. For example, on one particular block, there was a couple who for three years running had not attended the annual block party. When they finally did turn out, all the neighbors gave them a round of applause.

captains take interest in people, especially those experiencing personal suffering. We send cards, bring food, listen to people’s troubles. We use e-mails to communicate special needs.

By practicing the Art of Caring, we started to build an overall network that today truly covers this town. On a regular basis, some captains even do extra by volunteering to drive people in town to doctors, or shopping for groceries for the homebound.

The mayor and the trustees themselves have also put the Art of Caring into practice, so I started to share stories of their acts of kindness during the captains meetings. For example, at one point, we had a block captain from another political party present and the mayor welcomed that person publicly and went beyond the interests of his own party.

I pointed out how the mayor and trustees saw politics as a way to serve their neighbor. They were surprised to see themselves from this perspective, being “first to reach out” or “sharing joys and sorrows.” It amazed me to see how deeply they were touched by this.



North Riverside, a suburb of Chicago. Its Neighborhood Services Program, coordinated by Carol Spale, links neighbors on a regular basis. The village citizens and administration’s “random” acts of kindness have impacted countless lives. Above right: Carol Spale with her family. Top: Block captains delivering information packets.

escaped out of the yard. Only then did they approach her with their concerns about how the constant barking was affecting the newborn baby on the block. Many of the other captains said they were touched by how much they had tried to love without causing a confrontation.

These days, to “be first to reach out,” the block captains give welcome bags

To “care concretely,” we distribute information packets targeted to specific groups, such as seniors and families. One time, a captain who was delivering the information packets discovered an older couple who had no working stove. When we told the mayor, the mayor bought a stove for them with his own money.

To “be one with joys and sorrows,”

Then I was asked to write a page in our quarterly village newsletter. I decided to share “angel stories,” in which unnamed “angels” would do acts of caring for others in the town. For example, one angel visited sick people, bringing everyone a rose; another grew tomatoes and shared them with her neighbors. An 88-year-old angel cut down a little tree for a

Living for the city



North Riverside's block captains meet regularly. Here they celebrate the 10th anniversary of their neighborhood program. Bottom: A recent July 4th parade in North Riverside.

widow who feared it would break her gutters.

Now the mayor has started giving an "angel award." He also suggested making appreciation cards, which he and the area representatives would sign and we would send to people whom we had heard had tried to help their neighbors, going the extra mile.

In one newsletter we even printed stories of children in town and how they lived the Golden Rule when they rolled the "Cube of Love" which children in the Focolare Movement use daily (see page 31). Each side of the cube has one of the points of the art of loving.

At a captains' meeting soon afterward, I took a risk and gave cubes to the captains and asked them to roll them (I even gave one to the mayor). Then I told them they had to live what landed on top!

Then at a later meeting of the mayor and the area representatives, one member

named Joe was complaining about someone else. The mayor asked me if I had a cube with me, which I did, and told me to give it to Joe. Joe rolled the cube, which said "love your enemies." Joe kept silent and did not say another word.

North Riverside has even extended the Art of Caring to other towns. As I made contact with others outside of town to learn about their resources, we started to build relationships with these other towns. We saw that we had to love the other towns as our own.

I truly believe that the art of loving can transform a town from top to bottom. These four points of the art of loving have created such a sense of family that people even invite relatives to move here. People driving around our town tell me they feel such peace. What touches my heart most is what one resident said a few months ago:

"I am so lucky to live in a village with a caring heart." ■



COURTESY OF CAROL SPALLE (2)