

Neighbors Making Changes



a conversation with

Don Vande Krol

Neighborhood Innovator

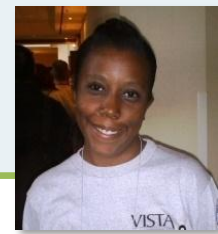
Founder, [Neighbors Gathering](#)

La France Ave, North Port, FL

and **Jenn-Marie Grant**

SCOPE VISTA Neighborhood Changemaker

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Together with his wife Terry, Don has created an innovative and surprisingly simple way to improve their neighborhood and their lives: by inviting the folks who live on their block into their living room each week. The “Neighbors Gathering” [website](#) declares:

“Neighbors enjoy life with one another! Unfortunately, it seems that the trend has been to become more and more isolated and alienated from those living around us. We want to reverse the trend!”

First, tell us about yourself...

Where you are from? What brought you here?

I was born outside of a little town called Sully, Iowa and we lived there until I was about 10 years old and then we moved to Lincoln, Nebraska where I did the rest of my growing up. I came here to Florida because I was invited to join the company, Art Craft Cabinetry, by a friend and guy who used to be my partner back in Rock Springs, Wyoming. We moved to Venice, Florida first, and then later moved to

North Port because we decided to build ourselves a house and the land values and cost of construction was a lot less expensive

What are your interests and talents? What are you passionate about?

I am passionate about community. My interest lies in theology, philosophy, and... That’s a tough question. **[JG] It’s hard to put in a nutshell...** Yes it is. I know one thing: I’m interested in figuring out why there’s suffering, why the world is so messed up, and how we as a community can heal it. And I don’t have the answers to that.

Based on what I've been told, I have some ability to lead, to inspire others. I don't know if that's a talent. But I guess if that is a talent and an ability, then I have a responsibility to apply that to helping facilitate the creation of community. By 'community' I mean

basically, relationships, face-to-face relationships, intimate relationships (of course I don't mean sexual relationships), the kind of relationships where people are open and honest with one another—where you connect to other people. This might be a little abstract, but that's how I see it—my role.

I like kayaking and mountain biking, hiking, [and] I do an awful lot of reading.

How did you come up with the idea of doing neighbors gatherings?

Terry and I have wanted to do something for a long time. We experienced very close community, back in Wyoming. We've kind of felt the absence of that since moving to Florida here. So we've discussed several times how that would happen and what we could do and those kinds of things. And we were reading a blog—I don't know where it was from—but I read or rather a question was posed on the blog: *"What would happen if we just simply began?"* And I thought to myself *"Well, what would happen if I just simply begin to do what Terry and I wanted to do?"*

And so from there I tried to think about what to do if I began, and the first thing of course to do was to contact my neighbors and see if there's interest in it and present some possibilities.

So I created a flyer and I think it was tagged "Won't you be my neighbor?" I sent that to neighbors within walking distance, several block area. So I did that and established a time and introduced the idea. And we told everyone that our house was going to be available for gatherings on a weekly basis from that point on. That's how it began.

What changes have you seen in your life, the lives of your neighbors, and your community since you started the gatherings?

Wow... a lot I guess.

First, relationships have formed that never existed before. A lot of the neighbors, neighbors that have lived next door to one another for over five years or more and didn't even know their next door neighbor's name. That was kind of neat.

One result of one of those relationships forming was people found that they were able to meet one another's needs. So that's been a very interesting phenomenon because all sorts of



Don and his neighbors at their La France Ave. "Christmas Walkabout"

things are happening in the neighborhood now that never occurred before.

[For example], two doors door down there's a neighbor who wife recently got a job. She was unemployed for a while until recently, which meant she had to leave her husband who's handicapped at home. And he just needed help getting to doctors appointments, you know, getting around.



La France Neighbors Gathering Block Party

So there's a neighbor on the street behind us who had time available, just took it upon herself to kind of be a chauffeur. She spends the time, taking him to the doctor, taking him wherever he needs to go. Now I don't know what could have been done [otherwise] to meet his need, but it definitely would have been more difficult.

We also have a neighbor that has two large dogs and birds that need to be watched when she leaves, so we watch them when she goes on vacation. There's also her next door neighbor that goes with her and walks the dogs, they both are committed to the need to exercise and encourage each other. Those are just small things.

Another thing, for instance we got a neighbor whose father passed away so they had a

memorial service at their home. I think it was encouraging for them when a good number of neighbors showed up at the memorial service to give her comfort and support.

And, there really is a lending and borrowing of food items like baking powder and sugar.

[JG] Like the good ole days "Can I borrow a cup of sugar?"

Yeah and...there are so many simple things. I was trying to think of some of the larger things, but there are so many simple things that really add up. A lot of it is just simply when we gather and get to know each other, we find out that when we don't see one another, there's this thought: *"I wonder how they're doing?"* [There's] just a sense of caring that would not have been there before.

In a nutshell, how would you like to see the Neighbor Gatherings flourish in North Port? How would you like to expand and build on what you guys did on La France Ave?

First of all I would really like to figure out how to help expand. I know what I did here but I haven't figured out how to replicate that. If it were to be replicated, one of the things I know is that there would be mutual encouragement and support between the gatherings. [When] I envision a network of gatherings, I think

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of a root structure of a plant, where each plant draws its nourishment from other plants and what they receive from the environment.

[It would be] interdependent—[meaning that] we are being nourished from our own creative efforts to extract from the environment, but also meeting the needs of others. We're drawing on what others have received as well. So I think, just like a plant, what I have envisioned what we have here is just a little sprout—a little plant that's struggling to grow, and needs to be watered and nourished. But I know that if there were more of these plants growing that each of these plants would be more viable.

And I think it's extremely important to tell you that one of the problems, one of the ills in our present-day culture is that we're disconnected

in so many ways. ...Maybe even another analogy: when kids went to camp and sat around a campfire looking at the fire they can see all the coals adding warmth to one another, but if you take one coal out and separate it, pretty soon that coal loses its heat and dies out. That's one analogy that explains community but I think it's an accurate analogy.

Thanks for all of your work.

I appreciate that you're out doing the work that a lot of people can do to improve the community.

If this helps or encourages anybody and gives them the idea to start their own neighbors gathering, that would really be a tremendous thing.

To learn more about Neighbor Gatherings or how you can start your own Neighbors Gathering,

- * Visit www.neighborsgathering.com
- * Email Don at don@neighborsgathering.com



“to connect and inspire citizens to create a better community”

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