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CENSUS DAY: IT'S NOT NICE TO FOOL UNCLE SAM

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## Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood in Galesburg

by Bruce Weik & Peter Schwartzman

Seems Mr. Rogers had it right all along. It's the neighborhood, stupid. Well, he wouldn't have quite put it that way. He was too polite. Every Mr. Rogers Neighborhood show, which aired from 1968-2001, opened with the same invitation: "Won't you be my neighbor?" It doesn't seem to get much simpler than that, does it? Since we are all neighbors, why not celebrate this fact and use it to our advantage.

A neighborhood is a geographical location within a city or town. It has boundaries and covers a well-defined area. They often are marked off by roads, business districts, parks, or waterways. Early on, neighborhoods were identified by ethnic, religious or social class. It provided a way for immigrants to maintain their identity and continue to use their language. While these distinctions can still be seen in large cities, they are for the most part becoming increasingly jumbled elsewhere. The prominent theme today is one of diversity. The better a town or city can connect its diverse elements, the more successful it becomes.

We have sort of fallen asleep when it comes to neighborhoods. What was once a vibrant, dynamic, empowering place is now a conglomeration of people, who despite

living in close proximity to others, barely know any one nearby. A convergence of many different social influences has worked to keep us apart. Work, technology, urban sprawl, and fear have made us less likely to interact with our neighbors. We prefer to stay to ourselves, and cast suspicion and doubt on those who are unfamiliar. In a misguided effort to make our lives safer, simpler, and less involved, we have shut ourselves off from the many possibilities that active neighborhoods have to offer.

One might ask, what are these possibilities? We plan to elaborate on these over the next couple of issues. Here, let's look at some things that can and have been useful in the past. The neighborhood is the best and most effective way to tackle such problems as hunger, loneliness, drug sales and use, dilapidated properties, slum lords, health care, and the simple act of just plain helping one another (whether that means mowing the lawn of someone who can't, taking them shopping, shoveling their drive, or doing house repairs on a pro bono basis). Neighborhoods are the best way for us to build a sense of community, whether this means enjoying fun activities in a neighborhood park, pitching in collectively on a neighborhood garden, working on a specific neighborhood hazard or nuisance

(like speeding cars, barking dogs, or drug dealers), or promoting friendliness and reestablishing the function of front porches. We tend to want to sit out back and not be bothered. While that might help our serenity and allow us to avoid human contact, it does little to promote the neighborhood or bring us real peace and comfort.

Strong neighborhoods will help our safety and security. We are living in a time of fear. Some people are afraid to leave their homes. We teach our children to shun strangers. Think about your own situation. Do you know the neighbors living next to you? Three or four houses in each direction? Across the street? Now stretch that out for a block or two each way. Have you ever walked around the neighborhood and introduced yourself? Fairly quickly we begin to see that our efforts and assertiveness to meet our neighbors are pretty low, if non-existent. Often, this lack of connection is the true cause of our fear. And this fear only intensifies when our sensationalized media feeds our insecurities and anxieties further. Fortunately, there are rewarding and successful methods for combatting this fear. It can be as simple as lifting up your head and saying, "Hello," to someone new.

Establishing and strengthening our neighborhoods can result in increasing

our community pride and motivating us to begin influencing city policy and decisions from the bottom up. More correctly, it places us at the top, with all the city administrators, politicians, and power brokers subservient to our needs and demands. It gives us a way to take ownership of what is happening around us. Too often we feel like things happen to us and that we have no control. An organized, active, energetic neighborhood organization takes back what we have given up. Rather than casting blame or constantly bitching about this or that, organized neighborhoods help us take positive steps/ actions to improve things, to help shape our lives and the lives of our neighbors. An organized neighborhood is a triple win situation. The neighborhood wins, the city wins and we win.

Mr. Rogers really had it right when he invited us to be his neighbor. In a way, I suppose the Nurturing Neighborhood Action group is doing the same, with a slightly different twist. "Won't you help us organize your neighbors?" Together we can make a difference. (For more information on our project, read future contributions here, or come to the next Nurturing Neighborhoods Meeting at the Galesburg Public Library (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor) on Tuesday, April 20<sup>th</sup>).