

## NEIGHBORHOODS

As a child, the entire town, population 100, was my neighborhood. It was a rich collection of people of varying education, cultural backgrounds, source and amount of income and family characteristics. I spent time in everyone's house with one exception: the odd guy across the street who seemed friendly enough but about whom Mom and Dad merely said "Be polite but do not accept an invitation to go inside." Thanks to an absence of prejudice on the part of my parents who believed "folks is folks," I found everyone interesting in one way or another and valued time spent in their company.

Some folks seemed pretty ordinary. Others were highly interesting, talking about places and experiences that made me long to go and do for myself. Or those who didn't talk with me but allowed me to watch, like the women who made tortillas from scratch each day, cooking them on large coal stoves. One lady liked to have me come by because the thread in her embroidery basket always worked itself into a matted clump. While I sat and untangled, I took in the wonderful aroma of dinner slow cooking in the big roaster. A few folks had styles and manners of living that seemed mighty unique. Whether or not I understood, they were threads in the neighborhood fabric and I didn't think any more about it. When there was trouble, everyone jumped on board.

The older I grew, the more limited and homogenous my neighborhoods became, in the various places I lived. Diversity diminished, at least from outward appearances. People spent time with each other more from what they had in common than learning about that which they did not. "Right" "wrong" "acceptable" and "unacceptable" seemed clear-cut to folks and others were judged accordingly. Geographic distance was only one defining factor. People living on the other side of adjacent walls could be strangers.

After moving to Denver from a mid-sized town, I spent about an hour every morning at the 7-11 where I got my coffee before going to work. Unsolicited and on a purely voluntary basis, I made coffee, kept the coffee bar clean and delighted visiting with customers of all walks of life, cultural backgrounds, economic levels, and opinions. I looked forward to seeing the same folks again and again. One day it occurred to me, I found my neighborhood within the city.