

Local dispatch: A real community is more than just a place to live

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By Eileen Reutzl Colianni

It's 7 a.m. and I'm walking early to beat the heat. The sky is powder blue, with splashes of milky white. It's bright already, although the sun is, mercifully, not yet visible.

As I stride down the walking trail, which is parallel to my neighborhood's main street, but on a lower level, I'm feeling grateful for where I live. Oakmont is a personal place and walker-friendly, not to mention its tree-lined streets, flower-filled lawns and porches, and its palpable sense of community.

It's not yet 7:30 and already I've greeted by name a funeral director, bookseller, religion educator and realtor, as well as my friendly mailman as he hurries into the post office to stuff his sack.

Such human encounters, momentary though they are, enhance life in an ineffable way. Maybe it's about the personalism of knowing and being known in an increasingly faceless world, where eyes are most often cast downward toward little squares of light.

When I reach the end of the .8-mile trail lined by lush groupings of lilies, lavender, roses and their colorful cousins, I decide to walk back along Allegheny River Boulevard, our main street, so I can peer into store windows on my way home.

I realize this will slow my pace, but I can't resist checking out what Jackie has created in the windows of *Ambiance*, the upscale re-sale shop whose profits benefit Bethlehem Haven, the shelter for homeless women. Usually, I'm such a reluctant shopper that I've designated my daughter my Purchasing Agent and call myself her Satisfied Client, but I confess to an addiction to stopping at *Ambiance* at least twice monthly, where unique fashion finds and artsy accessories abound ... at low prices.

I seem to derive inordinate joy from walking to many of my weekly destinations, whether for mundane errands like stamps or activities like yoga class at our excellent library or for entertainment like a movie at The Oaks, our small, human-scale, charming theater which, I've heard, doesn't even break even. It's said to be financially supported by a few community leaders who believe our neighborhood needs its own cinema.

Imagine: community commitment being accorded a higher priority than the bottom line. Thank you, Oaks' Angels, whoever you are.

Yes, Oakmont evokes that kind of love from its residents, including me, a relative newcomer who arrived in 1992 because of the Allegheny River and stayed to discover countless other community treasures.

I think our neighborhood appeals because of its vibrant main street, six churches all within walking distance of each other, that excellent library, diversity in housing -- tiny river cottages to sprawling mansions, almost all of which are enhanced by flowers and trees -- a famous bakery, a dozen interesting restaurants. Oh, and you may have heard of our golf course.

As I reach the end of the boulevard on this morning, it's almost 8 and the sun, already simmering, is now visible. I'm eager to escape its rays, so I walk briskly home, thinking about a story I heard last month at a garden club luncheon.

About 20 years ago, Dawn's husband was being transferred from the tiny town of Greenville, which she loved, to Monroeville. At the end of a long day touring suburban homes, Dawn was perplexed and asked the realtor, " So where is the main street in this neighborhood?"

"Oh," came the knowing reply, "tomorrow we'll look at homes in Oakmont."

Dawn and her husband bought the first home they viewed and still live in it, though their nest has been empty for a spell.

Recently I asked Dawn why she found -- and finds -- Oakmont so congenial. She replied without hesitating: "Community ... it's a real community -- with a main street!"

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