

Neighborhood of 17th St.

17th Street is a neighborhood, Normandy Lane is not. Yet the two locations are less than three miles apart.

I have had as much contact with my neighbors on 17th St. in six weeks as I had on Normandy Lane in 18 years. This has little to do with me; it has to do with residential density and the people who live here. They are working-class people of all races, Chinese elders whom I fondly call “ancients,” and young, school-age children. There are 30 apartment units across the street, three large, two-story single-family units to the north, two units (four apartments each) to the south, and a handful of small, single-family homes, on both sides of the street, also to the south.

Chinese seem to predominate, followed by Latinos and Anglos. Richard Rodriguez writes often about the transformation of San Francisco into a Chinese city. Judging by this neighborhood, can Sacramento be far behind? The language spoken on this street is primarily Chinese. The ancients, who live next to me on the north, smile and wave to me; they don't speak a word of English. Perhaps they are providing me with affirmation and approval for my garden work. Those with school-age children, living to the south, speak very little English and even their children speak only Chinese with their peers.

The 30-something woman next door, with her son, a junior high school boy of Latino descent, lives with a Mexican who speaks little English. He leaves early in the morning to catch a ride to work with his fellow crew members. From the looks of the truck that picks him up and drops him off, I think he must work in landscape/irrigation construction. A Latino couple live in the same complex, but they are rarely seen.

The ancients come out early in the morning to rake up leaves, sweep the sidewalk, and pluck small weeds coming up from the cracks in the driveway or sidewalk. Some hobble along, up and down the block, taking their early morning exercise. They appear again early in the evening, but this time seems reserved for visiting with one another.

Royal Market is our corner store, the commercial anchor of our block. Aside from such staples as beer, soda, milk, basic cleaning supplies, and the daily

papers, the store features an array of Chinese non-perishable food items. No fruits or vegetables are offered for sale. One of the human fixtures at the front counter is a laid-back 40-year-old neighborhood resident who carries his pet parakeet on his shoulder. He, along with the store owner and his wife, carry on endless conversations, mostly neighborhood gossip. A few minutes is enough for me; I pay for my soda and take my leave

The residential density of the 17th St. neighborhood creates an interactive environment that does not exist on Normandy Lane. The adults living on Normandy Lane number 11, and only a car or two is ever parked on the street during the day, and none at night. On this block of 17th St., the number of adults is more than 40, and approximately two dozen cars are parked on the street, day or night. With this number of residents in a one-block area, human interactions abound; people coming and going, cars parking or leaving, and car alarms jiggled and set off.

In ten weeks, I have had more conversations with my neighbor next door than in ten years with my neighbor on Normandy Lane. Sometimes she is curious about my gardening, sometimes she needs to borrow the hose to wash her car or my heavy rake to better clear her gutter area of wet leaves, or she asks leading questions to find out more about me. She recounts tales about previous tenants in the neighborhood or complains to me about her landlord. Her list is endless; it is simply her way of passing the time of day. After all, we have been thrown together in close quarters on this street, and our mutual survival depends upon knowing one another and hanging together.

I believe it is the sheer density of this neighborhood, and its working-class character, which breaks down any stand-offish and reticent human interchange. Foreign languages make these human connection points more awkward and confusing, but this seems to be more than offset by the enthusiasm and the effort to communicate about essential issues such as parking spaces, raking leaves, and one's neighbors.

Or perhaps it is simply a question of the common area. On 17th St., in the downtown urban core, we all share the same common areas, viz., sidewalks, street parking, lawn refuse, and garbage pickup points. On Normandy Lane there are no sidewalks, the only common area is the street, and it is

unthinkable that anyone would park his/her car in front of someone else's house.

I have come to enjoy the community feeling of 17th St.