

A Block Party, Two Policemen and a Girl with a Stuffed Pink Pig

When next-door-neighbor Benny busted the Rozanski's window playing baseball and hid under the porch, Mr. Rozanski coaxed him out to go for an ice cream. Then they fixed the window together. Everyone in the Polish neighborhood on Wrightwood Avenue knew each other. They traded recipes for golumpki and pierogis and passed the long summer evenings together on front porches. They looked after each other's children. During the Depression, they helped one another out with food and money.

That was a long time ago. The neighborhood has been mostly Hispanic for some time, but even after many years, my husband's aunt Mary (who lived there most of her one-hundred-two years) didn't know what to think of those "new" arrivals who did not speak Polish. She created community, remarkably so, with the few remaining Poles.

Last August, my husband, Jim, met with barricades on Mary's block when he went to visit. He was surprised to see kids jumping on an inflatable bouncing structure, and people, of all ages, enjoying food, laughter and music – a block party! Jim had never seen so much life in the neighborhood. "It must have been like that when my dad and his friends played in the street and there weren't so many cars," he thought.

It was a perfect day -- warm (but not too warm) and sunny. Jim carried two chairs outside so he and his aunt could sit on the porch together. "I miss your dad," said Mary. (Jim's dad, who was also Mary's brother, had recently died.) Jim said that he missed him too. They sat side-by-side, together in their thoughts.

Out in the street, six or eight kids started a soccer game. It had not been going on long before two policemen on bikes entered the block from the west. They rode slowly through and passed the barricade at the other end

of the block. Then they stopped and talked to each other. They turned around and rode back.

The policemen called and waved for all the kids to come over. "OK if we play?" they asked. The kids stood in a semi-circle as the policemen, each captain of one soccer team, picked their players. They both picked the littlest kids first. About halfway through, one of them picked an older, athletic-looking boy. After that it was "no holds barred." They picked to win.

During the last year, Mary's vision had severely deteriorated and she could barely make out large indistinct shapes. Jim realized she couldn't see the action and started play-by-play commentary for her. He announced each goal as first one team scored and then the other, back and forth, in a very competitive game. Mary smiled when Jim described the little girl with a stuffed pink pig watching from the curb with her dad.

Play continued to a tie. The next goal would determine the game. Everybody gave just that little bit more and eventually somebody scored. Although they had all played their hardest and tried to win, at the end, it didn't seem to matter very much who the winners were. Exhausted and happy, they all slapped high fives and the policemen rode away on their bikes.

It had been many years since Mary had sat on her porch. She always kept the curtains closed in the front room of her house because she was afraid if someone saw how old she was, they might try to rob her.

But on this most perfect day, with the help of her nephew, she was able to see a new community of people -- dads and moms, teenagers, babies, policemen . . .

and a little girl with a stuffed pink pig.