

Opportunities in the Neighborhood

By SUE PATT

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I'm a practical person. I believe that my faith should be lived out in relationships with others around me. As a teenager, I became a believer in Jesus and wanted to honor Him in my family relationships. In college, I took the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* class, and I learned it was important to live my faith in the context of international students on campus. Life went on and my passion to connect with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists grew in my heart and in my daily-life expressions of connection.

Here is a story from a season of my life that was filled with young children, community life, and a desire to love on Muslims in my neighborhood. It might spark ideas of how you can reach the unreached within your reach.

I had known it as a Perkins. It was the unmistakable landmark near the closest Turnpike exit. It was even open 24 hours a day. Then it changed hands to another owner. I watched the transformation over time with disinterest since I don't eat out much. But there was one detail which attracted attention. A gigantic American flag displayed at the diner proudly waved 24 hours a day. It's an area landmark, and it's right across the street from my house.

On more than one occasion, I'd had breakfast with friends there and noticed the very polite dark-haired waiters with accents. I found out that the diner was owned by Egyptians, and many of the staff were also Egyptian. One day, I finally called and blurted out that I was just a regular American person who lived across the street. I was embarrassed that Americans like me usually didn't do a very good job welcoming internationals into this country, and perhaps there were ways a regular person might be able to help the Egyptians feel more at home in this country. The Egyptian on the other end of the phone was speechless, so he passed me to an American gal who was a manager. I told her the same thing. "You'll have

to talk with the owner, Mohammed," she said excitedly. "He will be so delighted to talk with you."

Later that afternoon, I called Mohammed and found myself blurting out the same tumble of thoughts. He was speechless too. When he found words to say, they were not quite what I expected. "This is amazing. I've never heard anything like this before."

I said, "Would you like to bring your family over for dinner at my house so we could talk tomorrow about what I might do to help welcome you and your Egyptian workers?" Mohammed and his family did come for dinner that next night and we began an amazing friendship. Family to family we began sharing about our interests, our children, our history, and when I commented to him that he was blessed by God to have such a beautiful and attentive wife, he countered with "Yes, but I'm even more blessed by God to have friends like you. I've been in this country for 25 years and I've never been invited to an American family's home."

Followers of Jesus Christ should be looking for ways to welcome the alien and the stranger, as the Bible directs us to do (Lev. 19:34). It took me a while to take the step to connect, and I was anything but smooth, but I was sure it would be a seed that would eventually bear fruit. And it has.

Many years have passed since those first conversations with my dear Egyptian friends. I even got a job at the diner and have worked there for most of the past 18 years, giving me the opportunity to have hundreds of conversations with friends from all religious backgrounds. None of those stories would have happened had I not been watching for ways to live out my faith in my community.

Who in your community is still waiting to meet a follower of Jesus? What practical steps might you take in response? 

