Think of a neighborhood scene and a Norman Rockwell painting comes to mind. Kids sharing ice cream cones on the front porch swing while their parents chat over the fence. You know, warm fuzzy images of yesteryear. But neighborhoods are about more than backyard coffee klatsching. In our hectic times, neighborhoods provide us with a sense of community, a source of friends, a place to get involved. In this issue of FOCUS, we take a closer look at what's happening in Boise's neighborhoods today.

Reaching Across the Fence

By Amy Stahl

On a hot Sunday afternoon last summer about 30 people (I being among them) walked out their front doors to gather for a couple of hours in the middle of the street.

It was my first block party or the first time I truly felt like a neighbor. Since graduating from college I've moved eight times and lived in three states. Frequent moves tend to stifle the urge to become friendly with the neighbors.

Relaxing in lawn chairs, we chatted about this and that, the mundane and the extraordinary. We laughed and talked about weddings, births, barking dogs, forest fires, football teams, vacations, you name it.

After awhile the wind kicked up, we packed up our potluck dishes and went home. But the party left me with a new appreciation for the people who live next door, across the fence and down the block. No longer strangers, the people I see everyday on the street are now familiar;

STEVE BLY PHOTO

Hundreds of volunteers help their Boise neighbors each year during "Paint the Town."

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

Jim's Coffee Shop in Boise's North End is a favorite neighborhood hangout for friends.

some are close friends.

In these hectic times we need to connect with our neighbors, say BSU anthropologists. Why is this network of neighbors so important? It's human nature, says archaeologist Max Pavesic. We all need to develop "a sense of place," he says. "The idea of place, where people live, is important to who we are and where we are in the community."

And what exactly is a neighborhood? You may think of it as a cluster of houses, apartments or rooms on the floor of a residence hall. Or it could be the corner grocery store, coffee shop, laundromat or anywhere neighbors meet.

A neighborhood typically starts as a space, as a collection of houses and businesses, says BSU cultural anthropologist Robert McCarl. "Over time it transforms from a place to a cultural space and residents derive a sense of identity from the area. Once people start associating part of their identity with a particular space then they become defenders of the status quo as they see it."

Neighborhoods are a natural birthplace for grass-roots activism, says John Bertram. "If you get people involved at the neighborhood level they can get plugged in," he says. "The neighborhood is really a good place to engage citizens."

Bertram, a former city planner, runs his business, Planmakers Planning and Urban Design, from a lovingly restored Victorian-era home in the River Street area.

He believes in empowering neighborhoods. "I think of neighborhoods as a place where we can refine and enhance the quality of life communities really want." Through careful planning, neighborhoods can put a premium on features they consider to be important — things like walkability, trees, schools, building setbacks, sidewalks and small-scale commercial areas.

He's heartened by the heightened awareness of community activism he sees all over Boise. More and more people are teaming up to help one another and improve their community. Thousands of people volunteer for Rake Up Boise, Paint the Town, the Boise River Festival and other activities every year. "Boise is still a young city. It's growing and healthy. Change is still possible. We're small enough that groups can deal with local problems," says Bertram. "Boise's a can-do community."

He encourages residents, where possible, to get involved in the neighborhood planning process. It helps people identify important issues, he says, "and allows people to buy in and understand what their neighborhood is about and how to make it a better place. Healthy neighborhoods make a healthy city."

Pavesic has been a neighborhood activist for years. A North End resident, he testified in support of the first community-based historic district and has campaigned against a plan to remove the grassy median from Harrison Boulevard.

Traffic is the No. 1 issue facing his neighborhood, Pavesic says, praising the collective efforts of

SOUL SEARCHING

It's not easy to capture the essence of a neighborhood, says writer Elizabeth VanderSchaaf. "We no longer live in a culture that recognizes the soul of a place, especially an urban place," she says. "We have to do the imaginative work to find it for ourselves."

In a 1994 story in the *Utne Reader*, she offers these tips on how to get in touch with the soul of your neighborhood:

- **Pay attention to the boundaries of the neighborhood.**
- **Notice the neighborhood's festivals or rituals.**
- **Find out where to watch birds and where children play.**
- **Study the history of the houses and streets to find out where the spirits live.**
- **Investigate what makes the neighborhood different from adjacent neighborhoods.**

North End residents who have waged war on what he calls "the engineering mentality" of the Ada County Highway District. "It's a show of neighborhood. You feel proud of living here," says Pavesic.

The socioeconomic mix and "walkability" of his neighborhood appeal to Pat Bieter, a retired BSU professor who was recently elected to represent District 19 in the Idaho Legislature. Bieter and his wife, Eloise, bought their house on 8th Street in 1957. The four-bedroom house was perfectly located. It's close to church, the grocery store, schools.

The Bieters raised their five kids in the house. They still hold backyard barbecues, sing Christmas carols with the neighbors, meet friends at Jim's Coffee Shop, chat with the pharmacist at Hill's drug store and shop at the Hollywood Market just down the street.

Bieter worries about the impacts of growth and shrinking "elbow room" in the Treasure Valley. But he's cautiously optimistic. Rather than dictate behavior through covenants and restrictions, he says, more neighbors are working together to reach consensus. "Neighborhood living carries responsibilities. A lot of neighborhoods are trying to build on that by convention — not by covenant," he says. "We'll have to develop these conventions that allow us to work together."

Maryanne Jordan, president of the West Valley Neighborhood Association, understands the need to work together. Her group was galvanized by traffic concerns. "We all realized that if we didn't get involved we'd have no say and no part in a compromise," says Jordan.

Jordan's neighborhood is rimmed by Maple Grove, Cloverdale, Chinden and Fairview, major arterial streets. As a result, traffic is a perpetual problem for the fast-growing area. "That's just an issue that's never going to go away."

"You get protective of a place," says Jordan. "People come here, they like it and they get protective. They want it to stay the same."

BSU historian Todd Shallat thinks that people get defensive because they're seeking a link to a better world. "People are striving for a solution to urbanization through their neighborhoods," he says. "They're looking for the small town they left behind in their past. Maybe it wasn't even their past, maybe it was their parents' past."

It's perfectly understandable to Shallat. "People yearn for community," he says. It doesn't really matter where they live. It can be Lakewood, Eagle, the Foothills or Kuna. People are simply "passionate about their place," says Shallat.

Shallat sees neighborhoods as more than just a group of houses: They're people reaching out to help each other. "A neighborhood means you're all looking out for one another and with that comes mutual respect," he says. ❑

Brother and sister Randall and Melanie Reese lead a BSU student organization that helps people sort out conflicts.

Sounding Off Safely

By Edie Jeffers

Your neighbor's dog barks incessantly. The landlord won't return your cleaning deposit. Loud music plays constantly in the apartment next door. Sound familiar? A BSU student-run organization can help. The Sounding Board of BSU helps neighbors, co-workers and others involved in a conflict to reach an understanding.

Currently, about 20 students serve as mediators for the Sounding Board, which is operated by the student chapter of BSU's Conflict Management Services and offers free mediation services to the university and community. Each student works closely with one of 40 volunteer certified mediators. Their service area reaches from Elmore to Ada and Canyon counties.

Mediation is a process in which two or more disputing parties voluntarily work together with the aid of trained, impartial mediators toward a negotiated resolution, says Sounding Board President Randall Reese. Student mediators meet with both sides in a disagreement, set up a joint meeting, and help disputants identify positive solutions. "We never offer a solution, even if we think we know what would work best," he says. "The solution has to come from them."

Reese says that in typical neighborhood disputes, people get focused on their position — I want your dog to shut up — and they lose sight of their underlying interest — I need my sleep. "Positions are usually mutually exclusive and therefore non-negotiable," he says. "Interests, on the other hand, are quite often mutually obtainable. When people come together and talk through their interests, they begin to see each other as people instead of problems."

Mediation as a process is thousands of years old, says Melanie Reese, a communication professor and 1988 BSU graduate who is the group's adviser and Reese's sister. Used frequently in Japanese and Hebrew cultures, mediation techniques were brought to America by the Quakers. In the 1920s and '30s, mediation was common in resolving labor disputes. In the 1960s, it was applied to civil unrest problems.

There has been a resurgence of mediation in the last 20 years, says Melanie Reese. It is being used more frequently to resolve divorce disputes, retail conflicts and neighborhood problems.

In our litigious society, mediation provides a reasonable alternative, she says. "It gives people a different way of channeling anger in a productive way." Rather than engaging in expensive court battles, she believes that mediation builds communities and saves relationships.

Not all problems, however, can be solved through volunteer mediation. When appropriate, the students will refer disputes to other agencies or community services. ❑