



Walk Around the Block

Ideas to Spark your Start

Whether you are a new Neighborhood Leader, or you've been around the block a few times, you are likely to be inspired by seasoned leaders Sharon Blaine, and newer leaders, Mavis Smith and Bryn Oh, as they share some of their tips.

The Door Dance

Starting to knock on doors to organize your neighborhood may seem like a daunting task, however, it may reassure you to know that these leaders report that they have had very positive responses from their neighbors.

Bryn shares the story of the “Door Dance.” She says that when she first knocks on a neighbor’s door, they only open it a crack. “Then when I introduce myself as their neighbor and point at my house, they open it a little wider,” she says. Bryn says she then hands the neighbor a flyer, at which point they open the door more, and stand parallel to it. Finally, as the conversation progresses, “they open the door all the way and step out in front of it to chat with me,” Bryn smiles.

Making Connections

Mavis reports that since she has started organizing her neighborhood, people who haven’t “neighbored” in a while, are now talking with one another and having more interactions. Sharon’s neighborhood has become so well organized over the years, that she has a co-leader, and says that even if she were to move away, she knows the neighborhood would carry on their connections without her.

Each of these leaders started differently. Sharon began with earthquake preparedness, and over the years, her program grew to include Neighborhood Watch, as well as block parties. Bryn started off holding a neighborhood organizational meeting to find out what her neighbors were interested in doing. Mavis hosted a Neighborhood Watch gathering, and shortly had enough participants to earn Neighborhood Watch signs to post throughout her neighborhood. Mavis shares that the meeting was quite an eye-opener for long-term residents who were so comfortable in Cupertino, that they weren’t always taking prudent safety precautions.

Mavis added that she is “astounded” at the amount of support and encouragement available from City Staff, especially Laura Lee, and encouraged new Block Leaders to seek help from other leaders, or Laura. She also says that she believes that the best way to succeed is to “keep everlastingly at it.”

Contingency Plans

When Bryn began, she says she was initially a little intimidated and felt it was all a “bit big and scary,” to begin. She says that since she felt a lot of momentum coming out of the Block Leader training, she began her activities quickly. She conquered her worries

by asking herself, “What’s the worst thing that could happen?” Then she made contingency plans. If she threw a Block Party and only four people showed up, and they all brought dessert, then they could all go out to dinner and come back to her house to eat the dessert! It turned out that she got such great response that she never had to go to Plan B, but always having an emergency plan gave her the confidence to move forward.

Making Contact

Bryn shares that one of the best ways to get a good turn out, it to make sure to actually speak to someone from each house. She mentions that while flyers are a good way to reinforce your message, they don’t stand-alone. She says she received that advice from an experienced leader, and that it has been very helpful. In order to find someone at home at each house, Bryn goes door to door at various times of the day and week. She says that weekends and evenings have been the most successful times for her.

Organizing

Organizing events is another area where Bryn feels it is crucial to start with a good plan. She says she always asks herself, “What do I want to accomplish at this event?” That helps her to determine exactly how to design the event. She also again makes contingency plans about what to do if no one shows up, some people show up, or everyone shows up. Although she has never encountered the no-show scenario, she prepares herself for this possibility by writing out a list of next steps in the event of a non-event. Topping her list is calling Laura Lee, and contacting other Block Leaders for advice and encouragement.

Through her actions, Bryn has demonstrated the value of an organized neighborhood to many of her neighbors, including one quite close to home: her husband. Initially disinterested in the Block Leader program, he has become an enthusiastic believer. He became amazed and excited when he walked through the neighborhood with his children, and discovered that his neighbors would now smile and wave, knowing who he was through his wife’s efforts!

Strategies

When Sharon began organizing, she would leave flyers announcing herself and her purpose in advance of knocking on doors. That way, when she came around a few days later, neighbors were expecting her, and it took away some of the initial hesitation. Sharon advises new leaders to enlist a fellow leader, or a friend to walk with them when making their initial contacts.

Sharon has also developed thoughtful ways to be considerate of her neighbors. Noticing that many of her neighbors leave their shoes outside, she took to wearing slip on shoes when walking the block. Then if neighbors invited her in, she could quickly remove her shoes and continue the conversation.

New Neighbors

Sharon also says that the best way to begin your activities as a block leader is to really decide what you are after, so that you design a plan that achieves our purpose. In Sharon's case, since her neighborhood is well organized, she focuses on following through with new neighbors. She shares that without fail, new neighbors have been personally contacted within two weeks of moving in. In fact, Sharon says that if she sees them on moving day, she goes over and introduces herself and lets them know that she will be coming around to chat with them after they've settled in. When she does arrive to invite them into the neighborhood group, she brings a map and a listing of names and phone numbers of neighborhood residents.

New Technology

The advent of e-mail has provided another avenue of connectedness for Sharon's neighborhood. They have an active e-mail neighborhood network, where people can sign on to give information to their neighbors, or ask each other questions. This network has proven to be a great way to find a plumber, a mechanic, or a neighbor who likes to take nature walks. Sharon says that no one has ever used the network inappropriately and that virtually all of her neighbors have e-mail addresses.

Sharon is gratified to see how her efforts have paid off over the years. She says it's gone way beyond her initial plans for earthquake preparedness, and has snowballed to be a neighborhood organization which enables her neighbors to feel safer and more connected. She says it is fun to see her neighbors mingle and talk with people of various ages and cultures, and rewarding to know she has been a part of making this happen.

In Closing

As these neighborhood leaders have demonstrated, being a Block Leader is a fun and fulfilling way to make a difference in your neighborhood. The City of Cupertino is grateful to you for your efforts, as you move forward in organizing your neighborhood. Always remember that help is just a phone call away, and that you have City Staff and your fellow Block Leaders to turn to for advice and encouragement. As Mavis would say, "Just keep everlastingly at it!"