



Meet The Neighbors of the La France Area Neighbors Gathering

Don and Terry Vande Krol have created an innovative, yet simple way to improve their neighborhood and the community around them by inviting folks that live around the block to their home each week. Now a year old, this group has become known as the La France Area Neighbors Gathering.*

AmeriCorps VISTA Jenn-Marie Grant has had the opportunity to talk with a number of the neighbors from the La France Area Gathering to understand the significance of being a part of such a group .



(Who's YOUR Neighbor?)



MEET THE NEIGHBORS...

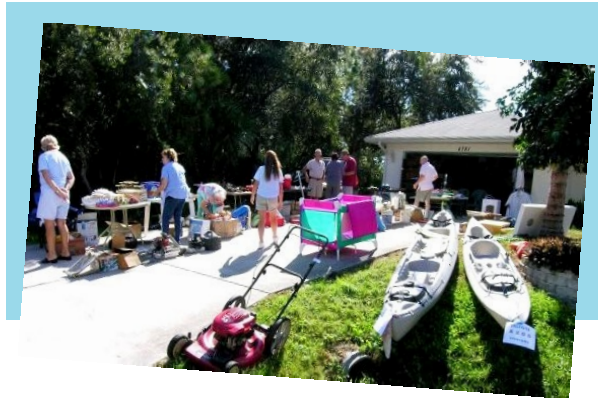
PETE W.

Where are you originally from?

A town called Wigan, UK.

Why did you come to North Port..?

I lived in NJ with my wife Shannon for a number of years then her parents moved down to Venice, FL to retire. And we moved down to be closer with them.



What do you do for work? What's your profession? Disabled right now, but a trained Professional Electronics Technician. ***How did you come to choose that line of work?*** I always liked gadgets and taking things apart, so when I was young I went to Night College for electrical training.

How did you become a part of the Neighbors Gathering on La France? We first met Don and Terry around October 2007. They invited us to come to their Halloween party. We thought it was unusual to be invited to someone's house that we don't know. However we decided to go and it was okay.

We then were invited to the gathering last year (2009). And we thought about going, this neighborhood is so close. **We figured it can't hurt to get to know a few people in the neighborhood.** So we went, and I think we went to the second one, and we've been going ever since.

What changes have you seen in your life and the lives of the other neighbors that participate in the gatherings? We have more company, see and talk to more people. As I've said before when I was in the hospital and my wife was away Ginny, (another La France area neighbor) looked after our two cats. Even after two weeks after I first went to a gathering, I was in the hospital, and Don and Terry visited me, even though I had barely known them. It was really a good feeling to have my neighbors there. We definitely have a better neighborhood now.

What do you think you contribute as a neighbor to the gatherings?

My knowledge and expertise as an electronics technician . We have a laser jet printer that Don sometimes uses to print out some of his material. If a neighbor has trouble with an electronic, I can usually fix it, no charge.

What do you think about Neighbors Gathering in the future?

I'm not sure where it will go. Ours can't get much bigger.

MEET THE NEIGHBORS...

Do you see the benefit in having other gatherings in North Port started?

It couldn't hurt. An offshoot could lead to more events and other things with neighbors from other neighborhoods.

Sum up Neighbors Gathering in one sentence.

A group of neighbors trying to build a community.

MARY S.

Where are you originally from?

Philadelphia, PA and the New Jersey area

How did you come to North Port?

We lived in Bradenton for a while moved back to NY for a few years. We lived in Venice too and even won the lottery. We loved living there. We came to North Port because of work, around 2004/2005.



What is your profession?

I was a health professional, nursing student and former ambulance volunteer.

How did you become a part of the Neighbors Gathering?

Don and Terry sent out invitations to go to the gathering. My husband Jim and daughter decided to go the first one, and I went to the second one.

What changes have you seen in your life and the lives of the other neighbors?

Lots of things.. Leah (one of the other neighbors in the group) opened up. She gave a bike to (my daughter) Lisa. **Everyone opened up. I opened up.** I opened up my home for the progressive dinner and for Easter too. I never thought to do that before. I kept to myself mostly, maybe saw the neighbors across the street. People are coming together.

What do you feel you contribute to the group?

"My big mouth.!" [laughs, then thinks] I think I'm the one to come to neighbor's house, if somebody's bothered about something they can talk to me.

Do you see the value starting other groups?

I certainly do. If anybody can do it, Don can.

Sum up the Neighbor Gathering in one sentence...

MEET THE NEIGHBORS...



I think the group has opened people up, and it's a loving group.

RON V.

Where are you originally from?

Central Falls, Rhode Island

How did you come to North Port?

I was serving in the military all over and I followed my wife to Sarasota because of her job (as a medical technologist for Lab Corp) after I retired.

What do you like about North Port?

It's quiet, nice.

How did you become a part of the Neighbors Gathering?

We had a "Lawn Fairy" who would come every week and cut the grass. [Because of heart and other medical problems, Ron is unable to do strenuous work.] At first it was our neighbors John and Danielle who took care of the lawn for us, later on it was Don, who would come after he'd mow his lawn, and swing by and mow mine. He and Terry invited us (Don and his wife Peggy) to their Halloween parties often.

Last year (2009), they invited us to the gathering, and Don said "Wouldn't you like to make our neighborhood a neighborhood?"

I thought about it, and it made sense to me, so we went.

What are the changes you've seen with yourself and others, since the gatherings started?

I don't worry about my house anymore. Before (the gatherings) I did. If I need something, I can pick up the phone and call. You're looking at a group of people who wouldn't give a second look at each other on the street before this happened. As for me, I didn't know any place existed outside of my house until this happened.



How do you feel about other groups like the Neighbors Gathering being started in other parts of North Port?

It's a great idea. There are people out there who are like we were, looking for something like this. They just want to learn how to approach the neighborhood.

What do you think you contribute to the gathering?

MEET THE NEIGHBORS...

My sense of humor. [laughs] I'm a good listener; I like to come to the events. I like to enjoy the things that we put together as a group. I can teach poker. Everybody can contribute.

Sum up the Neighbors' Gathering in one sentence...

"A wonderful opportunity for people that need other people to get together."



JOE C.

Where are you from originally?

Venice, FL

How was it living in Venice?

For me it was strange. I was given up as a kid, so I went from foster home to foster home a lot. I've traveled all over Florida, used to hitchhike a lot. I've lived in Lockwood Ridge, Wilkinson in Sarasota.

So how did you end up in North Port?

I met a girl. Moved down here. I've been living here for the past 19 years.

What's your profession?

I work with electronics, computers.

How did you become a part of the Neighbors Gatherings?

Don and Terry invited me to their Halloween parties starting about four or five years ago. We became fast friends soon after. I came to the first gathering and I've been coming to pretty much every one since.

What are some of the changes you've seen since the gatherings started?

I'm more social now. I was very anti-social before. Before they started we pretty much stayed to ourselves.

What do you think about other groups that would be similar to the group that you all participate now?

It's a fantastic idea. And I think that we show them how to do it by example. **We're a caring group and we care about each other.**

How do you contribute to the group?

I bring my sense of humor. We donated watermelons to the Salvation Army food pantry. I think God uses me bring to the table what I can. I bring wisdom [to the group].

MEET THE NEIGHBORS...

Sum up the Neighbors Gathering in one sentence...

"They're fantastic!"

LISA T.

Where are you originally from?

Philadelphia, PA

How did you come to North Port?

Long story short: Bad divorce. Moved in with the parents about 5 years ago.

How did you become a part of the Neighbors Gathering?

Don and Terry had always invited us to their holiday parties. We never got a chance to go. However, we did go to the neighbors gathering. We figured "What the hell." We didn't really know anybody here anyway.

What are some of the changes you've seen since you've been going to the gatherings?

People are more emotional, and more positive. Everybody here has given a piece of something.

Everybody wants to give something back. I've learned to trust again.

And Don's faith in humanity is so great. It's inspiring just to know him and Terry. As for the neighbors, it's almost like we've known each other forever. We help each other out. For instance Nicki (who currently lives with the Vande Kroels) and I have become good friends, [The gatherings] make you feel heartfelt warmth.



How do you feel you contribute to the group?

My energy, whatever good I have to release and share. If somebody asks me for help, I'll try my best to help them. I wouldn't have done that before.

What do you think about other groups that would be similar to what you've started?

I love the idea. And I would help Don and Terry in any way I can to help. I'll knock on doors, I'll do whatever I can.

Sum up the neighbors' gathering in one sentence...

"Wonderful support for one another and for mankind."

MEET THE NEIGHBORS...

NICKI

Originally from Tennessee Nicki has been staying with the Vande Krols for the last several weeks...

What things have changed for you since participating in the Gatherings?

It's renewed my faith in people. It has helped me emotionally, mentally. It broadened my horizons to new friends (referring to Lisa T.). We exercise together. If I need help or someone else does, I can ask a neighbor, and know the help is always there. We encourage one another. And I feel like I've been blessed. It's gratifying and it's great.

How do you feel you contribute you the Neighbors Gathering?

We help neighbors whenever we are able to. We've tried to help people in the area that are homeless. We've helped neighbors that need help with things in the house.

How do you feel about new groups like this one being started.?

I think it's great and I would definitely help Don and Terry start another one.



JON R.

Where are you originally from?

Casper, Wyoming

How did you come to North Port?

We moved down to be closer to (wife) Lea's parents. We used to rent down here, and we absolutely loved Siesta Key, but it was very expensive, so we bought three lots down here (in North Port).

What kind of changes have you seen since going to the gatherings?

A larger group of friends, a place where you can go and feel comfortable talking about personal things you care about. Before, we didn't know a lot of neighbors, now we have more connections to each other. If

somebody's in the hospital everybody helps and supports that person, and the needs of others.

MEET THE NEIGHBORS...

How did you become involved with the Neighbors Gathering?

Don and Terry sent out invites to us for Halloween, and summer parties before and we weren't able to attend. I can't exactly remember when we started going but we've probably been going for about eight months now. When I first starting going, I was a little shy, uncomfortable at first, but that soon changed as the weeks went on.

How do you feel about other gatherings doing the same thing that you guys are doing?

The original premise of Don starting this was to start a network of gatherings that would stay connected to one another. **I think the more neighborhood groups there are, the more it would be beneficial for the neighbors and the city as a whole.** I'd be more than willing to help start other ones.

What do you think you contribute to the Neighbors Gathering?

An open mind. Advice and compassion. Time and friendship. When you share things in a group like this, you become friends rather than just acquaintances.

Sum up the Neighbors Gathering in one sentence...

"A safe environment when you actually feel welcome and warm."

LEA W.

Where are you originally from?

I was born in New York, lived In Elmont. I lived coast-to-coast but I consider Wyoming home.

Why did you come down to North Port..?

We followed my parents down here. We rented in Venice in 2000 before we decided to stay permanently. We looked around for cheap housing and decided to go to North Port.

How did you become involved with the Neighbors Gathering?

Don and Terry's persistence.. [laughs] They invited us to holiday parties they've hosted in the past, but we never got around to going to any of them. Afterwards we were invited to the gathering and I realized what they were trying to do. I tend to be a hibernator, close up, and not share what goes on with my life with others.



MEET THE NEIGHBORS...

What kind of changes have you seen with yourself and others since going to the gatherings?

I've definitely opened up more, and I see more good in other people. There were more friendships being made. **People want to be your friend for altruistic reasons;** everyone just wants to help. It's helped me trust, open up and care about other people. I see other neighbors opening up and not being afraid to ask for help. There's a real desire for group interaction and spending time with each other. Usually a lot of people in general seem to rely on themselves. [The gatherings] have given people an avenue to allow another side to come out.



How do you feel about other gatherings in town that would do similar things that you guys have done?

The groups could potentially have a very positive effect in the community, the more participating the better. [Neighbors Gathering] could make neighborhoods healthier, safer, cleaner. It could give us a voice. More groups could mean more ideas being shared as our groups grows, and more skills and gifts being contributed to the network we're building. And I'm willing to help Don as much as I can.

How do you feel you contribute to the Neighbors Gathering?

Probably a sense of skepticism, a sense of honesty. The gathering has meant a lot to me and I feel safe there. I try to be a member and to share in the responsibility in the things we do as a group, such as bringing ideas to the table.

Sum up the Neighbors Gathering in one sentence?

"Neighbors' Gathering is a way to experience a true sense of neighborhood, having caring people nearby and friendships fostered through it."

MEET THE NEIGHBORS...



JIM S.

Where are you originally from?
Philadelphia.

What is your profession?
Management, retail, ceramic tile contractor, leader.

How did you come to North Port?
I originally came to Florida 30 years ago, and lived in Bradenton. Then I came back up North before settling down in Venice where I worked as a ceramic tile contractor, and eventually came here.

How did you become involved with the Neighbor's Gathering?

I was approached by Don and Terry before with holiday parties and it really wasn't my forté. Afterwards they invited me to a neighborhood meeting. At first we were a little suspicious thinking it was going to be some kind of Tupperware party, then soon afterwards, me and my wife realized [the gatherings] really were for the neighbors. Nobody knows anybody around here. If you do know somebody, it's because you caught them while they were mowing their lawn. This was about getting to know your neighbor, trusting someone to watch your house. You need to know your neighbors too. It's a security factor. If you know more people around you, you feel more secure.

What has changed for you and other neighbors since you started coming to the gatherings?

I look forward to coming and relaxing with my neighbors. I got people to joke around with. If Ron needs anything or just wants somebody to talk to, I can do that. You can pitch in and help each other. It's not 'You help me now here's \$20.' You don't ask for money or expect reimbursement. If I had a problem, I can get feedback from anybody in [the gathering.] **And I think everybody here realizes how much fun their neighbors are.**



Do you see a benefit in starting other groups such as this one?

Yes, I think it would broaden our group, and broaden our outlook on life.

How do you contribute the Neighbors Gathering?

Support. I bring the extra laugh needed in the group. I think once we explore an idea or an event we want to plan, I will help encourage the others in the group, so that more can join in.

Sum up the neighbors gathering in one sentence...

"A place where you can come relax and have a happy hour."

“Individual transformation is not the point; weaving and strengthening the fabric of community is a collective effort and starts from a shift in our mindset about our connectedness.”

~Peter Block

** To learn about how the Neighbors Gathering began, read our interview with Don Vande Krol [here](#).*

These stories were shared by the La France Area Neighbors with SCOPE's Neighborhood Team.

Through our Neighborhoods Initiative, SCOPE works with residents in Sarasota County neighborhoods to discover and activate community assets toward strengthening community, economy, and improving the quality of life for all residents.

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