

# 'Please Have A Seat' brings neighbors closer

Cities and towns in countries other than the U.S. have long been accustomed to plazas and village squares as popular places for people to sit with friends and family, make new acquaintances or just simply watch "the world stroll by," sometimes with a little happenstance street performance or music thrown in.

It's not unheard of abroad for bridges spanning rivers to have walkways with benches for pedestrians to just sit and watch the water.

A couple of years ago on a late autumn trip through several Eastern European capitals, in city after city, I found crowded outdoor dining tables despite the cool weather.

Restaurants offered their own color coordinated blankets for patrons to wrap around themselves.

Outdoor dining did begin to catch on around here some time ago, but I've yet to see a Northwest Indiana or Chicago restaurant keep outdoor patios open in the winter, much less offer a warm blanket for the diehards. Al fresco dining just wouldn't hold up in our subzero temperatures.

Once upon a time, Americans enjoyed sitting out on their front porches or gossiping over backyard fences.

Now, architecturally speaking, our homes' entrances are often

## MY TURN



### BY JANET MORAN

"statements" and rarely have front porches big enough for chairs. Rear yard fences are usually built 6-foot high for privacy. Along the way, we've become isolated from our neighbors.

But with a little nudge, neighbor-ing can spontaneously break out. It's happening in East Chicago with the "Please Have a Seat" program sponsored by Neighborhoods Inc. and funded by the Foundations of East Chicago and People's Bank. The Roxanna Civic Club and St. Stanislaus School have helped as well.

It came about when Neighborhoods Inc. director Keith Speaks read about an Oak Park, Ill. man who put out a couple of chairs, then a small, simple patio in his front yard so he could watch over his grandchildren.

Before long, neighbors started

drifting over, bringing their own chairs. Eventually, other front yard patios with seating showed up along his street.

Now it's catching on in East Chicago's southwest side neighborhood. This summer, 13 homeowners applied to participate in the Please Have a Seat Program. Decorative benches have been installed on new front yard mini patios.

Another seven are still available at Neighborhoods Inc.'s offices, where additional information on qualifications can be found.

The results in East Chicago have succeeded beyond expectations. Neighborhoods Inc. stays in touch with participating homeowners monthly. They've reported no bench or patio abuse by the public and say they've all gotten to know their neighbors a little bit better thanks to the opportunity to sit outside and talk.

Beyond neighborliness, the effort also promotes public safety. "One of my guiding principals in neighborhood revitalization is that the more you know your neighbors, the less crime will happen," Speaks explained. Other communities are now interested in the program.

The opinions are solely those of the writer. Contact her at [janetcopywrite@sbcglobal.net](mailto:janetcopywrite@sbcglobal.net).

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