

Recipe for a sweet street: Give the gift of community activism to your neighborhood

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As the holidays approach, I want to share my favorite recipe that helped transform Hillside Avenue, the street we live on.

When we moved here, there were three drug houses, a tipling house, two party houses, five empty lots, a boarded-up house, and two houses of prostitution. A bullet came through a window of our house after only a week. Later, a stolen car ended up stuck on our lawn. Still later, another drug house opened across the street.

Loud music and cussing were the norm. One summer we had six homicides in a two-block radius within two weeks, all this while our street was teeming with young children.

At Cottage Park, behind the alley, pubescent Kevin Brewer was gunned down, and drugs were regularly being sold by up to 50 Gangster Disciples. Half a block down from there, where Chicago Deli is today, Stoplight Clothing was a cover for another gang/drug operation.

Around the corner on Broadway, Santana's convenience store was another drug venue and the site of many shootings. It was overwhelming.

We got to work with our neighbors and revived our block club with continental breakfast meetings. We printed block club invitations in Hmong and had regular attendance from some renters. We watched each other's homes, encouraged and got friends to move on to the block, and mentored, tutored and gave kids odd jobs around our yards.

We had garbage pick-up days. We invited landlords to meetings and often called them in the middle of the night and harassed them when their tenants harassed us. We went to problem neighbors, in large groups, to complain politely, but firmly, about their behavior.

Together, we spontaneously loaded into cars to go the Fourth Precinct police office to make demands. We had the SAFE team and our council member attend block club meetings. We picketed Santana's convenience store and shut them down. In the middle of winter, we picketed the suburbanite business and then the residence of Stoplight Clothing's landlord and nailed our signs to his trees when we left. In the end, we had the City shut them down.

We sat for hours, in lawn chairs, across the street from our worst drug-dealing house. We called 911 in a phone tree. We called child protection to address child neglect. We called the City to address blight.

On National Night Out, we've had a full band, street basketball, tons of food, sidewalk chalk drawing, jump-rope contests, games and crafts for the kids. We had the City close our problem alley, and when a neighbor's child ran away, we mounted search parties. Three of us joined the Jordan Council and became president, treasurer and secretary.

Along the way, feelings were hurt over frank or clumsy exchanges on class, race, renters and kids; but we were committed to stay the course together and did, with minor fallout.

Sometimes we were intimidated, so we spread the risk around by never doing anything with less than eight-to-10 people. We've had ebbs and flows of enthusiasm. We lost two neighbors along the way who were overcome by the challenges.

Today, you will see no drug houses or prostitution houses on our block. It is not perfect; we've had two foreclosures and we have two other empty properties, but we're not done yet.

The Greater Metropolitan Housing Corporation built three new homes on our street five years ago. Several tired, boarded-up and problem properties have been rehabilitated. Nearby Cottage Park now has several new homes, and the green space is under reconstruction.

Looking for help with this recipe? Call my office at 612-673-2205 and I'll get you started with a referral to a Crime Prevention Specialist and a promise to attend your first block club meeting.

This recipe is your holiday gift. Combine ingredients, let simmer and enjoy. Happy Holidays!

Don Samuels is the Minneapolis Fifth Ward City Council Member. He welcomes reader responses to Don.Samuels@ci.minneapolis.mn.us.