

# Neighborhood Roots

THE TREES MAY FALL,  
BUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD  
REMAINS THE SAME.

By Maureen Egan

**T**hough we moved into this wooded neck of the woods on Halloween, and owls screech, bats flutter and deer appear like ghosts in our cars' headlights on the mostly unlit streets, we've never felt a spooky bone in this road's body. It felt right from the start. On our first night years ago, tired from the moving chores, my husband and I took our two kids, then 4 and 8, out for a quick trick-or-treat. With no streetlight at our end and no neighborhood kids to run around with, it could have been a gloomy occasion, but the night brightened once we saw what our new neighbors had done for us.

They were so excited to welcome children on the street after a long lull without any that they'd decorated just for us with orange lights, spiderwebs, sound effects and other perfectly creepy touches. Then, as we said our hellos and thank-yous, they insisted that we take all of their candy. It was the sweetest welcome ever, and I'm not talking about the chocolate.

As more people with children have moved in, an annual gathering before, during and after trick-or-treating has become a must-do. Walking along, my favorite stop was always at the home of one particular neighbor, who, well into her 80s, rigged herself and her front window so that the kids were sure — and the adults suspicious — that a ghost was floating across her living room just as we approached for trick-or-treating. That Emily was a tad out of breath when she handed out the candy was the only clue that our host was the ghost.

We've seen it with our own eyes — this street has a hold on people. Our next-door neighbors hopped from a house on one side of the street to a house on the other side long ago — and longevity is a matter of course. Living on the street 40-plus years isn't a bit unusual. Over the years, neighbors who have moved away (it happens even here) return for our picnics, and Halloween or Christmas parties.

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Perhaps there's something in the water; there's definitely something in the trees. Like so many streets in Stratford Hills, ours is shaded by a mix of outsized oaks, tulip poplars and loblolly pines. Even without hurricanes wreaking havoc, our houses and street have been smashed by trees more times than insurance companies want to remember. It's a baptism by tree — a local rite of passage. Move onto this street and



sooner or later, a tree will whack your house but good.

But a good ol' tree-smashing is our answer to the country barn-raising. We offer help and sympathy and chat a while. It's how we bond. Then our resident tree guy cleans up the mess. Add to that our share of feral-cat frenzies and rabid-raccoon dramas, not to mention the cat-, dog-, fish- and baby-sitting that my children did growing up, and it's a fully functional eco-and economic system in these parts.

The trees add seasonal color, but it's the neighbors who give our street local color. There's been heartache both shared and silent. There have been heroes and heels. Having a mix of generations on the street puts things in perspective. Now that my children live elsewhere, I love quick glimpses of cute kids that I have no responsibility for. And the older crowd continues to inspire.

Louise led the charge to clean the James and keep an expressway from along the river. Jim remembers the flu epidemic of 1918, but post-Isabel, he wasn't inclined to let a tree blocking the road in front of his house stop him from getting out. He drove his Buick on top of a retaining wall in front of his house and showed us young-uns how to roll. Older and wiser at 99, he was the first one off the street after Irene. We should have asked him to get us ice.

Though our little road is barely more than a half-mile long, it confounds both GPS and UPS, which only increases my admiration for it. My husband always wanted to live on Maple Street or something along those sylvan lines. Our street has the trees, in this rolling, river-y area, so 16 years ago, when we found this one-owner, well-loved house with low mileage and high-impact trees, we put down our Richmond roots. How lucky for us that we've matured alongside the people planted here. It will take more than a hurricane or two to uproot us.