

From Neighbor To Neighbor

My name is Brayden, I have grown up in Brantford all my life, I go to school in Brantford, I have friends in Brantford, everything I know is in Brantford, so it was weird just how long it took me to realize all the problems outside my own little world. I remember being a kid, feeling like I could get away with anything, that growing up was just a way to get into more fun and exciting things. In a way that is still what I look for, just any sort of excitement. Not because I'm having so much fun that I've gotten bored of all the ways to have fun, but because I feel so bogged down by all the issues in my world and THE world, because in a way they feel like different things. I don't remember when it happened but there came a point where all the problems that we as a civilization are facing just became more prominent. Paired with the general uncertainties of growing into adulthood; the lingering questions, "Am I ready?", "What if I can't handle being grown up, you know, being an adult?". My Dad tells me that at the end of the day, no one is ready, but once we are out there we have nothing else to do but get up and get started, start our lives. I always just ignored him. You know it's kinda what teenagers do, no matter how cheesy or basic as that is. It's hard taking in this critical information when you sit around being cynical all day, and I am quite cynical, or at least was. Things took a turn not too long ago, just changed how I viewed problems and people, something just made it all a little easier.

I remember starting High School, I was scared out of my mind, just completely ridden with anxiety. All that anxiety dissipated quickly though, even High School went quickly. I just

started grade twelve, and it doesn't feel any different than the previous three years, just going through the motions; walking to school, staying at school; walking home. I did this for the first couple weeks with no change, until one day I came home and saw my Mom talking to what I recognized as a neighbor.

"What are you guys talking about?" I asked.

"Oh nothing really, just chatting." the neighbor quickly interjected

I could tell this wasn't really true based on my mothers expression but just accepted it as my neighbor walked off.

"Oh that's just terrible." My mother exclaimed. "Brayden, He just told me his Son passed away."

After that I became completely uncomfortable. I mean we barely even knew the guy and he was telling us all about this majorly personal thing, I don't know, it just felt weird.

"Well I hope he's just doing all right." My mother points out

I thought about this neighbor the next couple of nights, his problems in a way shone a light on the idea of problems; we all got them, big and small they eat away at us. I couldn't imagine the heartbreak he was going through.

I saw him a couple more times throughout the week, mowing the lawn, when he was gardening, wandering the neighborhood, sitting on his porch. I think I felt bad but something simply just compelled me to ask how he was doing.

So I did, "Hey, my Mom told me what happened, I just wanted to see how you're doing?"

"About as good as I can be." he said, letting out a weak smile.

"I hope you don't mind me wondering, but uhm, how did it happen?" I asked, curiously

“It was Cancer, yeah, you know he was suffering a while, just passed over the summer” he responded.

“I didn’t even know another kid was living here, wish I got to know him.” I said, trying to uncomfortably lighten the mood.

“Yeah me too, he didn’t come around much, after the divorce his mother didn’t really want him to see me.”

I didn’t want to pry or seem like I was poking buttons, but he seemed friendly enough so I asked why: “Addiction, I was a mess for a while but in November I’ll officially be seven years clean.”

Drugs seem to be an all too familiar problem, some of my friends' parents struggled, some people I know have lost parents, some have even lost their own lives. I’ve never wanted to try drugs myself, just seems like this monster that follows you around, destroys everything in its wake.

After that, I talked to my neighbor after school nearly everyday, and found out his name, which is Mike by the way. We talked about his son, his recovery journey, and honestly, just his story. He was inspiring, he faced so much and is still facing so much. He told me he almost slipped after his son died, he was making so much progress, but almost crumbled, slipped, fell down to the bottom of the ladder, sorry, he uses a lot of climbing metaphors, but really they get his point across. Simply put, recovery is so much more of a journey than I could have ever expected.

As the weeks went by I noticed more and more of my neighbors stepping out of their way to talk to Mike, it sort of just became part of my schedule, it felt weird not greeting him as I walked by his house. I mean, through Mike me and my family seemed to be connecting to people all around the block. I've lived on the same street my entire life and have only ever exchanged friendly smiles and nods to my neighbors. All it took was one guy who was willing to talk, talk about his life, his problems, it took someone friendly, someone to start that first conversation.

In the four months since I've met Mike, I've learned all about my neighbors. Darlene lives next door, she has three kids, is an accountant, and her youngest just started kindergarten. The Mitchells live across the street, Mike lives on the corner, and Ethan lives in the rental property down the block, he just finished business school and has started working. I know everybody, it feels like a skill, I'm just full of knowledge on all the people that live here; Why, because they are my neighbors, they are part of my community.

I also learned that all these people have problems, they struggle, some of these problems are bigger than others but each and every one of them are problems, they create the struggle in our life. Empathy feels like the right word, being empathetic for others, recognizing that everyone struggles makes dealing with my own problems a little easier.

We received a letter on the door this morning, an invitation, it read:

Hey, I'm having a barbeque at my place on the 9th at 1:00pm. Feel free to come, there will be food, drink, and the pool is open for those interested, Sincerely, Mike

We talked with everybody on the street, and it seems like the barbeque will be a real hit.

