

One Simple Way to Minister God's Love to Your Neighbor

Kristin Schell put an ordinary picnic table, painted a bright turquoise, in her front yard. It was in a simple, impulsive effort to meet neighbors, but Kristin's small idea has launched a nationwide gathering of #FrontYardPeople. Here's Kristin's story of the first turquoise table, which has sparked neighborly love across the US.

Our neighbor Elizabeth, who's in her 80s, walked her dog, Clyde, down our street three times a day. Before my turquoise table, I didn't know this about Elizabeth. In fact, I knew precious little about her or her husband, even though our garage doors face each other. Sure, we would wave and strike up casual conversations on Thursday mornings as we pulled trash bins to the curb of our cul-de-sac. But that was about it. And I was ready for more.

I strategically placed my freshly painted turquoise table (a simple wooden picnic table in a friendly shade of blue) under a shade tree in my front yard. Then I began taking my everyday projects outside, sitting down at the table at all hours of the day. It wasn't long before I noticed a rhythm and cadence to the neighborhood. I learned the running habits of one neighbor, recognized the coming and goings of families, and noted the dog-walking schedule of my neighbor Elizabeth.

Our church relationships had shown me the value of the phrase "gather small and love deep" long before I applied it to my neighborhood. Small groups at church were a no-brainer. But what about my front yard? My turquoise table proved the perfect meeting venue for four to six people—a small gathering. And as we sat at that table, facing each other and sitting side by side, it allowed for intimacy to listen and enjoy real conversations. "Gather small and love deep" came to

life in my own front yard in small, ordinary moments.

At first, I would ask myself, "Is it enough?" Is it enough to know my neighbors by name? To spend an hour simply having coffee with only a handful of people? Does it matter if all I do is nod my head with pursed lips and a wrinkled brow while a friend shares her heart? Is it enough to wave at the jogger? With the magnitude of problems in the world, do these small gatherings at the table matter? Did it matter to God?

It took a while for my heart to catch up to my head. My impulsive side—you know, the one that painted the picnic table turquoise and plopped it in the front yard—believed without a doubt that being present in the front yard mattered. My mind, however, required the gift of faith to keep sitting at the table, to keep loving my neighbors in this small way. I eventually realized God was whispering to me all the while, "It matters to Me. When you show up, I'm at work."

Hospitality always feels small when you hold it in your hands. It's not until you let it go, release like an offering, that you see how extravagant and hallowed it has become. Sometimes I don't "feel" anything happening, which in our quick-fix society also feels a lot like failure. You see, building community—investing in the lives right in front of u—requires a longer view. Eugene Peterson refers to this type of relationship building as "a long obedience in the same direction."

One day, inspired by Elizabeth and the other dog-walkers, I filled two dog bowls with water and set them next to the turquoise table. I pointed out the water bowls to Elizabeth the next time she and Clyde walked by. She sat down at the table with me while Clyde lapped up the water. She said Clyde had been sick and was recovering from surgery. The veterinarian gave him a good prognosis, but he tired more quickly on their walks. Elizabeth shared how grateful she was for a place to sit in the shade and rest with Clyde.

After three years of talking with Elizabeth on her walks with Clyde, we've come to know each other. We share stories and prayers for health and family members. And we keep a good eye out for one another. If I don't see her out walking Clyde, I ring her doorbell and say, "I'm checking on you." It's simple. And it started with the small act of noticing and being present.

God is teaching me the ministry of presence through a crazy blue picnic table. I didn't make drastic changes to my schedule—I'm still the queen of crazy. But I've come to savor these moments of being outside and available at the turquoise table. My presence says to anyone who passes by, and to God too, "I'm available." It's a promise. It's an extension of the yes I said when I put out the table. The beauty of my turquoise table is its simplicity. It is an easy way to be present and available to listen.

I had it backward for so long. I thought I had to master the art of fancy French cooking to make people feel welcome. I thought hospitality was about entertaining and preparing a fine feast. But now I see the foundation of hospitality is simply being present and offering a listening ear, gathering small and loving deep. True hospitality thrives in humble venues—like a picnic table plopped under your front-yard shade tree.

*Adapted from The Turquoise Table: Finding Community and Connection in Your Own Front Yard by **Kristin Schell** © 2017 Thomas Nelson, **Kristin Schell** is an established speaker and blogger on the subjects of food, faith, and hospitality. As founder of the Turquoise Table and Front Yard People movement, Kristin travels the country speaking at conferences and events with an encouraging word on how to open our lives and homes to others. She lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband, Tony, and their four children. Kristin's first book is The Turquoise Table: Finding Community and Connection in Your Own Front Yard. More at .*