

# There's more to 'burbs than little boxes of tickytacky

LYNNE MELCOMBE

**W**hen we moved to the suburbs, a mere 25 minutes from downtown Vancouver, several acquaintances stopped phoning, never visiting. A few years later a friend, anticipating an imminent move to the burbs, expressed her fear that she might lose her individuality there and turn into a suburb Wife. Last summer, one city-dwelling woman I had the impression that all suburbanites were obsessed with towels so neatly stacked in the linen cupboard that the pipes (apparently compulsory in the burbs) ran into each other. Another thought me atypical for not knowing that suburban couples "swing" (bed-hop with each others' spouses). I have to admit, I've done my share of burb-bashing. I grew up in a suburb, so I always thought of it as my prerogative. After spending most of my life in one of these towns that sprung up in the late '50s, I finished high school and couldn't get out of it enough. To me, my surroundings represented all that's vacuous about North American life: houses that all look the same, the preoccupation with material goods, the egotricity of people who tut-tut at the evening news without doing anything to prove the world beyond their own backyards. After I left, I vowed to live in the city, the country, but never again in a suburb. I made good on that promise for about 15 years. Then, tired of throwing an increasing amount of money down the toilet of renting, sick of the whims of landlords, and exhausted by the demands of finding a home for a family that included children and animals, my husband and I accepted my mother's offer to help with a down payment and began looking at real estate. The city was out: too expensive. The country was out: too distant from jobs and friends. The suburbs, I rationalized, would be a temporary measure, a stepping stone. Certainly, by the time the children reached school age... that was six years ago. My son is in grade

two now, my daughter in kindergarten, and we're not going anywhere. That's partly because we still don't have the money to increase our mortgage with a move to the city, and we're still tied to jobs and friends.

But in the last couple of years, I've realized that there's more to it than that. Reluctantly, I've grown to like it here.

On the outside, our townhouse looks like no less than 50 others. But inside, every spot on the carpet or mark on the wall tells a family story. As time goes by and our circumstances improve we seize opportunities to purchase things we like. But never at the expense of the most precious commodity we have: time.

It's tempting to distance ourselves from the tragedies of life around the globe by focusing only on our own backyard. But after six years here I've met precious few people who do that.

Actually, I don't know which suburb everybody's criticizing, but it ain't the one I live in. The typecast of the small-minded, self-preoccupied suburbanite seems to be formed around no greater a grain of truth than the usual caricatures of bubble-brained blonds or nitwit Newfies.

Suburban life never has been as vacuous as its critics suggest. When I was small, the woman next door literally took over the running of our household in addition to her own when my mother became very ill. In return, she requested only that my mother do the same for someone else someday.

Almost every article of clothing my siblings and I wore as children came to us via the generosity of neighbors whose children outgrew them. As we grew, the clothes were passed on again.

Less than 24 hours after my father died, friends from across town appeared on our doorstep bearing food and warm hugs. Our house was filled for months with flowers.

Memories of my suburban childhood contain as many of these episodes of mutual interdependence and support as recollections of the neighbor's backyard parties or mindless chats over the fence.

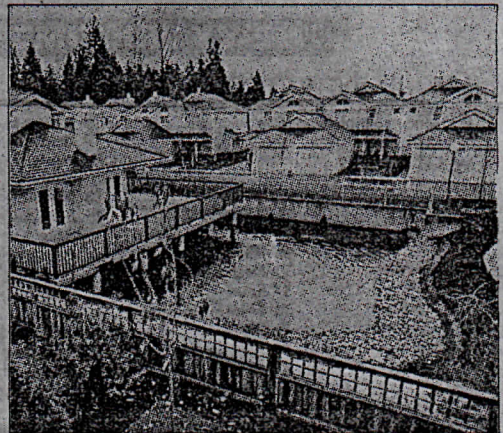
As I write this, I have no voice. My sinuses are blocked, both eyes are infected and the raging pain encompassing my scalp, neck and face will probably return before it's time to take more Tylenol.

Like most mothers of young children, I



Sun files

REAL LIFE in the 'burbs is a far cry from the madcap antics in the movie of the same name (above) starring (from left) Corey Feldman, Tom Hanks, Wendy Schaal, Bruce Dern and (reclining) Rick Ducommun, and a good deal more than the uniformity suggested by nearly identical streets and homes (right)



don't have time to be sick. Or, I wouldn't, save for neighbors who drive my children to school in the morning, bring them home in the afternoon, invite them over to play so I can sleep, and ask if they can pick up anything for me at the grocery store.

They don't make these offers because they have nothing better to do. Every one of them has two or three children, most work and/or study 20 or more hours a week, and all struggle to maintain healthy relationships with spouses, extended family and friends.

Helping out sick neighbors is not their only unpaid act of goodwill. Several of the mothers are actively involved in their children's school. In the park the other day, I met the president of the ecological society keeping watch as the coho waited for the creek water to rise so they could swim to their protected spawning area.

During the recent municipal elections, I was amazed at the volunteer hours the candidates had typically put in. They've coached sports, visited the terminally ill and worked with the Special Olympics. They've lobbied for park facilities, sat on

the library board and answered phones at the crisis centre.

And, like the suburban woman who helped my mother 35 years ago, and the women who are ferrying my kids back and forth while I'm sick in bed, they've asked for nothing in return.

Life in suburbia is not the utopian existence it was sold as in the '50 and '60s. There are too many cars, too little green space, and too few activities for young people.

But these problems result more from the shortsightedness of developers than residents who arrange car pools, lobby for youth facilities, organize park clean-ups and generally make the world a better place every day without thinking twice about it.

With this in mind, the next time I read anything in which the author dismisses an entire group of people on the basis of where they live, I'll follow the precedent I set a few weeks ago: I'll put their words in the blue box so they can be recycled into something, well, useful. ♦

Lynne Melcombe is a Port Moody writer.

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