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Full Circle

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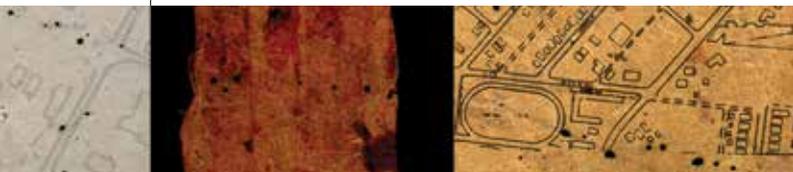
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STORYTELLER: Mary Jo Dahm

OLD NORTH DAYTON

I was born in Old North Dayton to my fabulous mother and father. I have eight brothers and two sisters, so there were eleven of us living in a three-bedroom house with one bathroom, next to the bakery. And the ironic thing is that I moved back to Old North Dayton three years ago, and I live catty-corner from where I grew up.

WE HAD QUITE A VARIETY OF PEOPLE. WE HAD STORES ON EVERY CORNER. YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO DRIVE ANYWHERE. You wanted some clothes, you went down to Kirk's, and we had groceries stores, and we had the pizza houses. That I miss. That I miss a lot. We had our local bars that guys, you know, the fathers would go there and have their beer.



It was nice. I miss that neighborly stuff—really truly. If you ran out of a cup of sugar, you could go next door and borrow a cup of sugar. The door was always open. You just didn't think about anybody stealing from you. You didn't think anybody was evil. North Dayton has changed a lot, but I still feel safe there.

I went to St. Joseph Commercial High School to be a secretary, and I graduated in '61. You know, back then, you went to school, you got a job, you lived with your mother until you met someone and married them and moved out. But I was the real renegade of the family, because I moved out of the house early and actually spent a few years in Texas. When I was thinking about moving, a friend told me, "Go. You'll always have home. Go."

ONE THING I'VE LEARNED IN MY LIFE: TELL GOD YOUR PLANS, AND HE'LL LAUGH AT YOU. I can't tell you how many times in my life that I figured how the rest of my life was gonna be. And I won't even do that now, at age 73.

Here I am—after living so far away and moving back to the other side of Dayton—right back in my old neighborhood. I'm in an apartment now, but everybody thinks what's really funny is if I would rent my old house. I have some family in the neighborhood, so my kids say, "Don't you

wanna move somewhere?" I say, "No, I'm perfectly happy where I am and with what I have, and I feel blessed that I have the good neighbors that I have." You can't move into a new apartment complex and get that.

ONE TIME, WHEN I WAS FEELING UNDER THE WEATHER, MY MAILMAN SAW THAT I HAD LEFT MY KEY IN THE DOOR, SO HE CALLED THE POLICE TO COME CHECK ON ME. HOW MANY MAILMEN WOULD DO THAT? He's such a sweetie, and he takes good care of me. Another time, my next-door neighbor Victor heard me hammering a nail into the wall so I could hang a picture, and he came over to check on me, just to make sure everything was okay. They take care of me so well.

Even outside of my apartment complex, I have some very good neighbors—many of them are immigrants. I have always been a Catholic, and I don't agree with many parts of the Koran, so I want to sit down and talk about that with some of my Muslim neighbors. But, the hardest thing is to quit grouping people. You have to meet each individual. There are so many good people out there.

One day, I was going to a party, and I was carrying a heavy Crock-Pot, and I set it down on the sidewalk to take a break before I got to the car to open the trunk. And all of a sudden,

this guy runs across the street, saying, "Let me help you with that!" So he took it. I opened the trunk of my car and he put it in. I had my little wallet right in my hand, so I took a couple dollars out to give to him. So I said, "Thank you so much. Here," and he goes, "No, no! We're neighbors! I own the store there now. We're neighbors. You need help, I'll help you. I need help, you help me." His name's Zyair, and I know he's married, has a couple little kids, and runs the Muslim grocery across the street.

Whenever I see my neighbors walking outside, I'll always say "hello" or "good morning." Some of them don't usually respond, but I'll keep saying it every time. But, one day, this woman called me over, and she spoke not-good English, but she asked me if I lived there alone, and I said yes, I have children, and I've been a widow for many years. So, she said, "You come for coffee sometime?" And I said, "Sure! Yeah."

So, even while the Koran bothers me, now there are two Muslims there that I could be very good friends with. I hope that, you know, if we keep talking, that we can try to understand each other. Again, you've got to take each person individually. You can't group 'em together. There's good and there's bad.

Old North Dayton has changed a lot, but then so has the world. It's a whole different world, and I'm sure, because my mother used to say, "Oh, for the good ol' days," that when you're my age, you're going to be telling someone, "Well, when we grew up, it was so much better than it is now."

But, I've had a good life. If God took me tomorrow, I would be happy. (Not really, because my apartment is a mess right now, and I've got to mop my floor! But, other than that...) I've had a good life, even if it hasn't always gone as planned. I've always told my kids, tell God your plans, and He'll have a good laugh. I even have a date this weekend with a guy I had a crush on in seventh grade. Can you believe that?

BOY, GOD MUST BE LAUGHING.