

## A FRANK DISCUSSION ABOUT NEIGHBORS

By Mike Farragher

When your cul de sac has this many older folks on it, your mind goes to the worst case scenario each time an ambulance blocks your driveway as it did this morning. Your heart sinks as you watch the worried and bewildered wife scurry in the direction of the gurney that was raised into the back of the rig. Your throat congeals into a lump when she returns as a widow a few hours later, eyes red and puffy. Our block is quiet and feels empty without our good friend and neighbor Frank Veltre.

Frank was the custodian of our local school for decades and though he may have retired a while back, he was the kind of guy with energy to burn and was always working with his hands. Despite being 76, he was always up on a ladder or tending to the immaculate flower beds on his small patch of greenery. You wouldn't be long on your lawn putting patio furniture together before he'd shoot over with a tool box to lend a helping hand. That's just the kind of guy Frank was.

Being retired, he had nothing but time to talk to you when you pulled into the driveway. This leisurely relationship with the clock was often at odds with the hectic schedule of the parent taxi driver/on-the-go writer and businessman. Truth be told, there were times you either didn't have time or were not in the mood for conversation. Frank would often approach the driveway when I pulled in and I'd smile gamely, pointing to the wireless headset in the ear when I was on a call. When time was especially tight, I'd put the thing in my ear when I was rounding the block, just to avoid conversation. Before long, he wouldn't even bother coming over; he'd just wave from a distance and ask for the family. I'm left with a deep sense of regret and shame about that.

It's certainly a far cry from how neighbors interact with one another in Athenry, County Galway, where my dad grew up. As we left Uncle Mattie's house and walked down the hill to Granny Farragher's a few houses away, we'd always meet a few cars ambling up the busy street. Drivers would wave and nod their head, even if they didn't know you.

The citizens of rural Ballylanders were just as welcoming. I remember a postman delivering Granny Cleary's mail, who would smile when you told him who you were. "Yerra, amn't I the one that delivers those letters to yer granny from the Yanks every month? She always looks forward to those. Ye brighten herself's day," he would say before turning to Granny and discussing the gossip from every house along his route. Imagine a mail carrier doing that over here? He'd be sued for slander!

When my cousin Linda got married in Athenry, I was struck by this custom of bonfire lighting that the whole town seemed to turn out for. Turf and wood fires were lit in driveways as her limousine and motorcade snaked through the narrow boreens, neighbors waving enthusiastically as we waved through the window. The dark turf smoke would lick the blackberry vines that clung to the stone walls across the street, creating a canopy of well wishes for the newly minted couple.

I also have fond memories of Granny Farragher pouring mugs of tea and high glasses of orange soda without complaint as half the town would parade through her door to see Mick and his family from America. Michael John Rabbitte, the Costellos, Mary Furey, and a cast of lovely characters would recount stories from their youth while lamenting over those that had passed on. No matter how far away my father lived, he was always part of that community.

Some folks might say that this is the Ireland of yesteryear, with most younger folks retreating into their Ipod earbuds the same way they do over there. I hope that's not the case. It's sad that we only get together in community nowadays when a terrorist attacks or when a flood from a hurricane turns us all out in the street. We claim to be connected to hundreds of people, yet we know deep down that a Facebook message here and there does not make you related to the people in your community. I should know better than that because it's especially inexcusable for a writer to keep the warm conversation of a neighbor at bay. Writers are supposed to be observant and curiously engaged in our fellow man as we scribble our take on life. When did I forget that?

I look over at the mound of flowers covering Frank's grave as I walk the dog today. I stop and say three prayers: one for his kind soul, one for answers on how to inject warm Irish hospitality into this neighborhood, and another one to ward off ambulances visiting our cul de sac for the foreseeable future.

Mike Farragher's collection of essays, *This Is Your Brain on Shamrocks*, is available on [www.thisisyourbrainonshamrocks.com](http://www.thisisyourbrainonshamrocks.com)