

## *The Posture of a Neighbor: Building Relationships through Story*

Kathryn Van Zanen  
*Calvin College*

During my sophomore year at Calvin College on the eastern reaches of Grand Rapids, Michigan, I transitioned from the residence halls, alive with energetic eighteen-year-olds, to a creaky century-old parsonage on the west side of Eastern Avenue, down which emergency vehicles make nightly pilgrimages and sirens provide the evening soundtrack. I was living in Project Neighborhood, six homes gathered under the banners of intentional living, community engagement, and Calvin College residence life. The program attracts justice-minded students and mentors; each house comprises a covenant that centers on concerns of, among others, Christian discipleship, environmental sustainability, local activism, and food justice. The most significant component, though, is the commitment each house makes to serve its neighborhood in partnership with a local organization. My house, Peniel, which means “to see the face of God,” received support from Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, so we worshipped there on the occasional Sunday, spent a few Saturdays at the food truck, and participated in its tutoring program on Thursday nights.

The program paired Eastern Avenue congregants with students in the surrounding neighborhood, one in which approximately one-third of the population falls below the federal poverty line and just 12.1% hold more than a high school education (Community Research Institute 2013). “Tutoring” involved dinner in the church fellowship hall with all the other tutors, mostly white, and their students, mostly African-American, followed by an hour spent one-on-one with my student in some corner of the building, working through class assignments together. The tutoring coordinator assigned students to each volunteer, and I put in a request for a Spanish-speaking student. I hoped to practice my language skills with an adorable elementary schooler from the surrounding area. I pictured a pig-tailed eight-year-old lighting up when I sat down next to her for the evening meal. Instead, I was assigned to Nikia<sup>1</sup>, a high school senior who had once lived in the neighborhood. She had moved several times in the interim and was now attending a Northeast side high school while living a thirty-minute bus ride south of the church, but she still came.

She showed up late to dinner, snapping her gum and gossiping with her cousin while I did my best to seem cool. She seemed amused by my earnestness. Nikia and her cousins had been coming to tutoring since they were in elementary school. Previous tutors had struggled to convince her to stay in school, particularly during a period of familial strife, but I was told she was now determined to graduate. *She’s had a few rough patches*, the director told me, *but she’s grown up a lot. You’ll like her.*

Truthfully, I wasn’t so confident that *she* would like *me*. I’d been excited about moving into Peniel, living out my values for social justice and community engagement, which all seemed very vegetarian chic. But interacting with other people concerned me a fair bit more than the arduousness of buying locally grown vegetables. As a relatively introverted child, I never developed much in the way of charisma or social grace. Now, in our mandated, house-wide, service-learning program, I encountered the awkwardness of meeting new people, my discomfort further exacerbated by socioeconomic and racial differences. My housemates had drawn the

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed.

names of affectionate elementary schoolers whose homework involved drawing pictures and simple math activities. They were cute, and they adored their tutors. At seventeen, just two years my junior, Nikia was sharp enough to see through my air of confidence to the underlying anxiety. I felt woefully unqualified to offer her any sort of help and wildly uncool in my attempts to keep us on track with her school syllabi. Nikia was bright, spirited, loyal, and no-nonsense. I was nervous.

All went relatively well for the first few weeks, and I developed confidence as we warmed up to one another. Having deemed my earlier worries overblown, and having loosened up about actually accomplishing homework during our hour and a half together, I allowed my conversations with Nikia to drift from *The Canterbury Tales* to our own stories. I talked a little bit about growing up on the Southeast side, about living with four girls in an intentional community, and about my experience as a college student. She talked about her high school, her cousins, and the drama native to twelfth grade. I felt a little awkward, still, but we did okay. She was visibly patient with me, blowing bubbles with her gum while she waited for me to relax.

One Thursday night, halfway through a half-hearted government assignment, a casual question about where Nikia's mom worked snowballed into an hour-long tour of her family history. I knew, of course, that her family was not the nuclear unit I'd grown up in—when describing her home life, she mentioned mostly her grandmother and aunts. I knew her life wasn't easy. I understood, more or less, the population Eastern Avenue's tutoring program was designed to serve. But surmising the situation from overheard gossip and the comments of other adults did not affect me like hearing it from Nikia's lips. She mapped out the family tree: A brother, incarcerated, whose girlfriend had just revealed her pregnancy by another man. A father with a history of substance abuse and disappearance. An overworked mother, whose own mother did much of the extended family's childcare. A series of moves that had almost pulled Nikia out of school for good. The teachers who had convinced her to stay.

Nikia was tough—she threatened to fight her best friend's bullies and was fiercely protective of her younger cousins; she fought to make the dean's list in a school with a dismal graduation rate. So when she told me she struggled, I knew it was true, and I also knew that she trusted me. She would make snarky comments about her English teacher and complain about her online classes. She'd tease me, and I could tell she watched for my reaction. We circled each other, testing out questions, speaking lightly and waiting for a response, but when she told me about almost dropping out of high school, she broke her fighting stance. When she shared the private shame and struggles of her family, she spoke across the space between us.

That night, Nikia had to run to catch her bus and I was late to meet my housemates for the walk home from church. When they asked how my night had gone, I beamed. *We just talked*, I said. We'd left Nikia's homework largely undone, but that didn't matter. The facts and details of the stories we told didn't matter. Earning Nikia's trust mattered. Her display of honesty and vulnerability marked the most powerful moment of my Project Neighborhood experience. When she told me about herself, she implicitly described all the ways we were different, realities I'd been afraid to acknowledge. Sharing our experiences forged a deeper connection between us, and that gave me hope.

I'm preparing to graduate from Calvin College with an English degree, two years after leaving Project Neighborhood and moving several blocks west of that creaky old house and the church down the street. From what I know, Nikia has recently finished her freshman year at a university just north of here, on her way to a Bachelor's in Social Work or Psychology. We talked a lot about community in my Project Neighborhood seminar and around the Peniel kitchen

table, and we read articles for class about good practices of racial reconciliation and social justice and civic engagement. I carry those with me into new college houses and plan to take them much further. But it was from my twelfth-grade tutee that I learned the strongest lesson of that year: something fresh about the power of stories to bring people together, to confer friendship, to bestow trust. I learned something about telling them with humility and bravery. I had limited our interactions out of fear that we were too different; we wouldn't have enough to say to one another. But Nikia risked friendship to invite me into her life, and though I've long since forgotten the details of our class readings, I hold onto her example of honesty, vulnerability, and courage. She showed me how to be both tough and tender—the posture of a neighbor and a friend.

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### References

Community Research Institute. 2013. "Baxter Community Profile." *Johnson Center of Grand Valley State University*. <http://cridata.org/GeoProfile.aspx?type=31&loc=2634000031003>.