



Village People

Moving into a new house, **Roz Bellamy** found an unexpected community of love.

WHEN RACHEL AND I moved to Melbourne from Sydney, we moved to the well-to-do suburb of Armadale rather than one of the hip northern suburbs known for being diverse or queer-friendly. It turned out to be cheaper to rent an apartment among mansions than it was to rent anything in the grungy inner-city suburbs.

But after a decade on those leafy streets, we moved to Clifton Hill. During our first week in the suburb, I spent hours on the verandah getting to know our neighbours.

One of our friends who was helping us get settled cornered me in the hallway after a particularly long chat with a neighbour.

“Is this normal?” she asked.

“Is what normal?”

“That your neighbours are so friendly. It just seems so weird to me.”

It was weird to me, too, but in a pleasant way. I can recall the precise details of the conversations I’d had with our neighbours in Armadale, since they were so rare. Once, we spoke to some neighbours about an escapee chicken. Another time, it was a conversation with a spiritual neighbour about India. We comforted a mother from the country who was feeling nervous as she helped her daughter move into the apartment opposite. This was the extent of our contact, apart from the visits from the police due to someone who had a tendency to streak from the comfort of the trees outside our apartment block.

In Clifton Hill, the conversations are frequent and robust. We’ve been invited to parties, swapped gifts in the holiday season, and even traded food items.

One evening, a charity collector for the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre knocked on our door. As I talked to her, she marvelled about the neighbourhood. “Everyone in your area

wants to know about the research we are doing at Peter Mac,” she told me. “People actually want to hear about the science, which I haven’t encountered anywhere else.”

Another evening, we met a man who has lived in the area for decades. He told us his recollections of the suburb over the years. He recalled the Hoddle Street massacre in 1987, and the way that people rallied together afterwards.

As one of our neighbours said to us recently, “When I moved here, it felt like coming home.”

People affectionately refer to Clifton Hill as “the village”. It is the first suburb I have ever lived in where I have known all of my neighbours and have been encouraged to turn to them – whether I have locked myself out of the house or am having a rough week. I gladly took up this offer when I locked myself out one cold day, ending up in my neighbour’s living room, being served fair-trade tea, offered socks to keep my feet warm and given copies of *The New Philosopher* to read.

I am genuinely excited to run into my neighbours. Nothing has helped me get to know them more than walking our two very noticeable greyhounds, Rosie and Opal, around the streets.

People stop me and my wife to have long philosophical or political conversations about the racing industry, animal rights, or my dogs’ athletic achievements. For two people who tend to be introverted and a bit reclusive, the community’s interest and connection with our dogs has helped us to build a further sense of belonging.

This is the first area where I have felt out, proud and able to be myself.

During the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, Rachel and I put Menorah stickers on our front window. They were gel stickers that glistened in the

sunlight. The obviousness of the stickers made me anxious. Being openly Jewish goes against everything I have learned from history.

Almost a year later, during the marriage equality postal survey campaign, I put up a “Vote Yes” sign. While the sign reminded me to stay positive, it also made me feel a deep, almost innate fear.

But, very quickly, windows around the neighbourhood were festooned with rainbows, too. Many of our neighbours offered sympathetic smiles or kind words when the media coverage of the survey was at its worst. Being surrounded by allies, and like-minded people, made us feel stronger.

One afternoon, as I walked my dogs alongside Merri Creek, two strangers stopped nearby to examine a plaque that welcomes passers-by to the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri-willam people of the Kulin Nation.

It explains that this place, where Merri Yaluk (Creek) meets the Birrarung Yaluk, was an important location for large ceremonies and meetings for their ancestors.

I am always touched by how welcoming it is, and the way its writer so graciously shares with any stranger who happens to pass by.

“I don’t know how I missed this place before,” one of the strangers said to me, “but it’s incredible.”

That sentiment resonated with me. Like them, I feel gratitude and astonishment about the wonders of my neighbourhood: a place I didn’t know I was missing, but now will always feel like home.

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ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH BEETSON

