

MR. MIKE'S NEIGHBORHOOD

WORKS TO CHANGE THE CULTURE IN MOBILE HOME PARKS

by Mike Whitty, Director

Mobile Home Parks are a critical source of housing in the United States. Many people live in a mobile home park because they're more affordable than stick-built housing and apartment complexes. Many mobile home parks offer lower monthly rates while offering the same convenient locations with additional room and a lawn. So whether a resident lived in a mobile home park for a year or a lifetime, the Culture hasn't changed much over the years. Park owners main concern is collecting rent. They don't really concentrate on providing a better quality of life for it's residents.

So, a 75 year old retired man who has lived at Lafayette Place Mobile Home Park in Warren Michigan for over 12 years, Mike Whitty, has decided to change the way his Neighbors experience mobile home park living. We met with Mr. Mike as he is affectionately known to see why he decided to take the reigns and make a difference.

Let's start from the beginning. How did you come to live at Lafayette Place Mobile Home Park?

I was living in South Redford when my mom, who had been a resident here for over 30 years, started having issues as she aged. As the oldest son, I left Redford and was fortunate to acquire a home just two doors down from her. It made it easy for me to take care of her needs.

That must have been a difficult decision to leave your home.

Actually, it was probably one of the easiest decisions I had to make. I've always been a believer that they take care of you when you're young, and you take care of them when they're old. One of my neighbors told me it's a debt you repay for them giving you life. And honestly, I would have never had the successes in my life without her. It reminded me of a quote Sheldon Cooper made on The Big Bang Theory when accepting his Nobel Prize. He said 'I always felt that my successes were my own, but it couldn't be farther from the truth'.

Your Mom was really lucky to have you.

I was lucky to have her. Toward the end, we spent a lot of time in doctor's offices and hospitals together until she passed away about 7 years ago. She was very faith driven so she was ready to meet her maker. Once she passed, I had no where else I needed to be, so I decided to live out the rest of my life here at Lafayette Place. I've been here now for over 12 years and I can see it was the right decision to make. It's a wonderful Community with beautiful families from many different generations and lifestyles.

So, why did you start Mr. Mike's Neighborhood?

This was never even a thought when I moved here. But when you're retired, you have plenty of time to look at your past life; decisions you've made, paths you took. And though my successes were plentiful, I found that many of my decisions were selfish. So I realized that for the rest of my life, if I want to stand at those pearly gates, I may need to earn some additional points to get there. So I decided to become a giver instead of a taker, and see if there were ways that I could help the wonderful Neighbors within my Community to not only feel good about living in a mobile home park, but also to feel good about themselves and their families. This was the promise and commitment I made to them over 18 months ago.

How did you start Mr. Mike's Neighborhood?

That's actually the start of a great story. When I first attempted to create some programs in October 2022, it was the Lafayette Place Neighborhood Association. I started the Association with my own money, creating a website, business cards, signage, newsletters, all done professionally with a great image for the Community. But Sun Communities legal team informed me that I might be breaking some rules by using the park name, so they suggested I dissolve the Association, even though they felt it was doing a lot of good. Once the word got around, Neighbors would come to me and say, "please don't give up on us." Wow!! It became my reward for thinking of others before myself. So I invested even more of my own money to create Mr. Mike's Neighborhood.

What types of programs do you provide your Community?

Before I even began thinking about programs, I looked at who were the Neighbors we had

living in our Community. Some of them were transient. They'll live here for a year then move. Some had money and some were poor. We have Seniors, Handicapped and Disabled. Some of these Neighbors have no one to turn to. If they had a problem they wouldn't know who to call. So from the beginning, I had to create some programs that would help everyone.

Now reality took over. I originally wanted to provide my Neighbors some entertainment, music, games etc. But that took even more money I couldn't afford which I expected to receive in donations. But how could I expect to get money from Neighbors who are living day to day? How do I give them the confidence of knowing I would stand with, by and for my Neighbors which was my original commitment to them? So I first of all I needed to change the Culture.

You said you wanted to change the Culture of living in a mobile home park. How are you doing with that and is it working?

I grew up in Hamtramck Michigan, at the time a Polish town with one way streets, and homes close together. But we had a real neighborhood. We knew each other, kids played outside till the street lights came on, and we never felt uncomfortable going to our Neighbors for a favor, to borrow a cup of sugar, or to watch the kids while my parents went shopping. It was a great way to grow up.

I realized that many of our Neighbors never experienced that type of life. Some grew up without having grass, some in drug and criminal environments, some without two parents, or any parents, some without any friends. And of course my Seniors and Disabled who as they get older can always use more help.

And you do this all by yourself?

Originally yes. But a Neighbor, Linda Varee, who has lived here for over 35 years, retired as a Section 8 Manager for over 25 years, saw what I was trying to accomplish and didn't hesitate to jump onboard. She's now the Assistant Director and is loved by the Neighbors. Her bubbly personality and her caring for our Neighbors has directly affected many who I'm sure consider her a friend.

So let's get back to talking about this Culture.

Yes. Originally I was so full of myself that I thought I could affect the lives of 250 families. But why should 250 families, who don't even know me, trust me enough to let me into their lives? So I gave my personal phone number to all 250 homes, to let them know that they have the comfort of knowing that no matter what the situation, they have at least one person to call in case they needed someone. And that was a success. I'd take sometimes 3-4 calls per day. Some had complaints they wanted to vent, some wanted to tell me about their Holiday, or some were just lonely and wanted to talk. Either way, they let me into their lives. Again, WOW!!

Along with that, I created a website that had a Resource Page that was second to none. It provided valuable information if they needed a Food Bank, a Dentist who took Medicaid, or an Insurance company that would provide them lower rates. When they viewed the website to read the Newsletter, it made them feel like they were truly part of a Community.

But the big results came with my "Smile and Wave Program" and "Say Hi Neighbor Program". Jim Watkins said, "A river cuts through a rock not by its power, but by its persistence". If I was going to ask them to change their Culture, I would need to show by example, and keep showing it so their was no doubt the effect we were trying to accomplish.

To create a Neighborhood Culture, The Smile and Wave Program is simple. Linda and I, whether sitting on my front bench, winter and summer, or whether we take our daily walk, we Smile and Wave to every car and every Neighbor that passes us by. When they come in from work, we welcome them back home, and when their leaving, we're wishing them a safe journey. My philosophy is, when I Smile and Wave, and they Smile and Wave back, I have the opportunity to make them a friend. But if they Smile and Wave first, I've already made them a friend, even though we may have never met. And let's take this simple step further. Let's say a Neighbor had a bad day at work and is now coming home to see the family. For that split second, that Smile and Wave may have changed their attitude toward meeting their family.

In order to get our Neighbors to associate more with each other, I created the "Say Hi Neighbor Program". Every Neighbor we see when we're walking, we say Hi Neighbor, and they respond in like. Parents are even teaching their children to say Hi Neighbor. Even though we can't meet our Neighbors individually, we at least gain a visibility so they know who we are. And again, if they say Hi Neighbor first, what an impact we have made with something so simple. George Bernard Shaw said, "I am of the opinion that I belong to the whole Community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do whatever I can."

So as you continue to create a Neighborhood Culture, how else do you help your Community?

Nothing that we do for our Neighbors will create a momentous change in any family that we help. Hari Nambiar said, "Life is a journey made up of many moments, big and small. While we often focus on significant milestones, the little things make life truly meaningful." In our Community, half the homes are leased by Sun Communities and half are owned. Regardless, there are items that are not the responsibility of Park Management. I change batteries in smoke detectors, ceiling light bulbs, furnace filters. For my home owners, I fix skirting, siding that is coming loose, stairs that need repairs. I also help shovel their snow and cut their grass. I also have the Porch Pirate Program. We have had some issues with criminals stealing packages off our porches. So if a Neighbor knows a package was delivered, they can text me and I'll pick it up, bring it to my home and they can pick it up from there.

I also have a Trash Can to the Curb Program. The trash removal company provides us with these big, yellow trash cans. Some of my Senior and Disabled Neighbors can't move these trash cans to the curb since they get a little heavy. So every Sunday night I take them to the curb, and Monday morning after the trash has been picked up, we put them back. We took this program one step further. After the trash is picked up on Monday morning, when we take our walk, we put all the trash cans back to their homes. We did this for several reasons. First, on a windy day, these trash cans can fly onto the street. Second, they may stay out for several days without the Neighbor taking them back in. And finally, it's just a nice thing to do as a courtesy for our Neighbors.

Since Linda and I walk the park pretty much every day at noon, we decided since we're walking anyways, we'd pick up every little piece of trash to keep our Community clean for the Neighbors and their guests. But these aren't the real things I'm proud of.

Tell me a few.

I had a Neighbor who had just put down her dog, her closest and best friend. I came over and held her hand while we cried together for several hours. I've purchased food and diapers for a family in need. I've loaned my car to a Neighbor who needed to get parts to fix his vehicle. I loan tools, ladders, power washer, garden stuff, for those who don't have these and need to do some work on their homes. I've helped Neighbors sign up for AAA Roadside Assistance and lower their insurance premiums. And I don't just give them a phone number and tell them who to call. I sit with them and we make the call together. I've jumped the batteries on their vehicles at 6am so they can get to work, and take them to the drug store to get their prescriptions. It could fill the page with what we do.

How has Sun Communities viewed Mr. Mike's Neighborhood?

Sun Communities is a 16B publicly traded company that is the second largest mobile home park owner in the country. We have been totally transparent with Sun from the very beginning. But with all of the parks they need to manage, I'm sure I'm just a blip on their radar. Sun knows I represent Lafayette Place Mobile Home Park with the highest standards and concerns for their residents.

So, what's next for Mr. Mike's Neighborhood?

Mother Teresa said, "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast stones across the waters to create many ripples." For Mr. Mike's Neighborhood, since I can't affect all 250 homes, the ripples will be all of the small things we can do to make a meaningful impact in their lives. More importantly, our bigger picture would be that every mobile home park would work to create a Neighborhood Culture in all their facilities. We're showing how a Culture can change with very little money, and a lot of caring. Unless there's a grant available from Government or Community Organizations to help take Mr. Mike's Neighborhood to the next level, we'll continue to think of small ways that will benefit our Neighbors.

One thing that did stump me the other day was a devoted Neighbor came to me and asked, “what will happen to Mr. Mike’s Neighborhood and our Community if you die?” I’m sorry to say I didn’t have an answer. Let’s hope it doesn’t happen soon.

Mr. Mike, you’ve told us all the things you do for your Neighbors, what do you get out of it?

I can summarize it with this story. I was cleaning the trash in one of the common areas when a 12 year old boy came up to me and said, “Mr. Mike, I don’t have a buck, but please take this. It was \$.35. I was hoping not to break his ribs as I hugged him. If this doesn’t put an exclamation point on what I get out of it, I don’t know what does.

And finally, what would you like the Mobile Home Industry learn from Mr. Mike’s Neighborhood?

Easy. That the families that rent and buy your mobile homes should be considered more than just rent. That the term “trailer trash” does not apply to a Community, but more to individuals who act like trash. And as with other housing Communities, people who live in mobile homes are valuable threads that make up the fabric of our churches, our schools, our workforce and our cities. And finally, if you use the term Community, it should not be thought of as just a bunch of renters gathered in one place. But instead, it should be a place where friendships are made, where individuals and families are cared about, where children should not be embarrassed to have their friends over, and that partnerships between the Neighbors, Park Owner and Park Managers are created to help develop a wonderful place to live. As far as I’m concerned, every mobile home park should develop a Mr. Mike’s Neighborhood philosophy. After all, it worked for Mr. Rogers, it can work for you.