



In My Neighborhood

A Mother's Story

By Jen

For the first three nights I slept fitfully. I was angry and afraid. Four months ago, my neighbors allowed their adult son to move back in with them. He was a sex offender recently released from prison.

A sex offender has been living across the street from me and I hadn't known it. I had put my children in danger! I didn't know how we could go on living in this neighborhood. I felt violated though no crime had occurred. I wondered "Why? Why did he have to move in here? Why does this need to become my problem?" I was angry that my neighbors hadn't told us, warned us, that he was here. My mind carefully checked the recent past.

I had seen him and was aware that he was there since the time that he had moved in. I wondered, had he ever crossed the street? Had I ever seen him talking to any of the neighborhood children? Had anything seemed strange since he had moved in? The answers were all no. In fact, as I lay awake, I realized that I had seen him come and go during the course of normal daily activity, but it actually seemed to me that he had been making an effort to stay away from the children.

I finally decided that I needed to do something. A warning email had gone out to the whole neighborhood. Other neighbors with children were asking the same questions that I was.

I came to the conclusion that there was only one way to get answers. I had to ask some questions, I couldn't just be angry and afraid. I realized that if I didn't take action I wouldn't feel safe in my neighborhood anymore. So, I called Wayne, a family friend who had worked with sex offenders for years. I needed to know how likely it was that this sex offender would reoffend. I wanted to know if he was even allowed to live so close to children. I wanted to know how to protect my children. I wanted to know how long he was going to be here for. I wanted to know what my rights were.

Wayne reassured me that this man was probably doing everything that he could to put his life back together. He encouraged me to find out if he was involved in therapy for sex offenders and if he was accountable to a parole officer. He pointed out that if this man was living with his parents that this was probably the best place for him to be. I learned that a sex offender who has a support system is much less likely to reoffend. Wayne encouraged me to call the sex offender by name. He gently reminded me that, though this man had made some terrible mistakes, he was a person too. Finally, Wayne encouraged me to try to talk to my neighbors and be a calm voice of reason, once I knew some of the facts.

My husband and I set up a neighborhood meeting at our house. Before the meeting took place, I had to do what I thought would be one of the hardest things in my life. I had to go and talk to Robert – the sex offender. I needed to meet and talk to the person who was living within yards of where my four children play. I knew that once I looked him in the eye and talked with him that I would know what we were up against. I also knew that the only way to get the answers to the questions that I had was to go right to the source.

So, I put on my big girl boots and knocked on his door. I can't even begin to describe the fear I had about meeting Robert, but my role of protective mother overcame any fear that I had. This wasn't about me and my preconceived notions of sex offenders, this was about my kids. I knew I had to do it.

An interesting thing happened that day; I changed my mind. Robert was a nice man. Robert was so thankful that I actually came to talk to him. He had been wondering if people in the neighborhood knew about him. He had been wondering what they were thinking, and he was hoping that they wouldn't cause trouble for him

Robert didn't have many friends. In fact, since he had been released from prison he was finding it pretty difficult to blend back into society. He was doing everything he could to start his life over and put his past behind him, but as a felon that was no easy task. Society would rather not deal with him, support him, believe in him or give him a job. Robert told me that he had met many people in his same situation while he was in prison who had no support system and no family to lean on when they came out. Robert was happy to answer the questions that I had.

I learned that he was in both individual and group counseling. He was also accountable to a parole officer. He was even on a monitoring band which tracked his location at all times. He was fortunate to have a good job and a supportive family. And, the most surprising thing to me, was that he was willing to meet the neighbors and answer any questions that they had so that they could feel comfortable having him there.

I came to the conclusion that Robert was in the best possible place for him to be, with his family, who could help him through counseling and hold him accountable in his new life. I made a friend that day.

The night of our neighborhood meeting came. I was nervous. I played a role at that meeting that I never thought I would play. Neighbors were angry and afraid, as I had once been. But now I had information that had calmed many of my fears and I knew would calm theirs as well.

As neighbors voiced their fears I shared what I knew. I told them about meeting Robert and that I had actually come to the conclusion that this was the best place for him to be. I realized that he needed his family to overcome his situation and that driving him out of the neighborhood was not the answer. In fact, all that would do is lead to his further seclusion and take away the great system of accountability and support that he had here.

Not everyone agreed right then and there. They were still afraid. It took a little bit of time for the neighbors to come around. But, I was amazed at how far a few calm and rational words went. I shared with my neighbors some of what I had learned from Wayne about actual rates of re-offense. Those rates were not what the sensational news media would like to make us think. The numbers were actually very encouraging.

It's been almost a year since we found out that Robert had moved in. In that year, I've made a loyal friend. I bake him cookies every once in a while. He plows my sidewalks in blizzard conditions. He's like any other neighbor.

Robert continues to make progress in his therapy and in rebuilding his life. The neighbors who live closest to him, like me, have come to a place of acceptance about his presence. We allow our children to play outside without worry. Robert keeps boundaries so that we don't need to worry and to keep himself above reproach. I really appreciate that.

I actually found myself coming to his defense recently. A rumor circulated at our neighborhood pool that "the sex offender" had been seen watching children from the pool fence. I talked to Robert and he reassured me that it wasn't him nor could it have been, if his monitor showed that he was anywhere near the pool, he was at risk of being put back in jail. There is no way that he would put himself in that kind of jeopardy. So, I went to the pool manager and reassured him that the "peeper" was not Robert. I also pointed out that since we knew it wasn't Robert, that he should probably keep a very close eye on the situation. He did and the man who was looking in the fence at the local pool was arrested within a few weeks.