

Just what is this thing we call neighbourhood? And why are we so like those who live beside us?

STORIES BY LAURA THOMPSON

With its historical old homes and prime downtown location, the Durand neighbourhood is the kind of place where Janis Topp feels at home.

She moved there with her husband, David, seven years ago. They liked it so much they decided to share their experience with travellers and launched a bed and breakfast.

"It's really nice to have that feeling of belonging," said Topp, who's involved in the Durand Neighbourhood Association. "When I come home from wherever, I always think, 'It's nice to be here.'"

The word "neighbourhood" conjures up a barrage of images: block parties, barbecues, children riding their bikes up and down the street.

Planners once defined a neighbourhood as having a church, a school and a community centre. Shopping areas lined arterial streets — the boundaries separating one locale from another. Yet neighbourhoods have always

COMMON KNOWLEDGE

How marketers see you

Day 1: The neighbourhood

Day 2: Comparing communities

Day 3: Watch what you swipe

Day 4: Hamilton's future

been more than bricks and mortar. They're communities of like-minded people.

Dr. Barry Wellman, a sociologist at the University of Toronto, said neighbourhoods, aside from giving people a sense of belonging, fulfil certain needs. The classic cup of sugar. The borrowed

hedge trimmers. Eyes on the kids.

Even with the advent of the Internet world and cyber neighbourhoods based on common interests, geographic neighbourhoods have remained important.

Wellman's research in a suburb of Toronto where computer use is heavy found residents organized barbecues, got help and arranged babysitting online — all within the confines of their geographic neighbourhood.

But how do you choose a neighbourhood in the first place? Why is the person next door so much like you?

Experts say it's economics, for a start. We need to pick a place to live that's affordable.

Before "commuter train" was part of our lexicon, we also needed to live close to where we worked.

There are other factors, too. What are the schools like? Is the neighbourhood aesthetically appealing? Are there a lot of amenities, such as shopping or a community pool? Some people may want a lot of space. Safety

Who are you?

Who are you as a Hamiltonian? What do you believe? Here are some predictions by Environics Analytics extrapolated from the data the Canadian firm collects from marketers, surveys, polls and Canadian statistical data.

Where Hamiltonians rate higher than the average Canadian:

- Being Canadian
- Importance of leaving a legacy. You're likely to plan bequests well in advance.
- Problem of too little time in a day
- Faith
- Belief that society is in the process of

accepting the inevitability of poverty

- Desire to make work less of a priority
- Equality of the sexes

Where Hamiltonians rate lower than the average Canadian:

- Belief that today's environmental problems are leading the planet toward catastrophe
- Status recognition
- Need to perform rituals or familiar actions
- Intuitive side: Emotions, dreams, mystery and creativity aren't necessarily dominant elements in your life.
- Aesthetics
- Desire to live intensely

and culture are also draws.

"It's the self-selection hypothesis," said Dr. Alan Walks, an assistant professor of geography at the University of Toronto. "People with certain types

of values choose certain types of neighbourhoods."

It's a simple premise: You live in a community that reflects who you are or who you want to be.

Contrasting communities

Meet the Halls. Step into Ancaster's Winner's Circle

They may live in Ancaster, but there's no Mercedes-Benz parked in Mike and Linda Hall's driveway.

The couple, who have called these suburbs home for 12 years, say they're just regular people who have worked hard for what they have. And it shows.

The Halls own a large, two-storey home on Devonshire Terrace. Their kids' rooms are wired with video-game systems. They like to vacation in Florida.

Environics Analytics says the Halls fall into what it calls Winner's Circle — a cluster known for its sprawling families, spirited consumerism and success in life. Canadians in this category usually own homes in new-money subdivisions, carry BlackBerry devices or cellphones and shop at Home Depot.

Those in the Winner's Circle have figured out how to turn hard work into affluence.

"Everybody works on this street. These aren't single-family incomes," said 43-year-old Linda, adding that her neighbourhood is a white- and blue-collar mix. Police officers, teachers, firefighters and butchers.

The neighbourhood, located just off the Wilson Street exit of the 403, is mostly two-storey homes built in the past 20 years. Free-standing basketball nets decorate the driveways, and Canadian flags hang proudly from porches. Some back yards are filled with in-ground swimming pools. Others have been transformed into landscaped gardens.

Environics predicts roughly a third of people classified as Winner's Circle work in an office setting. The rest are people like Mike and Linda who have high-paying service-sector or blue-collar jobs.

Mike, 42, has carved out a career in the heating and air conditioning business — a trade that provides a comfortable lifestyle and plenty of time with family. He started up his own business, KLM Heating and Air Conditioning, last December. Linda's a nurse at Hamilton General Hospital.

As Environics predicts, the Halls are a lot like their neighbours. Mike and Linda even have the same jobs as the people next door.

They're also suburban imports. Linda grew up in Dundas, and Mike lived in Rockton before moving to West Hamilton at age 15.

They say the stereotypes about Ancaster aren't true.

They say their work ethic is what sets them apart, and it's something they're trying to pass on to their kids. But they don't mind splurging on them every now and then.

"Why have kids if you can't spoil them?" Linda said, hugging the 10-year-old daughter perched on her knee.

Kids are the glue that holds families and the community together. Parents often spill out onto the street to chat with other parents while a handful of kids circle them on bicycles.

With three children involved in sports, the Halls seem to live out of their minivan for most of the year. Kyle, 13, and Lindsey, 10, both play rep hockey, and Mitchell, 7, spent the summer on the soccer field.

For awhile, the family had an SUV, but then traded it in for a more spacious van with a TV to keep the kids quiet during the commutes to tournaments.

They like to stick close to their neighbours who share their values and outlook on life. "I couldn't ask for a better neighbourhood," Linda said.



PHOTOS BY GARY YOKOYAMA, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Market analysis puts the Hall family, of Ancaster, in the Winner's Circle. From front to back, they are: Mitchell, 7; Mike; Lindsey, 10; Linda; and Kyle, 13.



Glen and Tania Smith in their Primrose Avenue home in Crown Point West (east of Gage Avenue and north of King Street). They're in the 'Lunch at Tim's' cluster — working class in an area with a strong sense of neighbourhood.

Meet the Smiths, and enjoy your lunch at Tim Hortons

Glen Smith is known as the mayor in his neighbourhood. He's the kind of guy people go to with their problems because he's got a good ear and the brains to solve them.

According to Environics Analytics, Smith belongs to the Lunch at Tim's cluster, which is marked by tight-knit communities and blue-collar pride.

Smith's a Stelco electrician. He just celebrated his 32nd year working in the steel mill. The 51-year-old lives on Primrose Avenue, just steps from Ivor Wynne Stadium. He's been married to Tania for 30 years.

The couple grew up across the street from one another in the same neighbourhood they live in now. After they married, they bought a house on the Mountain. Then 19 years ago, they moved back.

It wasn't the football or the amenities that prompted them to return to Crown Point West, east of Gage Avenue and north of King Street.

It was the people. "We were comfortable here," Smith said. "A lot of the older people were still here when we moved back after that many years. In fact, a few of them are still here."

"We liked our stomping grounds," adds Tania, a home-care worker. "It's a very friendly neighbourhood."

Smith, whose brother and father live within a kilometre of his home, is part of a tight-knit community of downtowners who live near Hamilton's industrial harbour.

Environics Analytics calls them Lunch at Tim's because they have a penchant for doughnut shops. But they don't come for the fritters; it's the promise of good conversation over a cup of joe.

Contrary to Environics predictions, Smith isn't a double-double kind of guy. His brew of choice is something a little bit stronger.

"I like to wind down by sitting out front chewing the fat with our neighbours over a couple cold ones," he said.

A couple times a week he meets friends at A Cross the Roads, his local watering hole. Even his mechanic swings by for a beer and some chat.

"It's a local place ... a neighbourhood bar," Smith said.

Environics describes the Lunch at Tim's crowd as working-class young and old who live in older homes, belong to tight-knit communities and have a strong sense of national pride.

"I like to go back to Britain to see my family, but I wouldn't want to live there," said Tania, 50, who emigrated from England when she was 10.

The Smiths have two married sons and two grandkids. Both boys are following in their dad's footsteps by becoming electricians.

People from the Lunch at Tim's cluster like to kick back with a bottle of Canadian beer while watching a hockey game on the tube. The clusters created by Environics are stereotypes in many ways. But there are truths.

Environics predicts the Lunch at Tim's crowd prefers minivans and Pontiac cars.

It's the sort of insight that makes Smith chuckle. After all, those descriptions match the vehicles parked in front of his house.

Still, he says his family doesn't fit the mould exactly. When it comes to money, they buck the trend. Lunch at Tim's tend to hold onto their paycheques, while the Smiths like to indulge in trips to Myrtle Beach and weekend getaways in Niagara Falls.

"It comes, it goes," Tania chimes. "Enjoy life while you're here."