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Making Friends in Unlikely Places

By: [Judith Matloff \(View Profile\)](#)

The first person I met when we bought our “fixer upper” brownstone in Harlem eight years ago was a manic crack addict named Salami. This menacing apparition bolted out of the abandoned house next door to inform me that he planned to take over our new abode.

“It ain’t your house, Mama,” he hollered about the property in which I had just sunk all our savings. “I used to squat there and I’m gonna get it back.”

Thus began my adventure in what is euphemistically called an “emerging neighborhood.” My husband and I bought our decayed Victorian townhouse because it was cheap. We didn’t have a lot of money and having lived in dodgy places abroad, we thought it was worth taking a risk on this sketchy neighborhood. What we learned along the way is that a house doesn’t stop at four walls and it’s worth negotiating with unfriendly neighbors. Even folks like Salami can be won over.

Not that he was our only problem. The street, we only learned right after taking possession of the house, lay in the epicenter of the narcotics trade of the northeastern seaboard. Funny—the real estate agent neglected to tell us this. On a given day, twenty vigorous Dominican youths leaned on our front gate and hawked cocaine to armed men in big cars. This drug Wall Street made it hard to find parking—clients took all the spaces—and the dealers used our front steps as a garbage can and toilet.

My cousin Greg, who had purchased a similarly abandoned house elsewhere in New York City, advised me to reason with the fellows. “Tell them that you won’t call the cops if they promise not to piss on your property,” he advised. Following his lead, I went up to the head of the gang, a suave fellow draped in gold chains, and used my fluent Spanish to strike a deal. Just as Greg said, these narcotics peddlers weren’t that bad—just young men

trying to make a buck to send back home. The last thing they wanted was for us to interrupt business. The guys not only agreed to stay off our front steps, but after a while even held a parking spot for my elderly mother when she came to visit. They also chased away a stoned trespasser who threatened to stab my pregnant belly.

Despite his initial hostility, Salami was surprisingly easy to win over, too. It took me some time to gather up the nerve to approach him. Salami had muscles like a bodybuilder, which he pumped up by swinging on the traffic lights. He also had an unnerving tendency to shriek uncontrollably when high. I broke the ice with some questions about his gunshot wounds—he wore them proudly like tattoos—and further sealed cordiality by offering him odd jobs like sweeping up construction debris.

There were a couple setbacks, like the time he sabotaged our attempt to rent out the basement. (Salami parked himself at the front gate in a swivel chair and introduced himself to would-be lodgers as the local “crackologist.” Naturally, no one wanted to sign a lease.) Eventually, Salami accepted our claims on the house and we found tenants who weren’t intimidated by his act. I wouldn’t say that we became close friends, but Salami drops by periodically to sweep up broken glass outside the house and helps me carry groceries up the front steps. When my book about the neighborhood, *Home Girl*, came out, he demanded a signed copy.

We had similar luck with another crack addict who loved books. He couldn’t get a library card because he was homeless, so we lent him reading matter—he particularly liked detective novels—in return for protection. In exchange, this ex-con looked after our car to make sure no one stole the hubcaps. Once I left the keys in the front door of the house and he sat on the on the steps for several hours until I got home to make sure no one broke in. Now that’s a good neighbor!

Naturally, we simultaneously built alliances with law-abiding residents. These included the elderly black folks who had lived on the block for a quarter of a century. We made sure to have them over for barbecues, and my husband offered to shovel their sidewalks when it snowed. In the process, we grew to appreciate the village flavor. People who don’t have a lot of money often stick closely together and the pavement here resembles an extension of their tiny apartments. Kids play on the street because they can’t afford after-school piano lessons. That means people actually know each other, a delicious rarity in New York City. When I was on pregnancy bed rest, the neighbors would drop by to ensure I had enough to eat. The street matriarch maintained such a close eye through her back window that she’d phone and order me to get back to bed if she saw me slinking into the kitchen.

Aside from the chumminess, there’s a lot to be said for a working class neighborhood where tacos and babysitters cost less than in nicer parts of town. We save a lot of money by going to parks instead of enrolling in gyms. The local coffee costs less than a dollar and tastes better than Starbucks. Oh, and did I mention the baseball Little League? The local Dominican teams cost a fraction of the downtown white ones, and my kid is perfecting his Spanish in the bargain.

The foreclosure crisis has sent a lot of affordable property on the market and people are always asking for advice on navigating what used to be called “slums.” Without a doubt, we got lucky with our particular set-up. Our rougher characters are a tame bunch compared to, say, the drug crew that terrorized a nearby building. Those thugs were so mean that residents were scared to leave their apartments. The brutes harassed women and openly brandished weapons in the halls. In contrast, Salami is a bunny rabbit. During a recent frank discussion about first impressions, he was astounded that I once feared he might stab me. “Whaddy a crazy, Mama?” he blinked. He then confided that he first thought I was a stuck-up racist. “I’ve decided you’re okay, after all,” Salami conceded.

The moral of this tale, I guess, is to keep an open mind and not be scared off by first appearances. Negotiation

goes a long way. Most people, when you get down to it, simply want a bit of respect.

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