

Finding home in America: Immigrant works to turn her subdivision into community

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
November 27, 2003 Thursday, Home Edition

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

Section: Gwinnett;

Length: 589 words

Byline: RICK BADIE

Body

Brigitte Craig has lived in her Norcross subdivision for 10 years.

Now she's working to make it home.

Home for foreigners like her, a German immigrant who left Munich for Atlanta and love two decades ago.
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Home, frankly, for the entire Wind Forest subdivision, an Ellis Island of whites, Hispanics and Asians located near an industrial section of Buford Highway in unincorporated Gwinnett County.

"People have come to America from different cultures, but they aren't home yet," said Craig, 48, now married, but not to the person who drew her to the South. "It's not their community yet. I have lived in this subdivision for 10 years, but I really didn't interact."

Until now.

Craig has made it her mission to bring residents who live in her neighborhood together. Their race, culture, religion and language are irrelevant. She has knocked on the doors of strangers and approached children at play to promote her idea for a community bond more humane than the streets that bind it.

"Some people don't speak English, so I have to have someone there to translate for me," said Craig, who oversees international affairs for Prosys Information Systems, a Norcross firm.

"Some are suspicious, but later on, they are touched by my efforts."

In early November, Craig and several children hosted a cleanup day to pick up litter. They ate lunch donated by the Chick-fil-A on Peachtree Parkway, then took in a free movie at the nearby cinema. The children practiced saying, "I'm glad to be your neighbor" in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Korean.

The cleanup was deemed a success, and the family support let Craig know she was on to something. Residents once hard-pressed to name even one neighbor applaud her efforts because they don't want the area to become rundown.

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Elda and Rafael Donates' youngest son, Jaime, 11, joined the cleanup. The Cuban-Americans are Wind Forest pioneers, having moved there nearly two decades ago.

"This isn't a bad neighborhood," Elda said, "but we need to maintain it. Some people take care of their property. Some don't. There are a lot of kids in the neighborhood, so it's a good thing to get them involved. I hope this continues."

Bank on it.

Last Friday, about 20 children and adults gathered in the cul-de-sac, candles aglow, to sing Christmas carols. This Sunday, the Donateses and others will open their homes so the youngsters can bake Christmas goodies. A Norcross Publix donated a \$25 gift certificate for purchasing the baking goods.

Come Dec. 6, the children will sing carols and share their baked goods with residents at three hospices --- Peachtree Christian Hospice in Duluth, Country Gardens Senior Living in Norcross and Merrill Gardens in Dunwoody.

Such activities have purpose, Craig said.

"If the kids grow up and are able to say, 'I love my community,' I think they will evolve into fine citizens later on," she said. "Kids with self-worth won't engage in drugs, gangs and crimes. They need to feel they matter. Kids have to be exposed to so many things."

Craig fell in love with Atlanta when she moved here 18 years ago to join a boyfriend. He didn't last, but her affinity for the city, its people and climate did. She and her husband, Michael, a real estate agent, have been married for eight years.

"I have never done anything like this," said Craig, the oldest of three sisters. "This project just can't be me. I want to see other people in the neighborhood take this on."

A version of this article may appear in the Metro section.

Graphic

Photo: Mary Espinoza helps her great-grandson Spencer Sanderson, 2, during carol singing in the Wind Forest subdivision. / CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / Staff; Photo: Gathering around lighted candles as they prepare to sing carols in Wind Forest subdivision are (from left) Luis Sepulveda, 8, Jaime Donates, 11, and Thien An .n. Tran, 11. / CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / Staff; Photo: Jaime Donates (left) and Thien An .n. Tran, both 11, sing carols in what has become an ongoing effort to bridge cultures in their subdivision. / CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / Staff; Photo: Brigitte Craig (rear) and neighbors (from left) Julia Kim, 8, Diana Kim, 7, and Thien An .n. Tran, 11, sing carols Friday in their subdivision as the result of efforts by Craig to create a community there out of residents who speak English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Korean. / CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / Staff

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: CHILDREN (90%); CHRISTMAS (83%); IMMIGRATION (78%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (77%); FAMILY (75%); RELIGION (68%); HOSPICE (64%); GARDENING (60%); INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE (51%)

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Company: PROSYS INFORMATION SYSTEMS INC (55%); PROSYS INFORMATION SYSTEMS INC (55%)

Ticker: PUSH (OTC) (50%)

Geographic: ATLANTA, GA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (92%); GERMANY (58%)

Load-Date: November 27, 2003

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