ONE morning recently, as I stood waiting on the corner for a trolley to take me to work, I idly watched a succession of little scenes outside one of the houses in the block where I live. First the front door opened and a small boy of about three came carefully down the high marble steps, looked around him in a vaguely curious way, and wandered off between two houses to the courtyard in the rear. Next came his mother, carrying the baby in one arm and dragging the baby carriage; as she was struggling to get it down the steps, a boy of twelve or so came bounding up and helped her. They saluted each other as the mother and baby in turn disappeared between the two houses. The next time the door opened, it was a lad of eighteen with a bag full of clothes slung over his shoulder, whistling as he made his way to the cooperative laundry in one of the other houses. Finally, just as my trolley arrived to pick me up, I saw three teen-agers come by on their way to school, chattering as girls have presumably done throughout history.

It seemed to me, as I rode downtown, that I had watched a little sequence which might have made the opening of a documentary movie: the people in our neighborhood getting ready to start another day. Only one thing might strike some viewers as unusual: the good neighbors in the picture were of different races. The mother and her two young children were white, but the boy who helped with the baby carriage was colored and so was the older boy with the laundry bag. Of the three schoolgirls, one was Negro, one white, and one Asiatic. It is heartbreaking that such a thing should be the occasion for comment, but I thought of Trumphall Park in Chicago and of a house I had seen myself in West Philadelphia, with boards hiding the windows which neighbors had broken with stones.

Every so often somebody asks us what is the proportion of Negroes and whites in our group of families living together in the block. The question always finds us at a loss because we really don’t know; we never counted and frankly we couldn’t care less. Don’t we have “difficulties,” they ask? Of course we have our problems, like any group of varied ages and backgrounds. Most of them center around the use of the play equipment by the children or of the laundry by the housewives, and experience has shown that no race has a monopoly on obstructionism. After attending a workshop meeting for people from housing cooperatives in four states, I now believe that we have rather less than our share of problems as compared with other, larger groups, many of them practicing discrimination.

It is only occasionally that we are reminded of being participants in a social experiment. A mixed group at a picnic or at Robin Hood Dell sometimes gets the raised-eyebrow treatment from others around. The mailman, the milkman, the driver of the department-store delivery truck, the man who comes to fix the stove, and a dozen others—all are getting an unobtrusive demonstration of the fact that people of different racial sorts can live together exactly as though they all looked alike, and sometimes there is a comment which tells us the lesson is not being lost. When we are at home, we don’t give it a second thought. When we are away from home, the impulse sometimes rises to become missionaries of an idea—an idea which ought not to need any missionaries but which still does, as our morning paper reminds us tragically almost every day. Then we take pride in living where we do, and most of us are especially glad that “Quaker” is the name under which we are known to the world.

The other thing by which our project is distinguished is the self-help feature, which might better be called mutual aid—the fact that most of us are on our way to becoming property owners without the customary down payment in cash. Except for a few families which could not manage it, almost all have invested hundreds of hours of work, after break-taking work, in helping to create the houses in which they and their neighbors live. I know I am more careful about dirty fingerprints on the living-room wall because I remember painting part of that wall myself. And there is a neighbor who has a streaky-looking porcelain door which is a cause of shame to me every time I ring her bell; one of these days I shall volunteer the necessary hours to do the job over again properly.

More important than the satisfaction that goes with acquiring new skills (such as carpentry or laying tile) is the way in which shared work for a common end builds people into a true group rather than a collection of individuals. We still fall out from time to time, but we have learned to know each other well under conditions of stress, and usually this mutual
respect prevents a disagreement from becoming a breach. There
is a real sense of loss when a family moves away. Not that a
great many do move away; they would not have invested so
much time and effort had they not planned to settle down, but
sometimes the arrival of the second or third baby creates prob-
lems of space, or someone may be transferred to a job in an-
other city or state. On the whole we are an unusually stable
group, although some of us had been quite mobile before
coming here.

There is another thing which is less easily described, but
nevertheless of great and probably increasing importance: that
intangible thing called neighborhood leadership. We are part
of Philadelphia's pioneer experiment in urban rehabilitation,
a concerted attempt to save the older parts of the city before
they become slums, then slum-clearance projects, and finally
new public housing developments in which various govern-
ments are obliged to invest enormous sums of taxpayers'
money. We believe in public housing. In fact we have new
public housing only a block or two away and we welcome its
clean lines, its green trees, and its cooperative people. But
still we think there are a great many houses which can carry
on an already long life of service if someone takes the trouble
to see that they don't go downhill rapidly as they grow old.
We ourselves live in reconditioned houses dating back perhaps
a hundred years, and we certainly expect them still to be solid
when we burn our mortgages just before the turn of the cen-
tury. It is true that in our own pioneer block the cost of saving
the houses was underestimated and came pretty close to the
probable cost of new construction, but still we believe that,
learning by experience, we can show the way to urban renewal
at a saving to the homeowner and to the public, pro-
vided the necessary steps are taken in time.
We have had a great deal of cooperation from the city and
from semipublic bodies such as the Reading Railroad and the
Philadelphia Transportation Company, not only in working
on our own block but in raising the character of the entire
area. A house-to-house survey made recently by the city's
Department of Public Health showed many things needing to
be done in some of the older houses nearby, and a work camp
is planned to help tenants and landlords with outside painting
and other minor clean-up jobs which they want but cannot
at present afford.

Most of this is done through committees—usually commit-
tees of the Community Council, a citizen's group which is
very active under the leadership of a businessman who himself
does not live in our block, but who calls upon us very often for
support. Goodness knows how many committee chairmen we
have supplied over the past two or three years. Housing sur-
veys, chest X rays, rodent control, better street lighting, a play-
ground, traffic lights at dangerous corners, attention to blocked
storm drains, but lunches for the schools, Boy Scout troops—
all these are things which our committees have won for the
neighborhood. We do not go after them in the manner of
social workers coming from outside; it happens that several of
us are social workers, but we serve on the committees as neigh-
bor wanting a better place in which to live. And as our
environment slowly changes about us, as eyecrops and plague
spots are pulled down and green grass or neat new buildings
appear instead, as streets become cleaner and quieter, we
realize that none of this could even have begun if the Quakers
had not bought the block some years ago and used it for a
many-faceted experiment in better living.

Just now things are very lively in our block because work
has at last begun on the Second Half. The First Half, 52
apartments, was finished two and a half years ago, but changes
in Federal Housing Administration regulations held up com-
pletion of the original plans. The battered old houses already
have new windows and resealed brickwork and look like houses
in the making once again. As the self-help workers pass on
to take breath (scraping walls and window and demolishing
chimneys is what we are doing right now; carpentry and pain-
ing come later), we look out of those new windows and see
clean, decent housing rising up all around out of chaos and
blight. And we know that out of distress, ignorance, and
prejudice there is also rising up a group of people who find it
easy to live together and work together in spite of racial dif-
f erences. We are proud of what we have growing here in
Philadelphia, and we believe the Society of Friends as a whole
has a right to know and to be proud.

Co-sponsors: American Friends Service Committee, Friends Neighborhood

From time to time there are apartments available when families
move to other locations. If you would like further information
about the program direct inquiries to:

Friends Housing Cooperative
703 North 8th Street
Philadelphia, Pa. 19123
Telephone: WA1nut 3-1547