

During the holiday season, I think deeply about what is most important in my life, recalling fond memories of growing up in New York City and experiencing this season in

## What Matters Most

my tight-knit, working-class neighborhood in upper Manhattan.

Though I've spent most of my life outside of New York, I always will be a New Yorker at heart. My memories are of snowy days spent sledding down the big hills in Fort Tyron Park, a short walk from the 90-family apartment building I grew up in right off Broadway.

I lived with my parents and brother in a three-room apartment, which included a living room, bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom. It's hard to believe today, but small quarters were typical for the families in my neighborhood. My parents slept in the living room, which made it impossible for me to invite a guy in after our date for a cup of coffee or a drink!

Communication then was talking with our neighbors by opening the windows and shouting across the alley, or by calling folks as they walked down the street, or by visiting people in their apartments. And naturally, as a teenager, I spent hours on end on the telephone. What in the world did we do without e-mail?

I felt as though I was part of a huge, extended family. We kept our doors unlocked, and my friends and I walked into each other's apartments regularly without even knocking. My friends' parents advised, scolded, and complimented me just like my own parents. The best thing about growing up in this environment was living with a diverse cast of neighborhood characters who all looked out for each other. The worst thing was the smell of fish throughout the building every Friday evening. Can you imagine almost 90 families all cooking different kinds of fish?

Down the street, there was a post office on one corner, a gas station on another, and what was called a "candy store" on yet another. The candy store really was a soda and sandwich shop that also sold comic books, newspapers, magazines, toys, sweets, and gift items.

If I was lucky, my mother would give me money for a comic book, a hot chocolate, or a candy bar. I especially liked hanging out with my friends, listening to the conversation of adults and the older kids. The candy store was exceptionally crowded during the Christmas season because people were shopping for gifts and celebrating together even more than they usually did, and I thoroughly enjoyed the frivolity.

All the "mom and pop" stores in the neighborhood were decorated with lights, and I greatly enjoyed walking in the evenings and admiring the decorations and bright lights everywhere while taking in the incredible friendliness of the people. Even those who usually were standoffish were warm and congenial around the holiday season.

What mattered most then were the caring people of our community. We always tried to see the best in one another and to provide for each other. Some people seemed poorer than others, but I don't recall anyone begging for food, clothing, or shelter. The churches and neighborhood groups took care of people who needed help and were always there for our entire community.

Life wasn't perfect by any means. My neighborhood had its share of gangs, crime, and discontent. But there was always an optimistic sense that tomorrow would be better than today for everyone. This feeling was strongest during the holiday season, when everything glittered with hope.

I was not raised to think I'd ever have a career, so I continue to be surprised about my life. I am so grateful that I discovered the world of association management, which provides me

with the gift of being part of a tight-knit community all over again.

As we move into this year's holiday season, I wish you warm, cozy, happy days full of quality time with friends and loved ones, and of the beauty of the season. I hope you experience much of the wonderful times I remember as a child, and may 2003 bring you much success and the comfort and camaraderie that is readily available in our rich association community.

Happy holidays and a joyous New Year!

