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Park Hill named one of the best neighborhoods in the U.S.

Neighborhood's top-10 charms attractive to small-business owners

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Photo by Linda Mcconnell / Special To The Rocky

Maggie Miller, 15, gets help Monday with her holiday decorating from her friend, Troi Davis, 14, right, in Denver's Park Hill neighborhood. Venerable Park Hill was recently selected as one of America's 10 "Great Neighborhoods" by the American Planning Association.

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It isn't quite Mayberry, and you won't find Opie, Andy or Aunt Bee around. But, shoot, there's something so small-town warm and fuzzy about Park Hill that it makes the folks who live here smile with pride when they talk about their corner of the universe.

And now they have one more reason to feel good about the 500-or-so blocks that compose the northeast sector of Denver: The American Planning Association recently selected Park Hill as one of the 10 "Great Neighborhoods" in America for 2008, citing it for "tolerance and openness toward others," as well as its "progressive integration, diversity and memorable character."

Which is nice to hear but not exactly stop-the-presses news for the inhabitants.

Take Bob Vance, 64, who grew up in Canon City, lived in Houston, and decided to move to Park Hill when he retired as an airline pilot. Sitting in the, yes, *Perk Hill Cafe*, sipping coffee and reading the paper, Vance cites the "true old-time neighborhood feel" of Park Hill.

Unlike suburban enclaves where "there are no trees, sidewalks or interesting architecture (and) people have no incentive to go further than their driveway," Park Hill's eclectic architecture, broad streets and "wonderful, mature trees" make "you want to get out and experience it."

The thing is, he says, "There's a life and spirit about Park Hill; it has a social dynamism to it. I guess I'd say it's really just got a 'neighborhoodness' to it. I'm not sure that's a word, but that's what Park Hill has."

Over at the House of Hair, in between snips of his scissors, barber Stanley Stewart is inclined to agree. He's lived in Park Hill for 40 years and the reason he moved in the first place was "I have a multiracial family. This area being so integrated, it's very conducive to raising biracial kids."

Now that his kids are grown and have kids of their own, what keeps him here?

"The people! The people are great," he says, adding quickly, "We're community-oriented here. And, get this, we like each other in this neighborhood."

Small town in a big city

Denon Moore, 32, has lived in Park Hill only for five years, but she's as smitten as Stewart. "The history, the architecture, the pretty scenery - I love all of it. It feels like a small town in a big city."

Moore likes Park Hill so much she couldn't wait until there was a vacancy on Kearney Street so she could move her Cake Crumbs Bakery there. In the three months she's been open, walk-in traffic has increased 300 percent - "and that's all from locals. People here just get outside."

And you see all different ages, too.

"Just on our street alone, we have a good mix of ages - young families with kids, like us, and some older people and some senior citizens. It's great. Very cool."

So is Park Hill's proximity to "so many cultural attractions. We have the zoo, the museum (of nature and science). And our kids love going to City Park."

The trip to City Park takes the Moores along streets where tall, venerable trees probe the sky, looking down on houses so different in style and size that the architecture is an intriguing hodgepodge. Brick bungalows, Denver squares and stately manses co-mingle on streets that pulse with people pushing strollers or walking dogs.

Close-knit neighborhood

For some of them, a point of destination is W.H. Ferguson Park, although nobody calls it that. Instead, this urban thumbprint of grass, gazebo and playground at 23rd Avenue and Dexter Street is "Turtle Park," a homage to the benign concrete turtle that sits at its center.

Mary Ellen Spinelli knows all about Turtle Park. Just like she knows all about her neighborhood's co-op bookstore, its monthly newspaper and Greater Park Hill Community Inc., which is the glue between disparate members of the neighborhood. Just like she knows the names of most of her customers, the ones who have been coming to Spinelli's Market since she and her husband, Jerry, opened it in 1994.

Comfortably cramped and redolent with delicious deli smells, Spinelli's is the kind of place that has virtually disappeared from Americana. But somehow, Mary Ellen and Jerry have managed to make a go of it, offering their own brand of spaghetti sauce (Puttanesca di Napoli anyone?), hanging photographs of customer-families, dealing with the public on a first-name basis.

Giving Spinelli's a neighborhood feel was easy for Mary Ellen. Hey, she's lived in Park Hill since 1954 and never wanted to leave.

"Why would I?" she says. "People here are friendly and respectful and supportive of each other."

So supportive that shortly after her market opened, a customer wrote a letter to his neighbors saying how they should all buy at Spinelli's - and then hand-delivered it up and down his block.

Small wonder that every year Spinelli's throws a picnic for the neighborhood at - where else? - Turtle Park. For Mary Ellen, Park Hill is the kind of neighborhood "where I get to see kids go to grade school, high school, college, then get married. I get to see them grow up in front of me."

Asked what makes Park Hill so different, Mary Ellen says, "I can't say what makes it special - I have no basis for comparison because this is where I've lived practically my whole life. But I can tell you that it *is* special."

To her, living in Park Hill is a no-brainer. "Hey, the mayor lives here. He made a good choice!"

Then she laughs, happy to embrace small-town living in a big city, happy to reside in her own little Mayberry that is one of America's great neighborhoods.

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Park Hill at a glance

Three miles from the Central Business District and primarily residential, Denver's Park Hill neighborhood begins just east of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science on Colorado Boulevard to Quebec Street and from Colfax Avenue to as far north as 52nd Avenue. Montview Boulevard, developed in 1882, and Monaco Parkway are main thoroughfares and typify the wide, tree-lined neighborhood streets. Park Hill's nationally recognized neighborhood organization sponsors an annual tour of the many historic homes in this welcoming community.

The other nine

APA 2008 Great Neighborhoods:

- * **Echo Park** Los Angeles
- * **North End** Boise, Idaho
- * **Old Town Wichita** Wichita, Kan.
- * **Downtown Salem** Salem, Mass.
- * **Charles Village** Baltimore
- * **Greater University Hill** Syracuse, N.Y.
- * **Village of Mariemont** Mariemont, Ohio
- * **Society Hill** Philadelphia
- * **Downtown Sheridan** Sheridan, Wyo.