

One Step at a Time

I took my first wobbly steps in Lee's Summit as an infant, and little did my parents know that those would be the first of a giant leap towards independence and curiosity.

My parents fostered that drive of exploration by being involved in our community. I loved attending Downtown Days, Mason School carnivals, cross town rivalry football games (Go Broncos!), and neighborhood get-togethers. Lee's Summit was home. It is where I felt comfortable, yet deep down inside I desired to explore more places, cultures, and traditions.

In high school I not only dreamed of traveling the world, but like most teenagers I wanted to get far away from home. After graduation, I said goodbye to Lee's Summit and hello to Fort Worth, Texas and college life. It was no foreign land, but a long day's drive from home. From there I continued my journey abroad and studied in Spain, road tripped around Ireland, ate my way through Italy, and backpacked the rest of Western Europe never looking in the rearview mirror.

Naturally I joined the Peace Corps in hopes it would send me to a far away destination. I became a Rural Community Development Volunteer in Maquengal de Guatuso, Costa Rica. My first real job out of college. I jumped right in and started walking to meet the neighbors.

Sometimes I was over informed from the all the gossip of a small town. I knew the ins and outs. I had facilitated and participated in countless community meetings, daily conversations with the neighbors, befriended the regional mayor, and became known for encouraging others to be involved.

I wore different hats each day from teacher, general contractor, political advocate, fundraiser, grant writer, and youth group leader. I was a community cheerleader working towards improving the town one step at a time.

I became more invested in that community, that I sometimes felt guilty of not knowing how things were in my hometown. I was unsure of policies and community groups that impacted the United States much less Lee's Summit. Trust me, I was asked a lot about how things are in the "North".

As my Peace Corps service came to an end, I realized I had been gone long enough. It was time to return to Lee's Summit. Time to give back to the community that gave me so much as a child. It was time to get involved and make my hometown home again. I wanted to be "in the know" of the community.

When I returned I must admit I did not plan to stay long, but to the answered prayers of my parents I am still here; married, happy, and making roots.

I am not an expert nor am I over involved, but I do try my best to be informed. Over the past few years I have asked questions, attended City Council meetings, read all the community bulletin boards, met some of my neighbors, and became a member of the Livable Streets Advisory Board--after all this is my home.

Like my service in the Peace Corps, I hope to replicate that dedication to the city of Lee's Summit. I encourage anyone at any age that resides in Lee's Summit to get involved and be informed. Ask questions, attend community meetings and events, be informed via social media, come to a WiBi (Walk-in, Bike-in)...make this community your home. I know first hand it takes baby steps to make a leap towards a better community.

Valerie Salazar resides in downtown Lee's Summit. She is member of the Livable Streets Advisory Board.