

A group of community members say grace around a Neighbor's Table in Chesapeake, Virginia. Opposite page: Sarah Harmeyer with her father, Lee.



setting the table



THIS PAGE: SAMUEL MELTON. OPPOSITE PAGE: RUSH JAGOE; PROP STYLING BY SARAH SMART

SARAH HARMEYER FOUND A WAY TO CONNECT WITH HER NEIGHBORS—NOW SHE WANTS TO SHARE IT.

by Sara Austin

ABOUT 30 MILES inland from the salt-water taffy stands of Virginia Beach, rows of tidy clapboard homes line the streets of Culpepper Landing. Nearly a century ago, this land was a 488-acre farm, abundant with corn, wheat, and soybeans. Nine years ago, it was a small housing development of only about 40 homes within the city of Chesapeake, Virginia. Most everyone knew one another; longtime resident Tim Gudge (everyone just called him “the mayor” back then) remembers throwing a party at which one roasted pig was enough to feed the entire neighborhood.

As the economy improved, Culpepper Landing boomed, and it now has some 700 homes of various sizes, many of them housing young military families tied to Naval Station Norfolk and other nearby bases. “What I like about the neighborhood is that we get all socioeconomic groups, all living together and being neighborly together, and isn’t that what we are supposed to do? We are supposed to love each other and get to know each other,” says resident Linda Rice, who works at the Hampton Roads Community Foundation. Still, says Rice, rapid growth has also made the area feel more anonymous; it’s harder to meet new people these days.

Which brings us to the table.

By the time I got to Culpepper Landing this spring, two solid western-cedar tables had been delivered by Sarah Harmeyer, who’d helped her father make them in a barn near Austin, Texas. They had been arranged end to end to create one massive table and set for a dinner for two dozen community leaders, part of an antihunger campaign from Walmart, the hunger relief group Feeding America, *Real Simple*, and Nextdoor, the social media network for neighborhoods. The idea was for Nextdoor members to nominate a neighbor to host conversations with local leaders about tackling hunger—and Rice had raised her hand for Culpepper Landing.

The first thing that happened at the table was a prayer: of thankfulness to be dining together, of hope for families who don’t have food on their tables.

The next thing that happened at the table was a conversation. An ominous cloud rolled in and the winds kicked up, so the group huddled closer to listen as each guest told a personal story. Chef Gary LeBlanc, who lives near Chesapeake and had made that evening’s dinner, told of being

so grieved while volunteering in his hometown of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina that he was moved to found Mercy Chefs, a nonprofit that serves meals to victims of natural disasters. Delena Buffalow and her daughter, Nischelle, founders of a local hunger charity, described cooking for hundreds of needy families out of their own kitchen despite having little means themselves.

The final thing that happened at the table was a feeling. I could sense that change had been sparked and that the guests wanted to keep it going. Ruth Jones Nichols, CEO of the Food Bank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore, spoke of holding more conversations at more tables throughout this corner of the state. It’s a chemical reaction that Harmeyer, who’s been delivering her tables across the country for the past five years, has seen again and again.

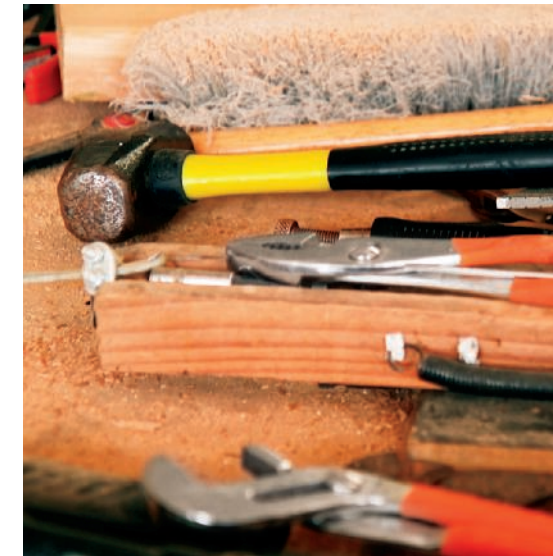
“Two thousand years ago, we were invited to love our neighbors, and that is for sure what drives me,” she says. “The world is a little crazy right now, and we could use more love in our interactions. A lot of people need to feel included and seen. And it’s hard—my neighbors are not all like me. But there are ways we can connect, and the table is a beautiful, natural place to do that. When you’re sitting at a big table, you feel like you’re part of something.”

WHEN SHE THINKS BACK ON IT, most of Harmeyer’s best moments have happened around a table. She grew up in Houston with a mom who was a kindergarten teacher, and every meal was a teachable moment—a plate with steak, salad, and strawberry Jell-O became a lesson on the letter s. When Harmeyer was in high school, after her mother died of cancer, it was just her, her sister, and her father at the dinner table, the three developing a close bond.

In graduate school for education in Arkansas, Harmeyer operated a restaurant out of her home; she left a menu on the answering machine and took reservations, seating 16 people an hour in a converted TV room. (The fact that the Red Porch Café was “super illegal,” as she says, did not prevent the university president from bringing guests over for dinner.) Later, people-gathering would become her

Top row, from left: Drilling a Neighbor’s Table; Sarah Harmeyer speaking at an event sponsored by Walmart, Feeding America, Nextdoor, and *Real Simple* in Charlotte, North Carolina; Lee Harmeyer, who builds the tables.

Middle row, from left: Sarah Harmeyer; tools used to build the tables; a group of neighbors and friends in Hunt, Texas. Bottom row, from left: Neighbor’s Tables in Clarkston, Michigan; Sarah Harmeyer sanding a table; the Harmeyers’ workshop near Austin, Texas.



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT: MATT ORCUTT; SMITEN & HOOKED; SAMUEL MELTON. MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT: HEATHER HAWKINS; MATT ORCUTT (2); SARAH HARMAYER. BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT: JORDAN STRICKER; MATT ORCUTT (2)

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career, as she took on a role organizing fundraising galas for a major pediatric cancer research center.

By 2010, she had transferred to the hospital’s Dallas office. She was living and breathing her job, and as a result she found it difficult to get to know people. “I was working all the time and I was happy doing it, but I realized there needed to be a shift in my life,” she recalls. “My work felt purposeful, but it was all-consuming.”

A friend challenged her to consider when she had been happiest, and she kept returning to the Red Porch Café. “That was the best year of my life. There was something about gathering people, the food, being connected,” she says. She envisioned hosting neighbors in her backyard and asked her father, Lee Harmeyer, to build her a table big enough to seat 20.

That the father had never built a table and that the daughter did not even know 20 of her neighbors were mere speed bumps. She drew a rough picture of what she wanted—a farmhouse table of western red cedar. Lee, a retired oil executive and amateur woodworker living on a family ranch outside Austin, hit the internet for instructions and built the table in a barn behind his home. In March 2012, Sarah placed the finished piece in her snug Dallas backyard and hung two chandeliers from the oak tree above. “I set a goal to try to serve 500 people that year,” she says, “which was a random number. But it gave me something to be intentional about.”

She found the names and addresses of 300 people in her SOHIP (South of Highland Park) area through its Nextdoor site. Then she mailed all of them old-school paper invites to her “So Hip SOHIP Soiree,” asking people to

consider coming out if they had never met their neighbors and to please bring a dish to share. More than 90 people showed up. “I was absolutely blown away,” she says. “I realized that night, as people kept coming down the driveway, that people just want to be invited.”

So she has continued inviting neighbors over for birthday parties, concerts, and more. The budget for these gatherings is around \$75 a month; most of the meals are potlucks, and everything is served family-style, with guests grabbing tokens that assign jobs such as filling the drinks, clearing the plates, and giving the toast. “That’s my way of getting out of the mentality that I have to do everything as the host, and it invites people to create something together,” she says. She can’t remember the last time she loaded her own dishwasher.

Eight months after her first potluck, guest 500 walked up the driveway for Thanksgiving: a single mom with two boys and a girl, carrying her aunt’s squash casserole. Harmeyer felt as if the moment were unfolding in slow motion, with Harmeyer jumping and clapping, wearing a crown and a sash with the number 500 on it, and looking over at her father cheering her on. “I knew I didn’t want to stop then,” she says. “That year had totally trumped my Red Porch Café year.”

Over the next few months, a plan began to form. She called her father: “Would you be up to building more tables?”

HARMEYER HAS NOW SERVED MORE THAN 3,000 people at her own backyard table. She left her job with the hospital about a year ago to work full-time running the company she named Neighbor’s Table. She has placed tables in 28 states, with the goal of having one in all 50 states by the year 2020.

Lee still makes each piece in his barn. He buys 800 pounds of western red cedar planks at a time and carefully sorts them by color. His tools are simple—a miter to cut down the boards, screws and a drill to attach the planks for the top of the table, a table saw to cut notches in the legs for support beams. Each board goes through a drum sander before assembly and is sanded again by hand afterward. Father and daughter apply stain and weather protectant and, in a nod to their Texas roots, finish off the tables with a hot-iron brand of their logo. They sell the tables for \$1,700 and up. Sarah delivers them herself out of the back of a rental truck, and buyers and their neighbors join her to unload and assemble them.

Earlier this year, she delivered 18 Neighbor’s Tables in nine days, driving from Texas to California, Oregon, Wyoming, and Colorado. She could outsource deliveries, but making it personal is the whole point. “Most people getting our tables want to be part of what we’re doing and want to be part of something bigger than themselves,” she says. Many customers are individuals or families buying a table for their backyard, but she’s also placed tables at churches and businesses and in public spaces. (The recent antihunger campaign with Walmart placed tables not only in Chesapeake but also in common spaces in Charlotte, Phoenix, and Pittsburgh.)

Harmeyer often stays for the first meal at the table; she says she tries to do more listening than talking. James and

Sarah Schneider, restaurant owners in Clarkston, Michigan, bought a table for their home and then, a year later, put four more in the lower level of the Fed, a restaurant they converted from an old bank building. Heather and Chris Congo in Diablo, California, threw a party around their table for all the new families entering their son’s sixth grade class, to ease the kids’ transition before the first day of school. Buyers have hosted family feasts, get-to-know-your-neighbor parties, dinners for refugee families, and cereal nights with friends. “We are all so ordinary, but we are doing something extraordinary by gathering together,” says Harmeyer.

BACK IN CULPEPPER LANDING, the sun finally broke through the clouds just as the dinner plates were being cleared away. The tables would stay in the square for good, a gift from the event’s sponsors. Linda Rice explained that the community’s social committee was already discussing possible monthly potlucks. Maybe they would pick one topic of debate and put it to the entire table, as was the practice at the dinners of Virginia’s own Thomas Jefferson. “The tables will become instrumental to building community,” says Rice. “They have the potential to change our neighborhood.”

To celebrate the tables’ arrival, residents streamed from the houses that lined the town square for a block party. A taco truck was set up, a DJ began playing, and soccer balls rolled in from all directions. Families eating at the tables ducked to avoid an errant Frisbee. Two teenagers sat shoulder to shoulder on the bench, huddled over a phone. A father and daughter climbed underneath the tables on their knees to investigate how they were built, knocking on the support beams holding them together.

Next to me, a mother straddled the bench and held her squirming toddler as he attempted to eat, missing his plate and spilling black beans onto the surface. As the mom rolled her eyes and dabbed at the stain, it struck me that an evening that had started with a prayer was ending with a kind of baptism by taco. Magical things were going to happen at this table.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUSH JAGOE; PROP STYLING BY SARAH SMART



From left: A plaque on a Neighbor’s Table donated to Culpepper Landing in Chesapeake, Virginia; Ginger Savage (left), a former food bank client, and Jessica Larche, morning anchor at WTKR in Norfolk, sit at a Neighbor’s Table in Chesapeake to discuss area hunger and poverty; the Chesapeake tables set with products from Walmart; fun at the Chesapeake block party.