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JAMAICA PLAIN

## Neighbors bond, 'party' through communal snow removal

Posted by Matt Rocheleau January 18, 2011 02:25 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Residents of Hall and Boynton streets gathered Saturday for a 'dig-out party,' clearing snow from the block's walkways, sidewalks and parking spots, including shoveling snow surrounding strangers' cars.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A small army of shovelers worked to clear snow around a single plowed-in car parked along the curb of a quiet side street in Jamaica Plain this past weekend.

It was unusual to watch at least six people chip in to clear one car, and even stranger when one of them declared, "Careful. We don't know whose this is."

The post-snowfall mood in Boston, where the density of people, cars and buildings magnify winter's impact, isn't always pleasant. But, even in a season where the Hub has seen two storms less than three weeks apart dump more than three feet of snow combined, some neighbors have been able to bond over the stuff that normally pits residents and commuters against one another.

This is one such story.

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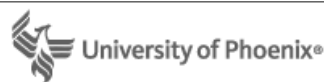
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After the first major nor'easter hit in late December, Katha Washburn, 38, sent an e-mail out to her neighbors on Hall and Boynton streets in Jamaica Plain attempting to organize a "dig-out party."



It was a shot-in-the-dark experiment. She didn't know most of those she was e-mailing – the addresses came from another neighbor who had organized a holiday cookie swap. Though the weather was seasonably warm and the e-mail promised participants a small treat for afterward, she planned the inaugural community shovel event for New Year's Day. Before clicking

send, she wondered, "Am I going to look like the woman everyone in the neighborhood hates?"

Two dig-out parties later, "even the people who can't come are like, 'what a great idea,'" said Washburn, one of the half-dozen or so that helped clear hardened snow around a stranger's red Chevrolet Cavalier.

A total of 13 volunteers – from their mid-20s to early 60s -- who live on the two streets worked to rid snow from the area's sidewalks, walkways and parking spaces on Saturday afternoon. Few have lived on the block more than a couple of years, and few had met each other before Saturday.



Each of the two-hour dig-out events cleared enough snow to open up about a dozen more curbside parking spots on the two streets.

Even with such communal benefit, "I think the biggest motive is to get to know your neighbors." Washburn said while shoveling snow alongside neighbor David Webster to widen a narrow opening where a sidewalk and crosswalk meet.



Throughout the afternoon that was filled with handshakes and exchanges of "nice to meet you," fellow volunteers agreed that the opportunity to interact with neighbors was a major draw.

"I thought it was the coolest thing, and a great way to get to know people," said Amie Lennon of Boynton Street.

"It's a really fun way to meet neighbors," said Luke Scheuer.

While some were notified by e-mail, Hall Street residents Scheuer and his wife, Therese, joined the clean-up after simply walking outside and noticing what was going on. Similarly, neighbor Akira Kamiya stopped to help after driving by the crew of shovelers, and Gabe Nardie joined when he noticed one of several fliers on area telephone poles advertising the dig-out party while sledding with his son nearby.

"It's the biggest gift when people show up unexpectedly," Washburn said.

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Before each dig-out, she said only three people confirmed they'd pitch in – herself, her boyfriend Chuck Vath and Hall Street resident Trinity Peacock-Broyles.

“You just need to find three or four people you know will show up ... and after that the community gets the credit,” said Washburn, who moved to Boynton Street three years ago. “These things happen in small towns, but it's special in the city.”



Hall Street residents Lora DeSalvo, Jim Balega, Maggie Moore and her 16-month-old son Eliot also joined in the past weekend's effort that concluded with a gathering around hot cocoa at Washburn's home.

“During the blizzard, you can look down the street and you can see everyone shoveling and helping neighbors, but afterwards, that's pretty much it. Everyone feels they've done their part,” added 29-year-old Peacock-Broyles.

Paul Hayes grew up in South Boston. Now 63, Hayes doesn't remember his former neighborhood being as heavily populated with cars as he hears it is today. But, referring specifically to the space-saving practice that is **most common and competitive there**, he said, “it sounds like it's become individualistic and everyone just shovels for themselves and that's it. So, I think this [the dig-out party] is a really good idea.”

Washburn said she's been amazed and thrilled with the response from her own neighbors along with word of a successful, web- and-cell-phone-friendly **neighborhood-wide campaign** organized through the **Jamaica Plain Neighbors for Neighbors website**.

“Although, I'll tell you, I won't be sad if there's no more snow after this,” she said Saturday.

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

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