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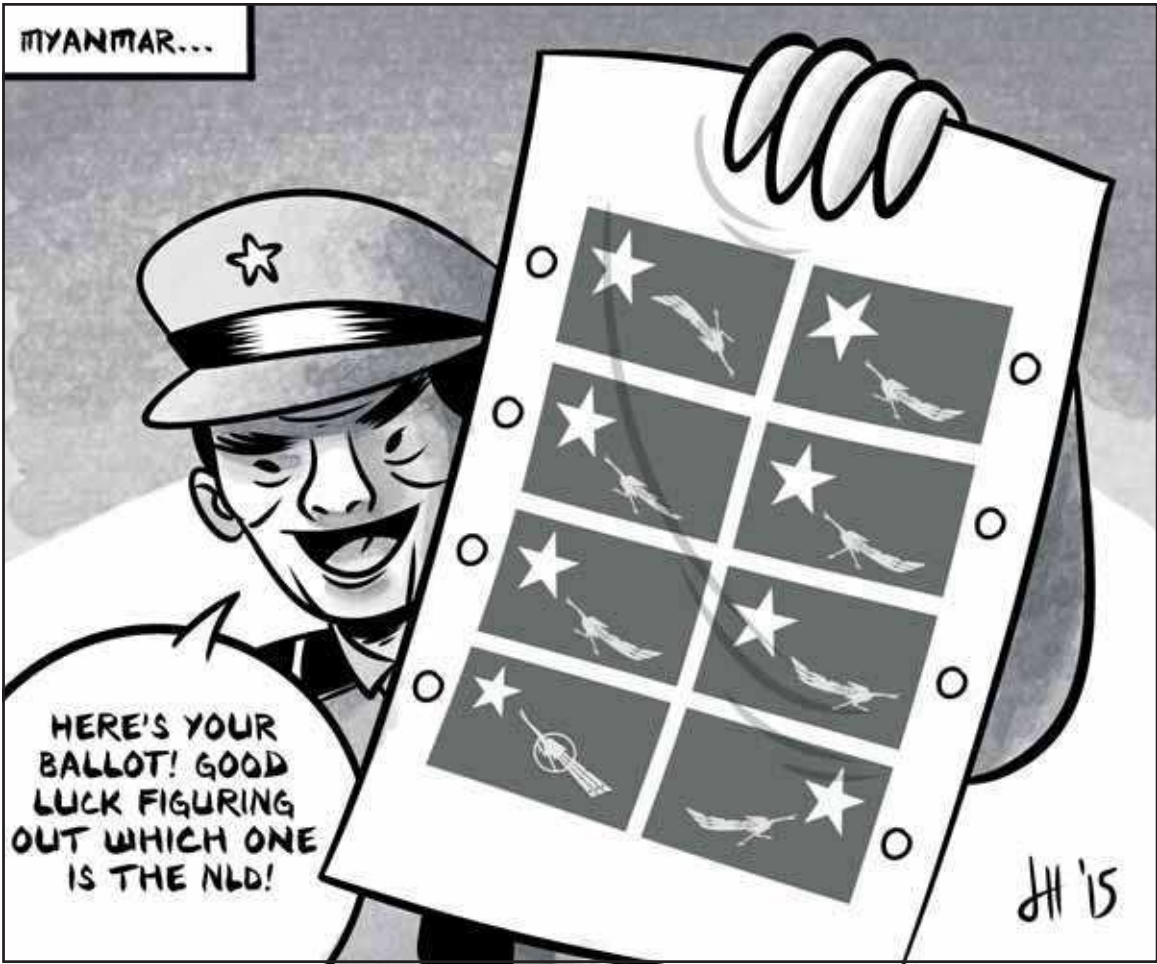
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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



When neighbors aren't neighborly

A reader wrote to me recently expressing that she doesn't feel welcome in the Portland neighborhood where she has lived for the past 15 years. When she first moved into her house, she made friends with the older residents, many of whom have now passed away or moved out. When one of her neighbors died, the letter-writer even adopted two of her former neighbor's stranded cats. It was difficult because she had two cats of her own, but she wanted to do that for her neighbor. The house she lives in isn't perfect, and the landlord doesn't seem to want to make repairs, but it's her home — although she now nearly lives in house confinement because her new neighbors scare her.

As a single woman who is a Chinese immigrant, she responded to the piece I wrote addressing the subtle racism and privilege I experience when I'm treated as white ("Musings on white privilege," *The Asian Reporter*, September 21, 2015). She wanted me to understand the kind of racism she was experiencing. Her handwritten letter moved me. Here's an edited excerpt:

I had a dispute with a white lady on the 4th of July because her teenage son and friends threw fireworks at my house ... When some black neighbors moved in, they got on my white neighbor's side and things went from bad to worse ... They called me a dead rat and I heard them say things like "get out of here." I've tried to ignore it, but the harassment intimidates me ... I've become a "stray" on the weekends because there is nowhere for me to go. What kind of life is this?

I met with her to talk about her changing working-class neighborhood and what makes her feel unsafe. She told me when the new neighbors moved in, they partied late into the night. When the incident with the fireworks happened, she called the police. From then on, she was branded as the neighbor who calls cops. She said the police showed up, but didn't do much, and her call to the police didn't sit well with the newer residents.

Soon after, she started to feel harassed. People began entering her backyard late at night and the constant noise disturbed her. Some white friends tried to mediate between her and her neighbors, but after they left, she felt even more unwelcome. She worries that anything she does will just make things worse. Despite being on a fixed income, she is actively looking for a different home that allows cats.

Her story reminds me of the difficulty I had with my neighbors when, as a single woman, I bought my home. My next-door neighbors, a traditional, first-generation Greek family, didn't understand why I

wasn't living with a boyfriend or husband. My life as a radio producer who needed quiet outside was also a source of conflict.

The first six years were difficult. My neighbors and I share a driveway and it was common for them, their extended family, and visitors to park on my side. The adolescent sons played basketball in the driveway at all hours while I tried to record and mix audio. The family would also host noisy parties in the driveway and in my backyard.

One Greek Easter, I was awakened to the sound of tap-tap-tapping outside my bedroom window. I peered through the blinds to see the carcass of a headless goat rotating on a spit in the driveway. As a lifelong vegetarian, I fought the urge to throw up. At one point, the driveway developed a sinkhole on my neighbor's side. Despite my work deadline, they knocked on my door until I answered, then insisted I pay for half of the repair. The husband, his brother, his wife, and their three teenagers yelled at me while circling around me. My neighbor's brother flat out said: "We don't understand you. You're not married. You're at home all the time." When I got frustrated with the interrogation, his wife chimed in: "What's with your attitude?"

We had a silent détente for many years after that, creating an invisible line down the middle of the driveway. Then something happened — I got married to Richard. After he moved into the house, the neighbors became friendly. The first thing Richard did was alter the driveway by creating a divider of native Oregon shrubbery down the middle. No more invisible line. Things have been peaceful for many years now and we're cordial with each other, yet it still irks me that it took having a man living in my home for the neighbors to accept me.

Given my past experiences, I can relate with my letter-writer. It isn't easy living alone. One can feel unsafe, especially if the neighbors are hostile and distrustful. Add to that mix anti-immigrant sentiment and the situation becomes even more difficult.

In 2006, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study called "Living In America: Challenges Facing New Immigrants and Refugees" examined the housing problems faced by immigrant and refugee communities. "The women in these focus groups expressed the most concerns about safety, since many must walk through these neighborhoods due to transportation problems. A number of research participants said they have experienced vandalism and robberies," the report said. A more recent study in 2012 by Consumer Action found that community-based organizations (CBOs) that work with "the

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