



photo by Jordan Stricker



NEIGHBOR'S TABLE

*Interview with Sarah Harmeyer
by Milady Griffin*

MILADY When I first interviewed Sarah, we were 20 minutes into the conversation before I even got to ask my first question because she was asking me all about my work, what my family was like, what my day job was like. This girl is hard-wired for relationship building and getting to know people. She wants to know you, what makes you excited, what your life is like. Her business is a natural outflow of her gifting in making people feel welcome and cared for.

I'll interject here and there to add some details, but she is so enthusiastic, I'll let her tell you how it all began...

SARAH I live in Dallas. I'm single. I work for a children's hospital as a fundraiser. I hit this point five years ago where I was totally finding my identity in my work and how I performed at work. I had to take a step back. I wanted to re-shape my identity as a Christian on who Christ says I am. I spent the first few months of 2011 kind of re-resting in that identity. Through that process and meeting with my friend, Eric, I realized that I'm a people gatherer. I didn't know what that would look like, but I thought back to the very best moments of my life, and oftentimes they were around a table, when I got to celebrate someone.

I started to follow this thread. I was new to Dallas and didn't really know my neighbors. I wanted to get to know the people around me, to my right and to my left. I thought, maybe if I had a table to gather people, I bet that would be that spot for me. I asked my dad to build an 18' farmhouse-style table big enough to seat 20 people. I have a tiny little home, and an even tinier back yard, but somehow we fit a table back there. So at a place of discovery and a hard place in my career, I started gathering

people in my home. My word for the year was Community, and I set a goal to serve 500 people that year. I started early 2012, one party after another, and I learned how to do it in a way that wasn't Martha Stewart or Pinterest-worthy.

For my first gathering, I put an invitation in my neighbors' mailboxes. I wrote that even if they've never stepped foot outside their homes, would they consider coming this night and meeting people? I've never done this before either. Bring a dish or a bottle of wine to share, and I had 91 people come! It set my heart on this path, where we created this space in my neighborhood together. That year on Thanksgiving the 500th person walked down the driveway.

This is the place where I come most alive, where God gets a little bit of glory because I'm using the gifts he's given me to serve the people around me. It's downright fun for me!

The following year, my word was Responsibility, and I set a budget. [Laughs] I hosted another 500 people for \$75 a month that next year. When people asked if they could bring something, I started to say yes. My guests could start participating before they even came to the table. I invited people into that experience to serve each other. If they saw a water glass running low, they'd fill it, or if they wanted to load the dishwasher at the end of the night, I'd let them. It became *our* table, not just my table.

MILADY Fast forward to 2016, she has served over 2000 people around her table. She's so humble and mystified by that number, but she says she's still learning... and that she's an introvert! She explains that while using the gifts that God has given her is extremely life-giving, after a dinner party she feels like she's been run over by a truck in the best possible way.

I wondered how she got past the idea that dinners had to be perfect. With a full-time job, who would even have the time to set a perfect table?

SARAH I had to get over any Martha Stewart or Pinterest-worthy notions I had. One dinner party in particular comes to mind. I volunteered to host a group of moms and their daughters, many who were Dallas socialites. I started to stress a bit: Did I forget to tell them we're sitting at a rustic outdoor table, that I

drink out of mason jars and not fine crystal? I told one of my friends my worries, and she said, "Sarah, I dare you to serve pizza to these ladies. What if you create an experience so different from what they normally experience in others' homes?" So, we grilled pizza! And I set the stage for them. I said, "Remember when we were little girls, and we shared stories and secrets and ate pizza? I would love it if we could do that tonight." I was so freed up! The pizza was just fine. I get stuck sometimes, too.

MILADY I was curious how she decided whom to invite. Did she know all of these people? Or was she inviting strangers over? The answer was both. Hosting 20 people at one time I'm sure held challenges in the conversational arena, as well as logistically.

SARAH I got over real quick trying to make sure everyone had the same beliefs or similar interests.

I make place cards every time because I want my guests to know I've prepared a place for them, just like Jesus did. I go around and tell everyone what I love them about them, even if I just met them. I say one little thing, and it's really meaningful to me to share that even with my closest friends. You don't hear that enough! It's a meaningful thing to make someone known who is on the fence about coming to a stranger's backyard, just to pull them into the experience. It's my prayer that people would experience God's love at my table.

MILADY How did Neighbor's Table go from dinner parties in your back yard to the mission it is today?

SARAH My friend Eric called me a couple summers ago, and he said, "I've been watching this happen in your yard and in your life, and I wonder if there might be something bigger that this could be, something outside your own yard."

I had no clue what that meant. I walked away from that phone call wondering what that could be.

I was at a conference when a thought popped into my head. What if there are other people gatherers who just need a table, like I did? Dad's retired, I wonder if he'd be up for making tables for other people. What if we could cheer people on to do this in their neighbor-

hoods? Everyone lives next to somebody. During a break at the conference, I called my Dad. He was so enthusiastic and so delighted at the idea of building tables for other people. I gave him the title of Chairman of the Boards. We started building tables for other people.

Our first table went to a college senior. College students would meet around the table and share pizza.

Pretty soon, we got requests from more people, and we had several tables scattered throughout Texas. We're in 12 states now.

My goal is to have our tables in every state by 2020. I want to see people all over the country loving their neighbors.

MILADY My very favorite part is how she delivers the tables!

SARAH I drive a giant rental truck across the country and deliver the tables myself! [laughing] It is the most inefficient way to do business! But I feel like I'm building this family. We're going on a roadtrip. Everyone jump in. We've got snacks. Let's do this together.

When you're a maker, you like to see how the end user interacts with your product. I love to deliver the table. I throw a dinner party with them when we deliver it to get the ball rolling for them.

Neighbor's Table is a love mission. Take that thing that fires you up. We can use whatever God has made us good at to love people.

Go look up Sarah and Neighbor's Table at neighborstable.com. You will want to follow along on her road trips!

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