



Joel Pace spends time gardening at his home. Later, he joined writer and neighbor Mary Klest for conversation and coffee in town.

How Well Do You Know Your Neighbor?

WHEN JOEL PACE and his wife Kristin moved into a house down the street from me, I was curious to know who they were and where they came from. The first thing I observe about Joel is that he likes working in the yard. One day, I see him outside planting some bushes. I say hello and introduce myself the way new neighbors are likely to do. His smile is friendly and we get to talking.

“What brings you to Barrington?” I ask as he wipes dirt off his pants.

He gives me the short version of his return to the area from Pittsburgh. “I teach at the American Academy of Art on Michigan Avenue. We needed a house along the Metra line.”

I walk my dog past their house regularly. I wave, say hello, and move on.


On another day, I’m at Madcats, a music room in Palatine, when a man nods and says hello to me. I say hello back and continue talking with the friend I had come with. The hello man comes closer to our table and says, “I see you walking your dog past my house.” It is then I recognize my neighbor Joel. I’m used to seeing him in garden clothes with a cap on his head and a trowel in his hand. We talk briefly before he moves toward the stage. He’s not here to listen to music, but to play in the band. He’s the lead singer and keyboard player of the Night Beats, a band he founded. After that encounter, I want to know more.

We meet for coffee in town where I get the longer version of his story.

Joel earned an undergraduate degree in Art from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. That’s where he first met Kristin. But they parted ways. He obtained a master’s degree from Carnegie Mellon, married, and began teaching at the Academy. After decades of teaching art and the death of his wife, he reconnected with Kristin and they married. He thought he wanted to retire so they moved to Pittsburgh. But the Academy wanted him back and he wanted to come back. “I love teaching students how to draw.” He now lives in Barrington, acts as Dean of the School and continues teaching a class in drawing.

It is not until our coffee cups are nearly empty that he tells me of his childhood. “We were very poor. We didn’t own a car or a television, not even a radio. But what I did have was a box of crayons and a library card.” Wow! With that, he built a most interesting and rewarding life.



Joel reminds me that we are not just one thing, at one time, in one place. We are multi-faceted people with lots to learn about each other. 

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Mary Klest is a Barrington-based writer and local journalism advocate. She can be reached at mary@maryklest.com.