

It's a tricky thing, putting into words, what makes my community so special. That always present, yet understated feeling of belonging, of being seen, of mattering. Even after growing up in Florence, Italy, living in Madrid, Spain and New York City, and traveling the globe, it is only in Washington, Iowa that I feel truly seen. I feel it every time I bring a concern to city council and something is done about it. Whenever me or my business are featured in an article in the local paper. Every time a community leader seeks out my opinion on a local matter, and every single time a concerned customer or neighbor or acquaintance asks how I'm recovering from being sick or how a family member is fairing or wishes me well on my upcoming trip.

I feel included when my business is asked to participate in a local event. I feel synchronicity when we gather as small business owners at our weekly merchant meetings and brainstorm ways to promote shopping local that benefit everyone. I feel safe knowing the local law enforcement and that they know me. I feel comfortable not locking my doors or leaving my items unattended in a store or walking my neighborhood at night. I feel confident going to a bar by myself because I am guaranteed to run into someone I know that I can sit and share a drink with. I relish going to a movie by myself, knowing that in the dimmed room all around me are my friends and neighbors. If it's snowing out and there are only a handful of us there, I feel privileged to be one of the few enjoying a movie in the oldest continuously operating cinema theater in the world.

I know our coffee shop regulars feel seen when their drink is already made when they walk in the door because we saw them crossing the street. We all feel appreciated whenever we call in for carry-out from a local restaurant and they already know how we like our order because they recognized our voice on the phone. Every time a shop owner holds something aside for us that they think we would like, or a coworker tells us about a new Mexican grocery store that has the best Central American food for carry-out because they know we studied abroad in Guatemala and pupusas are our jam. When the local Fareway carries a particular brand because they know it's our favorite, we feel remembered.

When we go to one of our many year-round events in our downtown and stay for hours catching up with all the people we know, checking in on each other, sharing stories of success and heartache and victories and defeats, we know that we matter. Everyone instinctively knows they belong in a place they are proud to call home, a place where the variety of opinions and backgrounds is an asset, something to be valued and respected. When we shop at the farmer's market and we know the vendors have grown their produce and baked their goods with love and attention, we feel nourished and sated.

We feel energized after our morning pickleball session at the Y, refreshed after a dip at the aquatic center, rejuvenated after a yoga class, relaxed after a massage, and satisfied after fine-dining at a destination restaurant where we go to celebrate life's big moments. There is just something about finding all this and more in my small hometown while also being able to park right in front of where I want to go, or walking there if the weather permits, or biking and leaving my bike unchained when I get there. There is something about that that is so quintessentially "home."

Mostly, we never feel alone in our community, whether it's our hometown or where we choose to plant our roots. We might be married with children or divorced or widowed, living alone or with others, in an apartment complex or a big drafty house, either way we are never truly alone. All it takes is a walk down the Kewash Trail or around our beautiful downtown, or perhaps a visit to our favorite coffee shop or restaurant, or even a trip to the grocery store. We know our neighbors and that visibility is what makes us feel, above everything else, loved.