

Merry Christmas, Hon!

I still can't believe it!

Imagine this New Yorker's shock and amazement as I gazed out at the gridlock on North Charles Street last Thursday afternoon with the sudden realization that not one driver had blown his horn in protest of the first snow-induced traffic jam. Not one horn. How could this be?

It was a parking lot in every direction. I moved around from one side of the house to the other looking on at mid-day drivers inching along, getting closer only to the car in front of them and still no horns. Nothing. The silence was interminable. Wait. I heard one. Hah, too good to be true, even in Charm City. Not so fast, just an ambulance trying to cut a path through the congestion, likely destined for the magnificent Mercy Medical Center.

Still no honking. Everyone's patience was still in check. Surely this civility and good-mannered behavior would never happen in my hometown of New York, where the sound of a car horn is comparable to a singing bird in Mountain Maryland or crashing waves in Ocean City. In fact, not only do the cars and cabs blow their horns if you aren't driving fast enough, you are just as easily to be serenaded for walking too slow on the sidewalk!

Maybe the drivers that day were in the Christmas spirit, what with Christmas only nine days away and the first measurable snow of the year falling from the sky. But I don't think so. I have three years' worth of evidence that says this "city of neighborhoods" makes a habit of taking care of its own, sharing defeats and victories, tragedies and triumphs more like a large family than a mid-market city. The city's unofficial greeting even confirms it. Right, Hon?

Perhaps the active presence of the city's historic faith communities has helped to weave the tapestry of tolerance and cooperation that envelopes the diverse City of Baltimore. There was certainly proof of it last January at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, as religious leaders from seemingly every faith family in Baltimore gathered for a prayer service to promote peace in our city. Including my own installation, it

remains the most crowded service I've ever attended at our Cathedral.

Such spirit would be on display again last week, following a tragic fire in East Baltimore that claimed the lives of six family members, spanning three generations, including three young children. Family members and neighbors instinctively gathered at St. Ann's Catholic Church (see Page 9) for comfort, consolation, and prayer. By all accounts, none of those who died were Catholic and neither were the mourners, but the parish is widely viewed as a spiritual anchor in the Barclay Midway community, a place where neighbors comfort neighbors and share in the pain of their suffering.

Though still a "newcomer," more than three years into my life in Baltimore, I am still awakening to the "charms" of Charm City. Considered as neither a Northern city nor a Southern one, Baltimore resides somewhere in between, and I believe the city and its residents like it that way. Baltimore isn't New York or Philadelphia and it isn't Savannah or Charleston. It's Baltimore. What you see is what you get. Honest, hard-working, kind, generous and, yes, civil people working to make a living for their family and enjoying the fruits of their labors, all the while willing to share them with those who have less.

Sure, the city has its problems just like any other - with more than 600,000 people in one municipal jurisdiction, it's unavoidable. But, amid the negative news stories and the television shows that depict the city in the worst possible light, it's time to take stock in the best of Baltimore.

As we prepare for the birth of Christ and the end of another year, I give thanks for my new hometown. When I learned I was coming to Baltimore, I knew of the city's importance to the Catholic Church, its special place in the history of our faith in this Nation. Since then, I have also come to know the many virtues that make it so special in the hearts and minds of so many countless others, and I'm proud to share these with anyone who asks where I live.

So, in the words of a true Baltimorean, I wish you a blessed Merry Christmas ...
Hon!