



Another 2025 Most Engaged Neighbors Honoree from Christian County

Ashley Meredith Marks: Turning a New Neighborhood Into a Thriving Community in Ozark

Story by David L. Burton, Community Development Specialist, MU Extension

When Ashley Meredith Marks moved into a brand-new subdivision in Ozark, Missouri, she realized something was missing. The streets were fresh, the lawns were perfect, and the homes gleamed with new paint — but it didn't yet feel like a neighborhood. Instead of waiting for connection to happen, Ashley decided to create it herself.

That simple decision has transformed her corner of Christian County into one of the warmest, most connected neighborhoods around. For her intentional acts of kindness and community-building, Ashley was named one of Missouri's Top 20 Most Engaged Neighbors of 2025, part of Missouri Good Neighbor Week — a statewide initiative led by University of Missouri Extension and The Hopeful Neighborhood Project to celebrate everyday Missourians who strengthen the places they live.

Creating Connection From Scratch

"After moving to a new place about a year ago, I was feeling more anonymous and isolated than I wanted to. So I decided I didn't need to wait for anyone else — I should try and change that myself," said Ashley. "In a new build neighborhood, it's been fun to meet people as they move in and be on a bit of a level playing field with lots of people in the same boat of being new to the neighborhood."

Armed with a batch of homemade cookies, her husband, and their friendly blue heeler, Ashley began walking door-to-door to welcome new families as they moved in. Those small introductions became the foundation for something much larger — a web of relationships that turned a collection of houses into a true community.

Her nominator wrote, "Ashley goes out of her way to make everyone feel included. Each week she visits new neighbors to introduce herself, remembers their names, and greets them personally, creating a warm and friendly atmosphere from day one."

Growing Connection — Literally

A self-described "enthusiastic gardener and sharer of food," Ashley turned her backyard into a gathering place for children and families. Neighborhood kids stop by after school to help tend her flower and vegetable gardens, learning about plants, patience, and teamwork as they wait for cucumbers and carrots to ripen.

That interaction, in turn, drew their parents together — sparking casual cookouts, shared meals, and new friendships.

"It's been fun to think of new ways to meet, connect, or help neighbors," Ashley said. "I like to think our neighborhood is a warmer place because of our efforts to be friendly and thoughtful."

Her generosity has even influenced the physical layout of the community. Instead of putting up fences, several families have chosen to keep their yards open so children can play freely across lawns — a visible symbol of trust and connection.

Leading by Example

Ashley's impact extends beyond her own street. She serves on her homeowners association board, where she stays late to prepare agendas, plans events, and ensures every voice is heard. She helped organize a neighborhood pool party and is now developing plans for a community garden inspired by her volunteer work with the Sparta Community Garden.

Her practical advice to anyone who wants to start neighbor-ing is refreshingly down-to-earth: "Start anywhere — maybe linger a little longer when you meet someone out walking and introduce yourself. Plan a front-yard activity where you can say hi to people passing by."

Ashley says people love context and connection — so help give some context -- tell who you are -- and connect - tell what you love to do.

"It's been fun to think of new ways to meet, connect, or help neighbors - it keeps me engaged in something positive I can control," Ashley said. "I like to think that our neighborhood is a warmer place because of our efforts to be friendly and thoughtful!"

The Ripple of One Neighbor's Effort

Through cookies, conversations, and community gardens, Ashley Meredith Marks has done more than make friends — she's cultivated belonging. Neighbors describe her as the heart of their community, someone whose kindness bridges differences and whose actions remind everyone that neighborhoods aren't just built with wood and concrete, but with warmth, empathy, and shared life.

What does Ashley have for someone who wants to be a better neighbor but isn't sure where to start?

"I'd advise them to start anywhere. Maybe lingering a little longer when they meet someone out walking and introduce themselves. Or plan some kind of front yard activity. I think these little actions can help spark something larger," said Ashley.



Ashley will be honored at our March 26th County Commission meeting. We invite you to attend and congratulate her in person.