

LIFE IN PRINT



Pender brothers Bob and Chris pose on Thomas Place, the site of many a Wiffle ball game. If memory serves, those high bicycle handlebars were known as "angel bars."



Steve Pender got dressed up for this shot that includes his mother, Joan, and neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Daly.

Wiffle balls, hapless tulips, growing up

By Steve Pender

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Did you ever play Wiffle ball? Growing up, it was the summer pastime of choice in my suburban New Jersey neighborhood.

Every day, kids would congregate on the side street by my house, choose sides and have at it. Games were noisy affairs, punctuated by lots of arguments over close calls, and could last for hours. It wasn't unusual for us to suspend a game

for dinner and then reconvene afterward.

We'd play until it got too dark to see the ball — and sometimes later. In fact, I remember finishing the last inning of one game "under the lights" — thanks to a neighbor who pulled his car up to the street and illuminated it with his headlights.

It was a pretty safe game, too, thanks to the hollow plastic Wiffle ball. It would glance harmlessly off just about anything it hit.

The exception was Mr. Daly's tulips.

Mr. and Mrs. Daly lived on the other side of the street. They were a very pleasant, elderly couple, and they tolerated us kids pretty well. Unfortunately, Mr. Daly insisted on planting tulips outside the chain-link fence bordering his backyard.

He was quite proud of those tulips and the bright red and yellow blooms they provided each spring. He became quite upset whenever a sharply hit foul ball lopped the top off one of them. Or two. Or three. Not that we wanted to damage the flowers; they were just innocent by-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE PENDER

That's Steve Pender on the right, with brothers Mike and Chris, in a 1960s photo. The Daly house — where tulips suffered Wiffle ball abuse — is behind them.

standers that occasionally got caught in our Wiffle ball crossfire.

The 1960s, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Daly, are long gone. But a recent experience brought all those memories back to me. In early July, my wife, Halina, and I traveled back to New Jersey to visit family members. One day we drove through

my old neighborhood. I couldn't resist stopping to look at my old house, now vastly enlarged from the little bungalow in which I grew up.

I walked around the house and took a few pictures, and it wasn't long before I caught the attention of one of the neighbors, who probably figured I was casing

the place for a robbery.

He strolled over, a glass of beer in hand, and asked if I needed some help. I introduced myself and told him I grew up in the neighborhood.

We started chatting, and soon I found myself in the middle of a small crowd of neighbors, answering questions about what things were like in the old days and who used to live where. During the course of our chat, I mentioned our Wiffle ball games and the many tulips we beheaded.

Finally, the time came to say goodbye. As I was about to leave, the neighbor currently living in the Dalys' old house said, "You know, I'm glad you mentioned about the tulips. They keep sprouting up, and I had no idea where they came from."

As Halina and I drove away, the thought of those tulips — Mr. Daly's legacy to the neighborhood — filled me with a warm glow.

The experience reminded me that legacies can take many forms, be they video biographies, written memoirs, keepsakes or tulips, and that they enrich and inform the lives of the generations that follow.

Nice job, Mr. Daly.

Steve Pender and his wife, Halina, moved to Tucson from New Jersey in 2000. He is a personal historian, video biographer and president of Family Legacy Video Inc.

We welcome submissions for this column of personal essays. Submit original pieces up to 1,000 words along with a short biography of the writer and contact information to Maria Parham at mparham@azstarnet.com. Please put "Life in Print" in the subject line. Selected essays will be published in ¡Vamos!