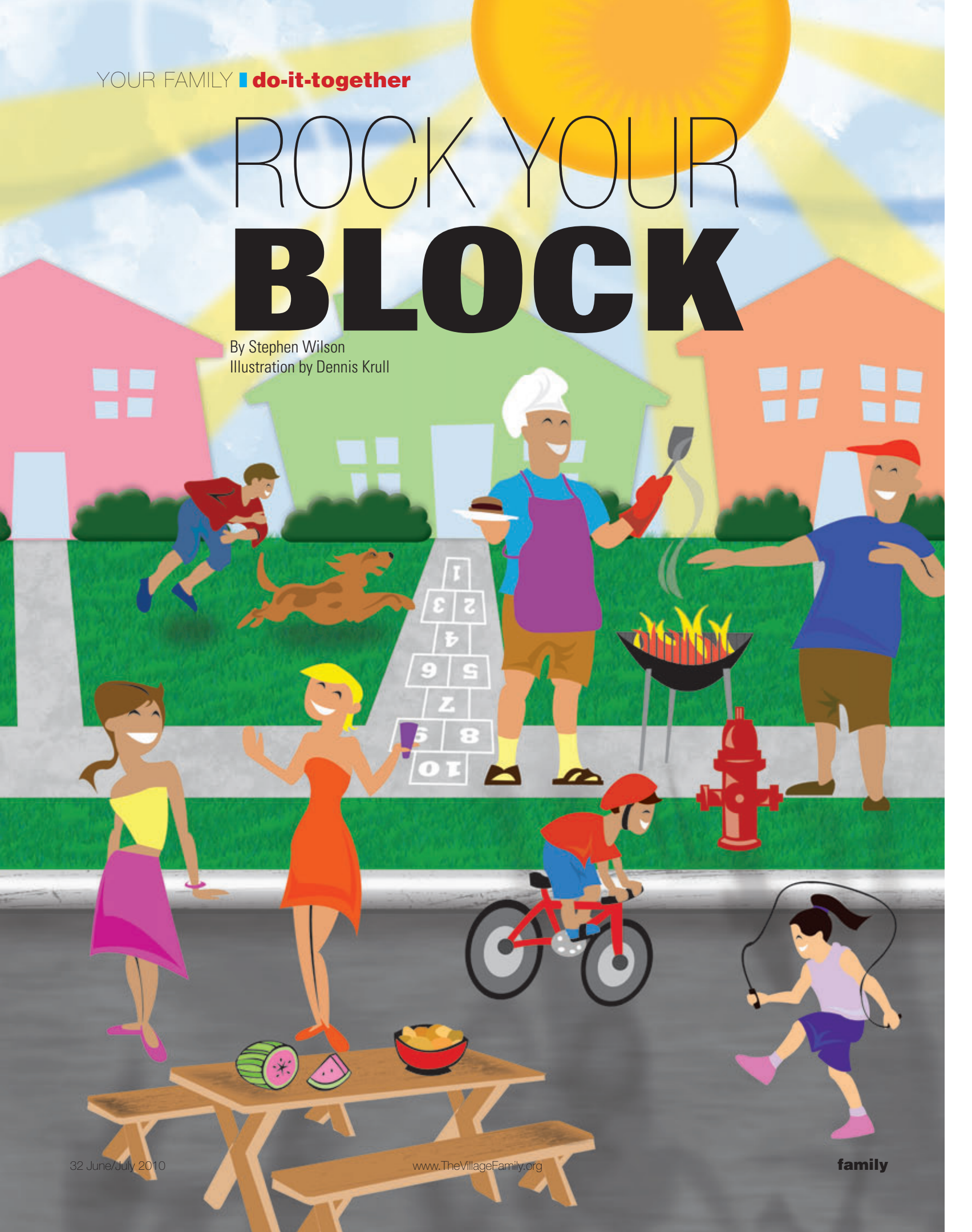


YOUR FAMILY | **do-it-together**

ROCK YOUR **BLOCK**

By Stephen Wilson

Illustration by Dennis Krull



The sizzle of grilling meat. The squeal of children sprinkler hopping. The scraping of chalk on the sidewalk. Dancing flames rising from a fire pit. If you like the sights and sounds of summer, then why not turn it up a notch and rock your block?

Summer is the season for block parties. They can be great fun and a wonderful way to break the ice with neighbors. Block parties offer an opportunity to form networks for community action, like a neighborhood watch, block parent program or dispute resolution committee. On a less serious but more social scale, they also can help you find a new racquetball partner, knitting circle or book club.

Whatever your goals, to be the hostess with the mostest, you need to get organized. Block party planning takes time, cooperation, collaboration, motivation and support. It's not something you can do alone, let alone at the spur of the moment.

A block party is more than just leaning over the fence and inviting your neighbors over to cook out. Thinking of it as such may set you up for failure. Instead, think of it as a transformational event that will turn your neighborhood into a community.

Here's everything you need to get your block rocking.

Start the Buzz

- **Recruit People:** To get your neighbors talking, take it to the streets. Knock on doors, chat with people in person and let them know of your plans to form a block party committee.
- **Make a Flyer:** As you knock on doors, leave something behind. A flyer should include all the details about the first meeting—the date, time, agenda and contact information. Schedule the first meeting in the evening when more folks might be able to attend. News like this will spread, so offer multiple ways to contact you, including mail, phone, text and/or e-mail, or even set up a Facebook page.
- **Make a List:** Details, details, details. As you chat people up, keep track of everything—the neighbors you meet, those you miss, those who are interested in helping and how to contact them and, finally, a survey of ideas, dates and preferences ... all the stuff you gather as you comb your neighborhood.
- **Ready to Meet:** For a Martha Stewart moment before the big first meeting, jog memories by sending a reminder and make some munchies for guests to enjoy.

Make a Plan

Your planning committee has to discuss some big items in your first meeting, so dive in after everyone has met and has had time to grab a snack plate and beverage. Gather your agenda, clipboard and thinking cap, and take notes as you discuss items and make decisions.

- **Scope:** Attempting to break a world record for attendance would definitely alter the scope of your party. Don't want to think that big? Then have your group consider these questions to set the best scope for your block:
 - How much area will this block party cover?
 - What time will it begin and end?
 - What will it offer for food and entertainment?
 - Where will people gather?
 - Will it center on a theme?
 - What is the budget?

No matter your answers, be a good party planner by following these three unbreakable rules of block party engagement. One: hold the party in front of people's homes so it feels public, not private. Two: gather in the center of the neighborhood so it draws people in, not to one end or another. And three: invite everyone with no exceptions ... even the cranky guy in the white stucco house.

Themes

A theme can make your work easier, since it will shape every aspect of the block party—the food, games, decorations, music and neighbors' outfits. Plus, there are oodles of cool themes:

Cook Off: Chili or BBQ... a little healthy competition can get people trash talking... until their mouths start watering.

Culture Fest—Each family could represent its ethnic roots and/or adopt a culture.

Water Fun: Set up a sprinkler obstacle course across front lawns down the entire block and get slipping and sliding.

Safety—Invite the K9 unit, fire department, D.A.R.E. team and car seat inspection program.

Mini Golf: Each household creates a hole and decides the equipment used. How par-fect!

Green: Learn how to recycle, compost and make your neighborhood and homes eco-friendly.

Sports: Select a sport, team or event, like the Olympics, and let it ignite the torch.

Talent Show: Make each family don the stage and show off their hidden talents.

Movie Night: Each family comes as the cast from their favorite film. Then watch the fun as the Incredibles meet the Griswolds.

Historical Period: Choose one important to your block or to the country, like July 4th, and then party like it's 1776.

—Will you serve alcohol?

—What specific community goals do you want to accomplish?

- **Budget:** If you want to break the bank, by all means do. If you are a frugal planner, fine. Just know that costs can add up quickly. It all depends on the food, location, entertainment, city fees, insurance, games and public relations methods. The big question is how do you want to cover costs? Fundraising, charging a fee, collecting a goodwill offering or asking for donations from local businesses are some ways to do it. No matter your method, funneling the budget through one person will make preparation easier, so designate a treasurer on the first night to track costs and handle cash.
- **Dates:** Once in the full swing of summer, many families take vacations, head to the lakes or ship kids off to camp. Working around all of those dates can turn into advanced algebra. Ugh! Sometimes it is best to set a date near the end or start of school or near a holiday. Once your work to find a date is over, you need another one in case it rains. Double ugh! If you don't set a rain date, Murphy's Law dictates that it will rain, so have a back-up plan ready in case of a soggy forecast.

Break Up the Fun

Once the planning group has a clear grasp on the basics, your job is not done. In fact, the fun has just begun. That fun is found in sub-committees. Hooray for sub-committees! Those groups will help maximize your resources, cover your bases, prevent burnout and facilitate goodwill.

Continued on Page 34

Call of the Wild

Whether the kids draw one, you buy a generic one from the store or design one online, invites set the tone of the hosts, the planning team and the party. So give people the right impression. Send out invites at least a month before the event. It gives folks time to get it on their calendars and help with the preparations.

Include this key information:

- Date

- Time
- Rain date
- Location
- Rain location
- Theme
- Cost
- Number of people attending and their names and ages of children
- RSVP date
- What to bring—chairs, food, drink and place settings
- Schedule of events

- Station locations—for cooking, eating, dancing and playing
- Special dietary needs
- Special skills/talents/supplies a family might offer
- List of needs—grills, coolers, decorations, sound systems, etc.
- Subcommittee members
- Contact information
- Update options—for tweets, posts and e-mails

Continued from Page 33

Cuisine Team

Fingers are licked. Bellies are filled. Recipes are traded. Food often is most memorable, so getting it right is important. This committee needs to decide how to cook it up.

- **To cater or pot luck.** You can bring in a crew with ready-made delicacies or turn your party into a potluck extravaganza. Sure, catering costs more but it can reduce the chances of odd combinations. If going the potluck route, make the pots less luck and more skill by asking odd-numbered houses to bring side dishes and even-numbered houses to bring desserts.
- **To provide or bring.** It can be cheaper to bring your own main course and slap it on the grill than to provide a main entree. But seeing a porterhouse next to a hot dog can make some folks uncomfortable. To avoid meat envy, provide a few options for all palates.
- **To feast or famine.** Be sure to organize a range of choices for all diets. Food assignments can ensure all block party food groups are covered: fruit salads, veggies, appetizers, side dishes, fruit desserts, chocolate desserts and snacks. Assignments can also challenge folks to make and eat new foods.
- **To hydrate or celebrate.** Serving alcohol can alter both the budget and people's judgment. Whatever you decide, be sure to make the rules clear. If you decide on alcohol, consider a happy hour to encourage socializing. Ask someone to play bartender and then ask others to bring their homemade wine and beer or their specialty drink. Don't forget to get ice, coolers and non-alcoholic choices. If you decide to skip the booze, grab soda and juice. Make iced tea and lemonade. Kiddie cocktails can be a big hit as well.

Entertainment Team

Activities, games and music for all ages, skill levels and abilities—what a fun task for this committee!

- **Play it:** There are so many outdoor games to choose from that deciding can often be the hardest part. Once selected, you will need supplies, leaders and prizes. Older children make great game leaders and it keeps them from being "bored." This team also may decide to hire talent if your block party budget includes entertainment, like a magician, balloon artist or dunking booth.
- **Hear it:** Don't forget tunes! Will you have a neighborhood band jam on a porch with folks bringing their own equipment? Can kids play too? Will you use someone's sound system or hire a DJ? Is there a dance floor? What are the noise ordinances? Who sets the playlist? No matter the choice, your party needs to rock! To keep it simple and diverse, grab an

MP3 dock, some good speakers and ask each family to bring a mix on an iPod.

- **Capture it:** Videotaping and photographing the events could be a great way to remind folks of the fun after the fact ... and entice others to attend next year's festivities.

Site Team

Location, location, location. This team makes the site outta-sight.

- **Cooking Corner:** Find a driveway and decree it the land of heat, meat and smells. Then let the grill cooks go to town. Remember to have some extra charcoal, lighter fluid and matches. Keep track of who brings a grill, keep young fingers away from the fire and keep a fire extinguisher within reach.
- **Picnic Palace:** Expect this area to have constant traffic because people come to eat. Think in threes: One spot for grabbing plates and utensils, one spot for dishing up and one spot for chowing down. The tables, chairs, serving tables, trashcans, tablecloths and recycling bins all need to be in place. Have masking tape and markers close at hand and encourage people to label their bowls, serving spoons, tables and chairs.
- **Beverage Bistro:** Think shade—nothing makes ice melt faster than coolers sitting in full sun. Labeling what's in each cooler can help make ice last longer too. Have bins nearby to recycle plastic, aluminum and glass. If serving alcohol, cordon off an area for the bar and be sure someone monitors who enters and partakes.
- **Décor:** You'll need banners, signs, nametags and anything else that makes your party or theme come to life. No theme? Then patio lanterns, pink flamingoes, citronella candles and helium balloons can serve most people's needs. With signs and banners, assign what's needed to each family or to neighborhood artists and kids.

Safety Check

Bandages... check. Bee sting ointment... check. Lawsuits... uh-oh. To respect everyone's wishes, feel protected and reduce tensions, it may be necessary to sign waivers. At a minimum, the houses in the thick of it should be neat, tidy and free of potential hazards. Having a first aid kit at hand is smart too.

Ground Rules

Parties don't usually have limits until they get crossed. Whether you have an unwritten code or spell out the ground rules, know your limits and rules for alcohol, garbage, bathrooms, pets, lawn care and uninvited guests. Just keep it positive and in perspective.

PR Team

Those savvy with words, images and influence should join this committee.

- **R.S.V.P.:** Think of this group as information central. All invites leave from this group and responses return to it. All

assignments to partygoers flow from this group. All updates fall on this group as well. In addition to guests, this committee keeps all other planning teams in the know.

- **M.C.:** Someone from this group should be the Master of Ceremonies. A hearty welcome, clear instructions and a heartfelt thanks are the bare minimum. Detailed play-by-play at games and activities is optional.
- **A.M. to P.M.:** This team is the maker of the schedule, deciding when folks arrive, eat, play, network, clean up and leave. All of those details give the day structure. Between footloose and regimented, it's best to fall on the side of fancy-free.
- **I.O.U.:** It can be smart to make one person hold the purse strings. He or she is like a treasurer on steroids. This person manages all receipts, collects cash from attendees and arranges donations from neighborhood businesses. He or she also can serve as liaison with city hall, calling about laws, permits, fees, barricades and insurance.

Clean-Up Crew

This crew helps the day end with good, clean fun.

- **Watchful Eyes:** No one may want to be a garbage watcher. But even fewer want to chase dirty plates blowing in the wind. A few folks should be on trash and recycling duty, just making sure that receptacles aren't overflowing.
- **Fancy Footwork:** Rats, raccoons and roaches love leftovers. To avoid uninvited critters or stink, see if the city will provide some extra legwork with a special garbage and recycling pick-up.
- **Helping Hands:** Decorations have to come down. Tables and chairs returned. Grills and coolers rolled home. It takes a village to keep a neighborhood tidy.

Group Hug

With all the work going on, sub-committees should reconvene as needed to keep planning members connected, caught up and appreciated. The last thing any block party organizers want to hear a few days before go-time is news that the entertainment team is in shambles. Communication is the key especially if a group needs assistance.

Big Day

Today you should be basking in the glory of your labor, watching neighbors assemble, eat and enjoy themselves ... all unaware of the work going on behind the scenes. Of course, a few

City Regulations

To learn what your city requires regarding permits, regulations, fees, barricades, special service needs, like garbage and recycling, and insurance, call the local offices and visit their online resources.

- Fargo: City Offices (701) 241-1310
Police (701) 235-4493
- Neighborhood Block Parties: <http://www.cityoffargo.com/Residential/YourNeighborhood/BlockParties/>
- Police Department Block Party Guidelines <http://www.cityoffargo.com/CityInfo/Departments/Police/CitizenResources/SeasonalandSpecialEvents/OrganizeaBlockParty/>
- West Fargo: City Offices (701) 433-5300
Police (701) 433-5500
- Moorhead: City Offices (218) 299-5301
Police (218) 299-5120; Street Closing Permit http://www.cityofmoorhead.com/city%5Fservices/streets/closing_permit.html

days before the event, you should begin to gather supplies at one central location and prepare for setup. At the same time, someone should be assigned to monitor the weather in case the forecast calls for downpours.

Don't forget to thank people publicly. Grab the mic, if your event has one, and praise committee members and neighbors for their hard work. Even as the event organizer, take time to smell the flowers. Be sure to help yourself to a plate, join a game and chat it up. Remember, your goal was to unite a community, so don't miss that moment.

Looking Back

It's one thing to pat yourself on the back for a job well done and another to get actual feedback from people. If you want to party year after year and see it grow and get better, then get input. Mail participants an anonymous survey to return. Gather the committee and discuss their opinions on preparation and execution. Jot down new ideas and lessons learned. Use that feedback to make next year's block party even more fantastic. **f**

Stephen Wilson experienced his first of many block parties as a youngster in Lockport, N.Y. He now calls South Fargo home, which is a few blocks from his office in the marketing department at Sanford Health & MeritCare.

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