



Candace, a high priestess in the Wiccan religion, believes God is present in trees, plants and animals.



Neighbors were alarmed by the torchlight ceremonies they witnessed in Candace's backyard. But Candace, a homemaker, says she was praying, not casting evil spells. Still, neighbors weren't reassured and tried to stop her from worshipping at home.



town witch

her family, pattered in her garden and dropped by for 90 people in robes gathered in her yard at night . . .

but put that dream aside for an early marriage and motherhood.

When her first husband was killed in a car accident a few years later, she met with a Wiccan priest for guidance.

Wiccans are nature worshippers who believe God is present in everything—trees, plants, animals, even rocks. Although they call themselves witches, they don't worship the devil; they pray. But not all her neighbors knew that.

When she moved to the neighborhood, Candace—then a high priestess—figured some of her fellow homeowners might be uncomfortable with her backyard ceremonies. "So I visited some of them, introducing myself and

explaining what Wicca was," Candace says.

Candace felt comfortable among the neighbors she got to know. She'd send them flowers and vegetables from her garden and drop by for coffee.

But as word spread of the "witch ceremonies," her neighbors grew worried. And as their fears grew, so did the stories.

"One was that the stone circle in my backyard was really a cemetery for animal sacrifices," Candace recalls. "It's actually a sacred circle where we gather to meditate."

Three hundred neighbors attended a meeting to discuss the situation and to ask state senator John Parrish to investigate. Parrish, in turn, wrote to

the DeKalb County Commission.

In response, county officials told Candace that she needed a zoning variance to operate a church on her property.

Candace argued that her home was not a church and that her religious observances were no different than Bible readings. But as rumors swirled through the neighborhood, hysteria continued to mount.

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A second meeting was held, drawing hundreds of people who claimed they feared for themselves and their children.

"I was pretty shocked the neighbors had done this. I felt absolutely violated and betrayed," says Candace. "But if I didn't fight for my right to pray in my own backyard, who else would they stop?"

Candace hired an attorney who told her that she didn't have to reason. She

appealed to the county commission. Last September, the county commissioners voted overwhelmingly in Candace's favor: since her home was not a church, she didn't need to apply for rezoning.

Since then, things have quieted down in Candace's neighborhood. But she still feels hurt.

"This was not about zoning—this was about prejudice, misinformation, fear and hysteria," she says.

—Patricia Candler

WITCHES IN THE '90S

There are now tens of thousands of witches in the United States, says Candace Lehtman, and we shouldn't fear them. The facts:

- They don't wish evil on others because

they believe evil is returned threefold.

- They worship nature and pray to God.
- Witch, derived from a word for wisdom, is used for both sexes; there are no warlocks.

