



Why I Love Highland Park

By Andrés Tapia, Senior Partner at Korn Ferry

Little did we know when we first rented a bungalow on Pleasant Avenue in Ravinia that we would still be here in Highland Park thirty years later. We ended up buying and remodeling that starter house and raising our daughter Marisela there for

twenty years before moving to our forever home on Lincoln Avenue.

We stayed and built our lives in Highland Park and made it our hometown because we love so much about the community. Our beachfronts, our ravines, our parks, our nature trails, our historical charm, our unique stores and restaurants all shape a vibrant and attractive city geography.

But it's the people – the welcoming and inclusive community – that made it all come alive for us.

I had grown up in Lima, Peru the son of a Peruvian Dad and an American Mom and ended up in the Chicago area when I came up to attend the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University where I met my wife Lori, a human development and social policy major from Kansas.

Given my multicultural upbringing, and which I replicated in our home life with Lori and Marisela, it was only natural that I was attracted by how welcoming neighbors were to us and those neighbors spanned every religion, ethnicity, nationality, generation, and socioeconomics. This diversity and the acceptance to all was refreshing and uplifting.

But at the beginning, given how far away I was not only distance-wise but culturally from my Latin American upbringing, I was unsure if I could fully put down roots here even as we made the decision to buy the house we had been renting.

But something happened the night of our closing date that put all doubt to rest.

We had been so busy preparing and executing on the close, we had not paid attention to who was going to be at Ravinia Festival that summer day. Though we were just a five-minute walk away, our fatigue from the day's events led us to just pull out our lawn chairs to our front yard to listen to the concert since we lived close enough to hear the music emanating from the Pavilion stage.

The show started and syncopated beats pulsated from the Festival grounds, sailing over the tree tops and down to our front lawn. To my surprise it was a straight-out salsa rhythm – the music I had grown up with and experienced through a myriad dance parties in Lima. As it always did, it swept me off my seat and there, on the front yard of our newly bought home in the city of Highland Park, Illinois, Lori and I danced salsa.

That moment was not an outlier event that made me feel at home just for a fleeting moment. Instead it was the foreshadowing of so many other moments of connection with Highland Park neighbors, parents, students, soccer players, and artists where cultural diversity manifested, was celebrated and shared.

Our daughter was a participant in the very first Dual Language class, a program that by design brought together families and students from different cultures who not only were there to learn to be bilingual and bicultural, but who developed meaningful cross cultural friendships between the students and also among the parents.

As our kids entered into the coming-of-age celebrations, Bat and Bar Mitzvah traditions found their way into Quinceañeras and vice versa.

Where does that happen? It was moving, fun, and beautiful.

Then there was diversity on the AYSO soccer field. Having played competitive soccer all my life, I dived into coaching girls' soccer for eight years. Again, the team and therefore the families were a nice mixture of diversity. And the girls responded very well to Latin concepts I introduced such as the rallying shout, *ganas!* This word does not have an exact English translation but it captures in five letters the essence of playing and living with everything you've got. It was always such a thrill when the entire team – with mostly native English speakers -- would whoop *ganas!* as the battle cry before each game. That embrace of differences on the part of Highland Park girls and their parents only made me feel increasingly welcome.

These diversity streams run all throughout Highland Park. Highland Park's award-winning Sister Cities program has decades of cultural exchanges with Yerucham, Israel, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, and Modena, Italy. The Highland Park/Highwood Rotary Club does conflict resolution exchanges with young people from here and Belfast. The Highland Park Community Foundation funds various not-for-profits who collectively serve a wide mix of people with different programs to help them thrive. These are just a few of many comparable projects that indicate that people from Highland Park are welcoming, are curious about other cultures, and want to experience the richness of diversity.

Home is where the heart is and people are the heart of a community. And since Highland Park's heart has been inclusive, you can see why I love Highland Park and how I have come to call Highland Park home.

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