



Lessons I Learned Growing up in Lake Forest

Reese Karras

I'm Reese Karras and I'm 23 years old. You may know my mother, Jennifer Karras, former First Ward Alderman. And no, she didn't encourage me to write this. You may know my father, Michael Karras, no title, but you've likely talked to him on the street, at the park, or at the local tavern. I was privileged to grow up in Lake Forest. And I recognize the unparalleled opportunities I was afforded--my education, nurturing family and community, and foundational relationships formed throughout my permeable years. The families here have values. They expect their children to emulate the same ethics and morals of the city that inspired them to raise a family here in the first place. So why, then, are these expectations not being fulfilled by all the adults in our community?

I recently returned to Lake Forest after working out of the country. Many kids who have moved out can identify with the nostalgia of coming home; pulling into your driveway or hearing your bedroom door creak as it opens, transforming you back into a whimsical memory where childhood feels within reach. Likewise, sitting on the porch sipping a brewski with mom and dad is also quite fulfilling--even if my mom says I've had enough to drink literally after having one beer (like, who does she think she is, my mother?). In all seriousness, it's meaningful for me to let my parents know how the values they instilled in me shaped my experiences in the world while subsequently teaching them the lessons I cultivated on my own.

When I got home a few weeks ago, I learned there was a new podcast called "The Lake Forest Podcast." Initially I thought, "Sweet!! We never had anything like this; that's a great idea. Then I listened to a few minutes of one of the latest episodes, and my mouth dropped open at what I was hearing. I studied English in college and know a little something about rhetoric and how to communicate a message to an audience. But you don't have to go to college to learn how to speak to a human being. Frankly, it was comical to listen to something branded with the community's name essentially tear apart the community for an entire episode. I'm writing this piece to convey the perspective of a young person who was extremely embarrassed to hear adults talk about other community members with such disregard and disrespect. I don't care what anyone says, that's not freedom of speech--it's bullying.

In high school, my friends and I went to CROYA. This sanctuary is where middle and high school kids camp out, do homework, and experience invaluable retreats, volunteer opportunities, scavenger hunts, dances, and a lot of laughter. CROYA, the Committee Representing Our Young Adults, is where we learned it's okay to struggle, to not be okay, to be happy--to just be. We would hang out with the staff who nurtured our understanding of respect for ourselves, our peers, and adults. We became Peer Trained-- a program that teaches more than 160 students a year how to listen and respond to others with empathy. A few years ago, I interviewed CROYA'S fearless leader, Todd

Lake Forest for Transparency

Nahigian, for a professional writing elective I took. I was investigating substance abuse in teenagers and what communities can do to aid and combat teens struggling with this issue. Todd explained to me whether a child struggles with drugs, mental illness, or any other adolescent development, "Self-esteem, confidence, and self-worth are vital parts of teenage identity." Todd added, "We don't judge the youth for their behavior, we help foster the best coping skills moving forward."

I think more adults in the community need to tap into these learnings so they, too, can promote accountability, ethics, values, civility, and service. How can your children uphold principles that you refuse to display? How can anyone grow if you refuse to admit there is something to learn? How can a community unite if you refuse to embrace a different perspective? Humans can't operate like an algorithm that only screens personal bias. The world won't prosper like that, and neither will Lake Forest.