



FOX VALLEY REVIEW

*Curating lifestyle, culture, commentary, and community
from the river's edge.*

MAGAZINE

VOLUME I
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ISSUE 2

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Fox Valley Review is a regional digital magazine dedicated to curating and elevating the voices, stories, events, and cultural expressions of the towns and communities along the Fox River.

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Just Pee in the Lake

In this humorous slice-of-life story, Jeff Weisman shares a father-daughter day at Illinois Beach State Park that starts with swimming and ends with an important, and slightly gross, life lesson about public bathrooms and lakes. He dishes while holding no punches.

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03

Caregiving for Aging Parents

The responsibility of caring for her aging parents fell on Miriam's lap, and she embraced it as a journey of learning and growth. Now she tells her tale to inspire and support others who walk in the same shoes she walked. Heed, or you will be none the wiser.

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Granny's Woven Quilt Series

The title of Granny's piece in Issue 2 is: "The Porch Light Was Always On." In this story, she once again brings the calmness, congeniality, charm, and history of the Fox Valley region with poise and wisdom with a focus on Batavia. Thus, she speaks. Listen to your elder.

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Two Days
at a Time

Craig, a divorced father, juggles fatherhood, singlehood, and his career like a champ, but he relishes the most the days he spends with his children. Don't be fooled; he is a prolific, not serial, dater. Sorry, ladies; he is busy. But, you may connect with his stories.

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Second Act

Robert retires, sails across the world, dips in earth's bluest, crisp waters, and plays golf to his heart's content, but he rediscovers himself and finds his true purpose in the service of others. Don't be misled: he still enjoys pickleball and golf.

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Miles of Smiles
and Memories

Megan reoounts the road-tripping adventures undertaken by her family and offers tip-top tips (no pun) to families considering the same. She is a pro. Don't take our word for it. Check it out.

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Love or
Duty

Dara grapples with the complexity of falling in love with someone her parents and friends do not approve, while maintaining the delicate balance of following her heart's desire and heeding her parent's advice. She is a hopeless romantic, but she is by no means torn.

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01 Mission & Vision



WHO WE ARE

WHAT WE DO

WHERE WE AIM TO GO

FOX VALLEY REVIEW is a regional digital magazine dedicated to curating and elevating the voices, stories, events, and cultural expressions of the towns and communities along the Fox River. We strive to inform, inspire, and connect residents through thoughtful storytelling, critical reflection, and celebration of the local from neighborhood events to regional art, food, and civic life.

We envision a more connected and culturally vibrant Fox Valley where every town and resident sees themselves reflected in the stories we tell. Through inclusive journalism, creative expression, and civic commentary, Fox Valley Review aims to become the cultural compass of the region, building bridges between communities, generations, and ideas across the river.



Welcome to the second Issue of Fox Valley Review, a labor of love and a vision long in the making. Rooted in the heart of our river towns and curated with care, this publication seeks to amplify the voices, stories, and spirit that make the Fox Valley not just a region, but a community vibrant, diverse, and unmistakably alive.

As we turn the page from our inaugural issue to this exciting second edition of Fox Valley Review, I want to take a moment to thank the talented contributors, diligent reviewers, and gifted photographers who brought both issues to life.

FROM THE DESK OF THE CHIEF EDITOR DR. BAUDELAIRE K. ULYSSE

Your creativity, hard work, and commitment to quality have helped shape this magazine into a vibrant reflection of our community.

The response to our debut exceeded all expectations: over 500 readers accessed the inaugural issue in its very first week. That milestone affirms what we believed from the start: the stories, voices, and images of the Fox Valley deserve to be celebrated and shared.

In this second issue, we invite you to dive into heartfelt and thought-provoking reads such as Caregiving for Aging Parents, Granny's Woven Quilt Series, and Miles of Smiles and Memories.

You'll also find lighthearted moments in Just Pee in the Lake, reflections on life's balancing acts in Two Days at a Time, and a stirring personal dilemma in Love or Duty.

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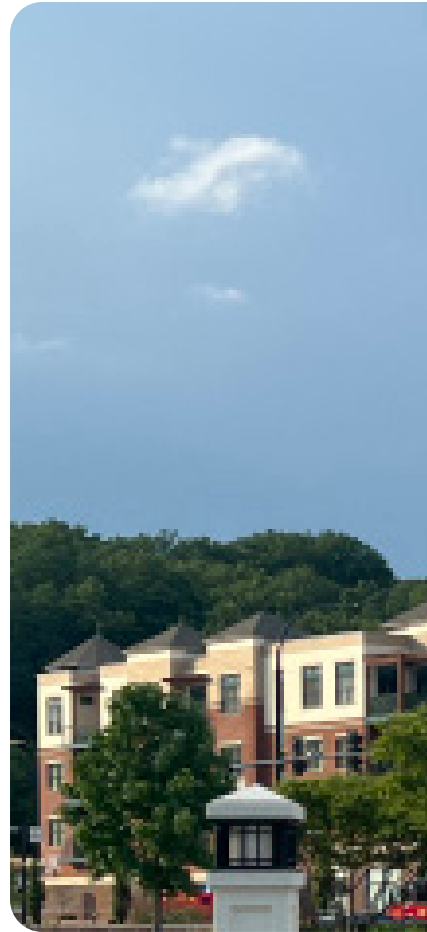
*LET THIS BE
YOUR WINDOW, YOUR MIRROR,
YOUR INVITATION!*

”

Whether you are a lifelong resident or a curious newcomer, Fox Valley Review offers more than stories; it offers connection. Let this be your window, your mirror, and your invitation to life in the Valley.

Enjoy every page, and don't forget to like, follow, and share our work on social media so we can continue building this community together.

Dr. Baudelaire K. Ulysse
Chief Editor
Fox Valley Review



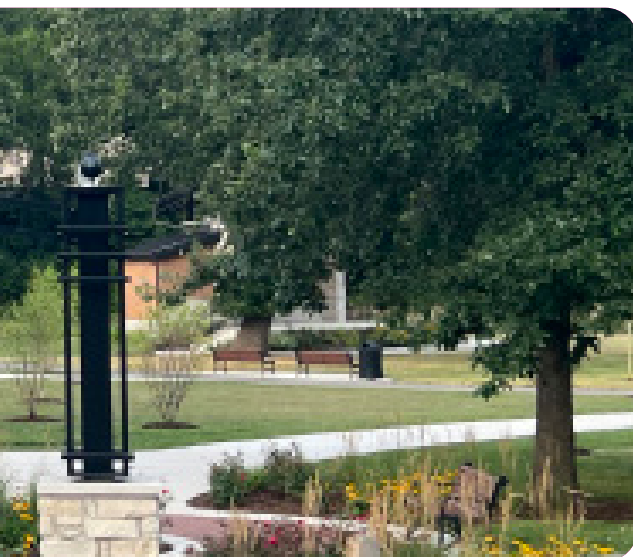
TOWNE PARK, ALGONQUIN

Towne Park in Algonquin features a welcoming playground with colorful equipment, lush green lawns, winding pathways, and vibrant flowerbeds framed by mature trees, creating a lively and family-friendly community space.





PLAZA, DOWNTOWN ALGONQUIN



Just Pee in the Lake

Between Swimming and Peeing

WRITER: Jeff Weisman

PH: Staff

When my daughter was younger, her favorite thing to do was go swimming. Beaches, parks, pools, you name it. If there was water, she was in it. One Thursday in June, I took her to Illinois Beach State Park on Lake Michigan in Zion.

As soon as we arrived, I needed to use the bathroom, so I pulled over at the park entrance, where there was an outhouse about twenty feet away. I walked over, opened the door, and instantly regretted it; it was absolutely disgusting. I ended up stepping behind the outhouse and using the woods instead.

I didn't think much more about it, determined to have a good time with my daughter. We drove on to the main



*I walked over, opened the door, and
instantly regretted it;
it was absolutely disgusting.*

"I glanced inside and was horrified. It looked like twenty people had decided to use every surface as a toilet, seat, walls, floor, even the sink."



"A breathtaking view of the Fox River from the van-tage point of Chicago Ave in Elgin, Illinois."

parking lot, eager to get in the water. Later, while we were swimming, my daughter called out, "Dad, I need to go to the bathroom."

"One or two?" I asked. (She was eight.)

"One." She responded.

"Just pee in the lake," I said, knowing there was no one around and remembering the state of that outhouse. The beach was unusually quiet that day.

"Eww, Dad, no!" she said, scrunching her face. "That's gross."

"Don't worry," I told her. "The fish do it. Just swim over there and pee. You'll be fine."

"No, Dad. That's gross," she insisted.

"Fine," I sighed. "We'll find a bathroom."

We got out of the water and headed to the nearest outhouse, about two hundred yards away at the back of the parking lot. As we approached, we heard a man in the men's stall loudly singing, clearly fueled by a few too many drinks. Not a problem, I thought, since my daughter would be using the women's side.

"You sure?" she asked, squirming a little.

"Positive," I said, waving her toward the door. "Go ahead. I'll keep an eye out."

She walked over, opened the door, and froze. "Oh, Dad, this is gross. Look at this. I can't go in there." I glanced inside and was horrified. It looked like twenty people had decided to use every surface as a toilet seat, walls, floor, even the sink.

"Great," I muttered, still wishing she'd just peed in the lake. "Come on, we'll find another outhouse."

Across the lot, about a hundred yards away, was another one. We trudged over, only to find someone already in the women's stall. We waited.

A few minutes later, a kind older woman emerged, looked down at my daughter, and said gently, "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. It's gross in there. I didn't want to use it myself."

My daughter thanked her politely, then stood there for a moment, glancing around as if weighing her options. Finally, she looked at me and said, "Dad, I'll just pee in the lake."

~Jeff Weisman

“A peaceful stretch of Elgin’s riverwalk, where shady trees and iron railings frame a quiet overlook above the Fox River.”



03

Caregiving for Aging Parents

REFLECTIONS

WRITER: Miriam

PH: Staff

Eight years. That’s how long my siblings and I lived in the slow, unrelenting shadow of losing our parents.

It began with my father, a man of quiet humor and stubborn pride, whose body slowly surrendered to a

litany of ailments: heart trouble, lung disease, neurological issues, infections, wounds that refused to heal. I was his in-home caregiver, the one who managed the medications, the home visits, the endless balancing act between keeping him comfortable and

“
*You grieve not just the future
you know is coming, but the pieces of you
that vanish along the way.*
”

keeping him alive.

Four hours after he passed, my mother, already frail, suffered a transient ischemic attack. I still remember the blur of the emergency room: the white sheets, the rush of nurses, the look in her eyes that told me something in her had shifted for good. That day marked the beginning of my second caregiving marathon, one that would last four and a half years and take me deeper into the world of dementia and deeper into myself than I ever imagined.

When the System Fails

My mother's dementia didn't announce itself all at once. It crept in quietly, disguised as forgetfulness, small lapses, moments of confusion that could almost be brushed off. Because her symptoms weren't textbook, the diagnosis took time.

And when the words finally came, they landed with an unexpected hollowness. Other than a prescription to manage agitation, there was no

roadmap. No guidance. No real explanation of what lay ahead. It felt as if the medical system had stepped back, leaving me and so many other caregivers to navigate blindfolded. "The doctor handed me a prescription and, essentially, a shrug."

I learned quickly that to understand this disease and to care for her well, I would have to become my own researcher, advocate, and problem-solver. I read everything I could find. I called the Alzheimer's Association and spoke with someone who, in ten minutes, gave me more clarity than months of appointments had.

Locally, the story was different. The county's health department, referred to me by our senior center, responded not with support but suspicion. One afternoon, a young woman arrived at my door, knocking hard and insisting she needed to "see Edith immediately." She took photos of my mother and her slightly swollen arm an infection I

had already scheduled a doctor's visit for and left without offering a single resource.

Weeks later, I received a certified letter demanding a year's worth of my mother's medical and financial records. My care was under formal investigation. I didn't have the bandwidth to respond; every ounce of my energy went to her daily needs. It was only after a hospice social worker intervened, shocked at the intrusion given my documented, constant involvement, that the case was closed. "While protections for vulnerable adults are crucial, not every bruise or swelling is abuse, and not every caregiver is suspect."

That ordeal left me convinced that our systems need more nuance, more compassion, and far better training for those entrusted with such sensitive work.



"The 'Our Destinies Entwined' sculpture in Bartlett, IL, symbolizes unity and interconnected lives, its flowing bronze forms rising as a tribute to community and shared purpose."

Carrying more than I knew I could

Caregiving is part love, part labor, and part trial by fire. I was not trained for the medical side of the role wound care, safe transfers, managing bowel issues between hospice visits, yet there I was, learning on the fly from nurses and physical therapists, then performing the tasks alone.

I doubted myself constantly. Was I doing enough? Doing it right? Could I handle the next inevitable crisis? Dementia brought its own set of challenges, the late afternoon "sundowning" when agitation would spike, the flashes of aggression from a woman who had once been gentle, the moments she seemed to slip further away from the mother I knew. "You grieve not just the future you know is coming, but the pieces of them that vanish along the way."

The loneliness stays with you

Even with regular phone calls with my siblings and the comfort of a dear friend going through a nearly identical caregiving journey, the isolation was real.

Caregiving compresses your world into medications, doctor visits, and the four walls of your home.

Social invitations dwindle. Conversations narrow. Your days become dictated by someone else's needs and limitations, and you forget when you last had an hour just for yourself.

I don't say this as complaint, but as truth: caregiving strips life down to its essentials. It demands you give of yourself in ways you didn't think possible, and sometimes in ways you never wanted to.

What I carry forward

Looking back now, there are moments I wish had gone differently, better support from the health care system, more hands-on training, less suspicion and more trust. But there are also moments I wouldn't trade: holding my father's hand in his final hours, the rare flickers of recognition in my mother's eyes, the quiet victories of a wound healing or a calm evening when the day had begun in chaos.

If there's one truth I can offer other caregivers, it's this: you will never feel entirely ready for the role. You will doubt yourself, lose your patience, cry in the laundry room where no one can hear you. But you will also surprise yourself with your capacity for endurance, tenderness, and fierce advocacy.

"Caregiving isn't a role you step into and then leave behind. It shapes you in how you see others, how you fight for them, and how you measure the value of your own strength."

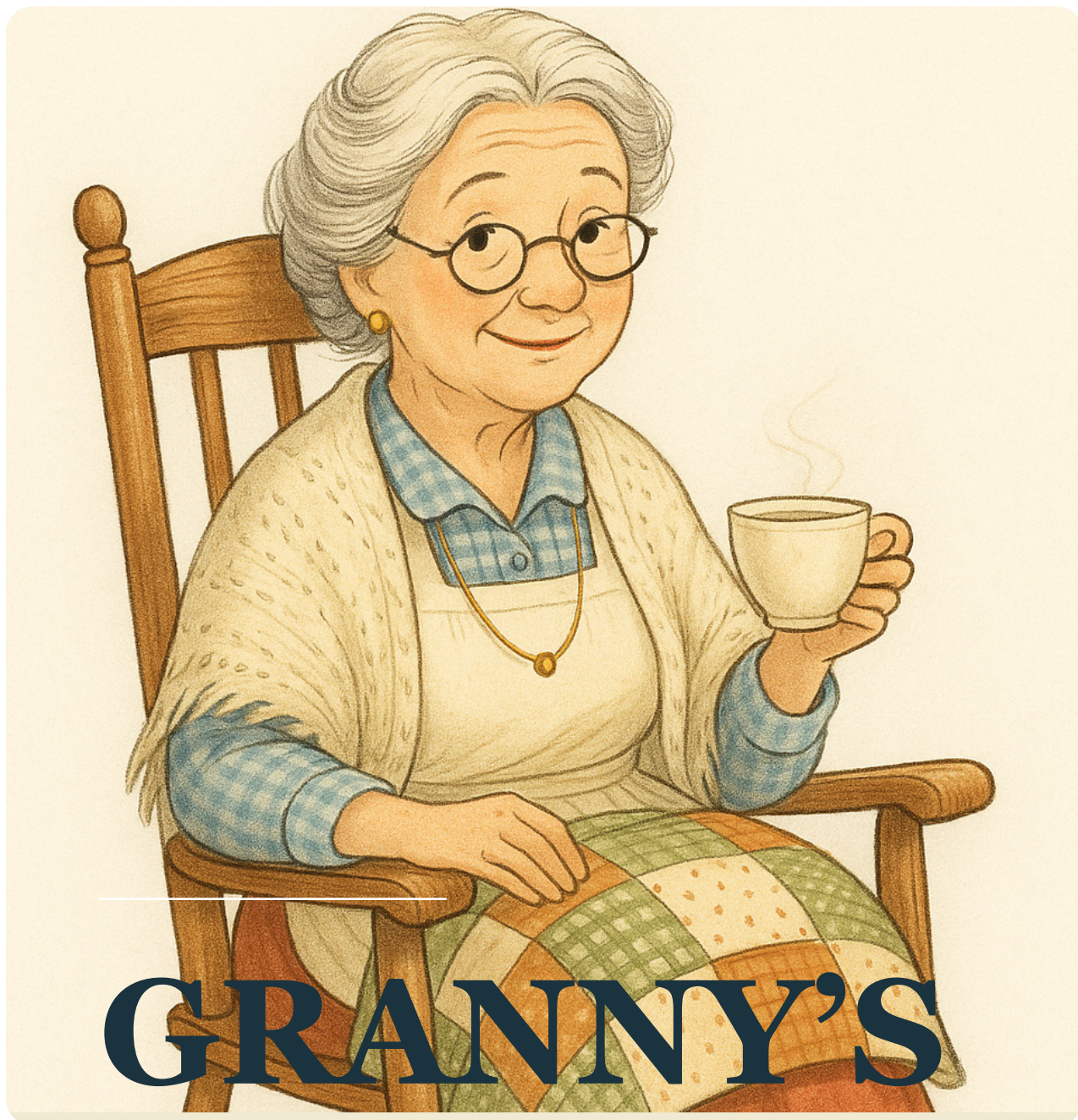
And in that way, it shapes you as much as it shapes the life of the one you care for.

~Miriam

She holds a Ph.D. in medical research and has served on faculty at the University of Illinois. An expert in medical ethics, she has worked extensively at the intersection of patient care, health policy, and caregiver advocacy.



“Bartlett’s Town Hall and Police Station stand with brick-and-mortar charm, framed by blooming planters and a welcoming civic walkway.”



WOVEN QUILT SERIES

The Porch Light

Was

Always On

“

*TEA'S READY, CHILD.**COME, SIT A WHILE...*

”

WRITER: GRANNY**PH: STAFF**

04

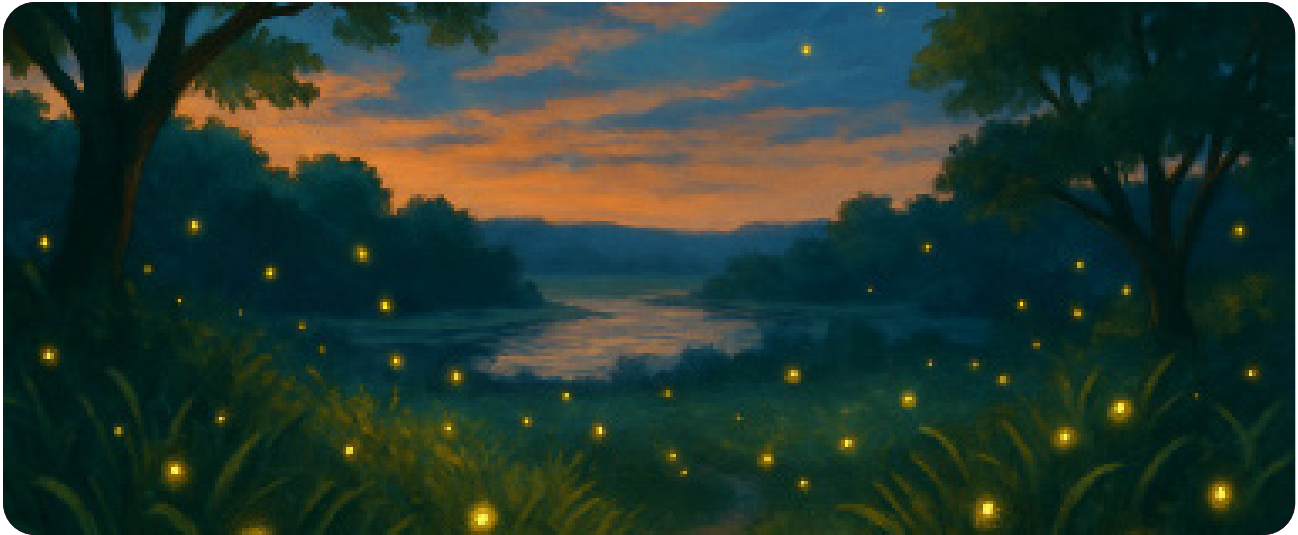
Back when the river ran a little slower and neighbors waved before you even turned up their gravel drive, the porch light meant more than a switch. It meant welcome. It meant someone was home. It meant supper was still warm, or at least the coffee was still brewing.

Every house on our block in Batavia had one. A porch light flickering through the bug-thick July air or cutting through the early November fog. It wasn't about electricity; it was about invitation. My mama would say, "Don't

ever let the porch light go out. You never know who needs a little light finding their way."

We didn't lock doors back then. And on cool summer nights, the screen doors did most of the talking, creaking open for cousins coming in from catching fireflies, or slamming shut behind papas heading out to smoke and talk about crops and Cubs baseball. The porch was where you solved small problems and shared big dreams.

I remember when your Uncle Jack broke curfew three nights straight,



“Fireflies dancing in the humid evening air, with a faint view of the Fox River.”

said he got caught up walking Mary Lou home from choir practice. Mama didn’t say much. She just left the porch light on and two glasses of lemonade by the swing. Some things didn’t need scolding; they needed space.

When neighbors were sick or mourning, the porch light was the first sign they needed community. Folks would show up with casseroles and hugs, never asking questions, just sitting a spell until the silence felt softer.

Some nights, the porch light was a beacon for more than neighbors. Travelers whose cars broke down on Route 25 would wander up, their faces lit in that warm glow.

Mama would hand them a blanket, Papa would find his toolbox, and somehow those strangers left feeling less like strangers.

Even in winter, when snow blew sideways off the river, we kept it shining. I’d watch the flakes dance in



A cozy front porch in Batavia at dusk, bathed in the warm light of a single bulb.

the halo of light and think it was like a little piece of summer refusing to surrender. That stubborn glow felt like defiance, a reminder that warmth and welcome could outlast the cold.

And I'll tell you this: in all my years, I've never heard anyone say they regretted leaving the light on. But I have heard plenty wish they had. It costs almost nothing, yet it tells the world everything: I see you. You belong here.

Even today, I keep mine on, even when I don't expect company. Not because someone's out there, but because someone might be. Maybe it's old-fashioned, but I believe in leaving light for others, especially when the world feels dark.

So, child, wherever you go and however far you roam, remember this: keep the porch light on. It's not just about home. It's about hope.

~Granny



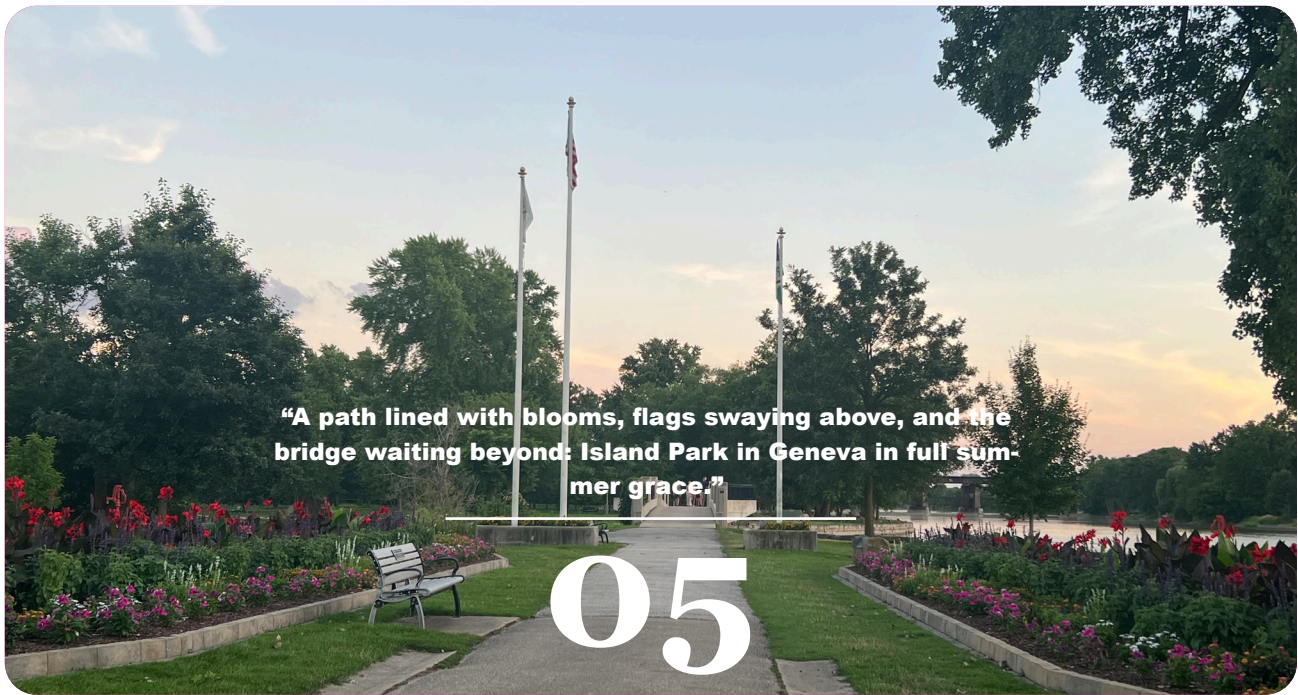
“A snow-covered back yard with footprints leading up to the guesthouse.”

Stay tuned for the next story from Granny's Woven Quilt Series. It's coming up in the October Issue.



Riverwalk Bridge at Island Park in Geneva

This pedestrian bridge is more than a crossing; it's an invitation. With its sleek stone pillars and black iron railings, the bridge frames a serene walk, linking trails, parkland. Whether for a sunset stroll, a bike ride, or a quiet moment with nature, this landmark offers a timeless snapshot of riverwalk life in the Valley.



"A path lined with blooms, flags swaying above, and the bridge waiting beyond: Island Park in Geneva in full summer grace."

05

WRITER: Craig

PH: Staff

- Two Days- AT A TIME

I live my life on a calendar. Zoom meetings fill the weekdays. Slack messages buzz around the clock. I manage a team of consultants spread across time zones, and my desk, tucked into a quiet corner of my Geneva home, has become both my workplace and my window to the world.

But the squares I circle in red? The days I live for? Those are the two days a week I get with my kids.

During the school year, our rhythms can feel hectic. But in the summer, I build our time around space and memory.



Flower garden at Island Park, with
stairs leading up to the bridge over the Fox
River in Geneva, Illinois.

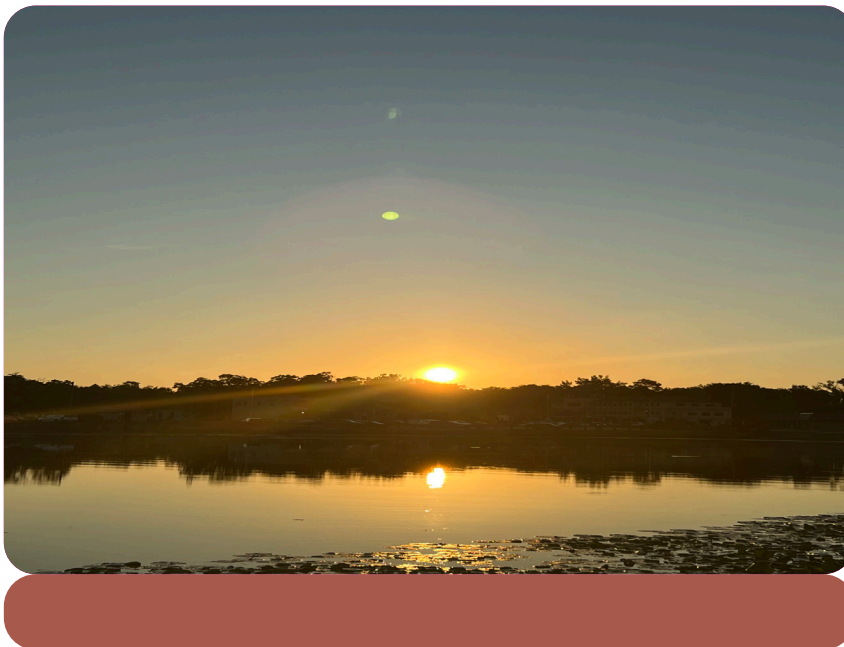
A Life Divided, A Love Undivided

I'm a father of three, two high school boys and a middle school girl. My marriage didn't last, but my commitment to being present in their lives is something I won't ever let go of. We share time, and the schedule shifts. Sometimes it's weekends. Sometimes weeknights. Always, it's never enough.

I used to get overwhelmed trying to "maximize" every minute with them. I'd plan packed itineraries, try to be both fun and firm, give them freedom but stay engaged. Honestly, I'd often fail. I'd check emails during soccer games. I'd take work calls after dinner. There were moments I wasn't proud of.

But fatherhood is like a muscle; it only grows with use, intention, and recovery.

Now, I've learned to shut the laptop when they arrive. To listen more than



**"Sun melting into the Fox, its
glow doubled on St. Charles' edge
in the evening hush."**

So I live two days at a time.
And I show up for them, again and
again.

Because fatherhood doesn't wait for
perfect circumstances.
It simply asks: Are you here now?

And every time I say yes, I get to be
their dad.

~Craig

I talk. To join them on their terms,
whether that's movie night in paja-
mas, driveway basketball, or last-mi-
nute ice cream at Batavia Creamery.

Summer Is Our Sanctuary

During the school year, our rhythms
can feel hectic. But in the summer, I
build our time around space and me-
mory. We hit the road, Wisconsin Dells
one week, northern Michigan the next.
Sometimes just a cabin in Minnesota
with a lake and no cell service. That's
when I see the magic.

My daughter braiding wildflowers into
her hair.

My boys skipping rocks and laughing
without inhibition.

Me, breathing. Just breathing.

Those moments are my heartbeat.

Still Becoming

I'll be honest: it's not easy. I'm 55. Di-
vorced. Balancing career pressure with
parenting guilt. Navigating co-paren-

ting logistics. And yes, I'm still trying
to date, which feels like a strange mix
of courage and comedy in this stage
of life.

I've gone on dates where I've talked
too much about my kids, and others
where I've said too little about myself.
But I've come to accept that I'm still
becoming, still learning how to be a
good man, a better dad, and maybe
someday, a loving partner again.

Rooted in the Fox Valley

What grounds me is this place. The
Fox River walks. Friday night foot-
ball games at the local high school.
Sunday farmer's markets in Geneva.
The friendly faces at Penrose Brewing
when I need adult conversation. This
community holds me steady.

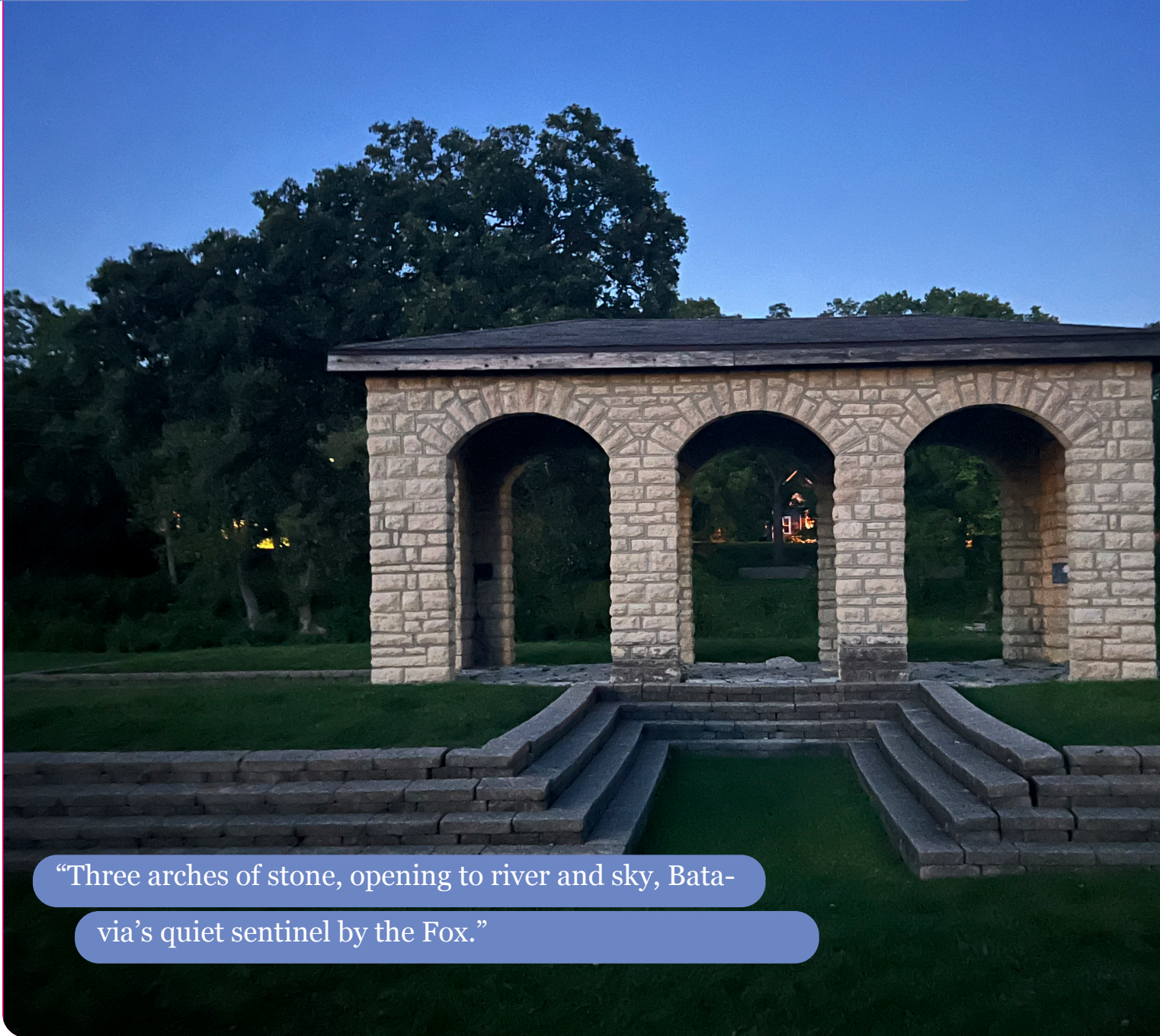
Here, I've learned that time is not
measured by volume but by presence.
That two days, when held with care,
can stretch into a lifetime of love and
memory.

LATE SUMMER REFLECTIONS

WRITER: Robert

PH: Staff

Second Act



“Three arches of stone, opening to river and sky, Bata-
via’s quiet sentinel by the Fox.”

NAVIGATING THE UNCHARTED TERRITORY OF RETIREMENT

For over three decades, Robert was the kind of man who knew the coordinates of his life with precision. A public servant to the core, he worked at a local government agency with the same steadiness and integrity that defined his quiet success. He managed his finances wisely, kept his head down, and rode the chaos of economic waves with unusual foresight, particularly during the market upheavals of early 2025.

When others panicked, he pivoted, made bold moves, and walked away with more than just a pension; he walked away with financial freedom.

But life, in all its unpredictability, had its own currents. Robert lost his wife to COVID-19, his anchor, his confidante, the one who shared his victories and softened his burdens. His children, grown and thriving, had homes of their own. There were no grandchildren to spoil, no lingering professional obligations. So Robert did what many dream of: he retired early and took to the seas.

The Caribbean glistened. The Mediterranean beckoned. For a time, it felt like living inside a postcard. He charted courses, met eccentric wanderers, sipped espresso in tucked-away harbors. When the ocean adventures subsided, he turned to land, meande-

ring across the U.S. playing golf in picturesque towns and storied courses. But even paradise, if unmoored from purpose, can grow dull.

"I wasn't depressed," he says. "But I felt... irrelevant."

He had spent his entire adult life defining himself by service, by his role in the system, by the predictability of calendars and deadlines, by the love he nurtured in his marriage. Retirement, it turns out, was not just freedom; it was disorientation.

That realization came to him one morning while sitting in a café in Geneva, watching a group of teenage boys laugh about something on their phones. He felt a pang, not of jealousy, but of restlessness. "They reminded me of what I had left to give," he said.

That afternoon, he made a few calls. A week later, he was mentoring high school students from underserved communities. The conversations were initially awkward: different worlds, different references. But slowly, a rhythm emerged. Robert didn't try to be cool or pretend to have all the answers. He simply listened. And that made all the difference.

Volunteering became a part of his weekly ritual. He found himself at food

06



Images from St Charles, Geneva, and Batavia



“Lit against the night sky, Batavia’s memorial stands in quiet reverence, a circle of honor, a flame of memory.”

drives, community clean-ups, and fundraising galas, not as a spectator, but as a participant. His checkbook, once reserved for real estate and index funds, now regularly supported local scholarships and nonprofits. “For the first time in a while, money felt meaningful again,” he said.

Then came pickleball. Of course it did. “It started as a joke,” he laughs. “But it turns out, I’m not half bad.”

Soon, there was hot yoga, book clubs, and coffee meetups with other retirees who, like him, had discovered that fulfillment wasn’t found in escape, but in engagement.

“I used to think retirement was the reward for years of working. But I’ve learned it’s just the beginning of a new kind of work, the kind where your soul gets paid.”

Robert still travels, but differently now. Not to check destinations off a list, but to reconnect with people, with place, with purpose. His second act isn’t as glamorous as sailing into the Sicilian sunset, but it’s deeper. Truer. Fuller.

And if you ask him what advice he’d give to others approaching retirement?

“Don’t just plan for your freedom. Plan for your usefulness.”

Editor’s Note:

This essay is part of our “Late Summer Reflections” series in the Fox Valley Review, celebrating life’s turning points and the wisdom they bring.

A Family Road Trip That Brought Us Closer

WRITER: Megan

DUPAGE CO

Miles of Smiles and Memories

I didn't expect to end up in the Fox Valley. But, love, in all its wild persuasion, has a way of moving you.



“Th gateway in Elgin welcomes visitors to a vibrant pedestrian plaza, where cafés, public art, and city life meet.”

We always talked about it, packing the car, hitting the road, and seeing America through our kids' eyes. This summer, we finally made it happen. We took our family on a good old-fashioned road trip. No flights. No resorts. Just our SUV, a trunk full of camping gear, snacks, playlists, and curiosity. It was bold, a little chaotic, and completely unforgettable.

From Illinois to the Great Beyond

We started in the Fox Valley and drove through the Midwest, weaving through Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and then into the Rockies. We zigzagged through national parks, small towns, roadside diners, and open highways that seemed to stretch into forever.

The kids were mesmerized by the Badlands' eerie beauty, the grandeur of the Black Hills, the geysers of Yellowstone, and the sheer scale of the mountains. They jumped into lakes, picked wildflowers, collected stories from locals, and tried regional foods we'd never heard of.

Not Easy, But Always Worth It

But this is real life.

We hit unexpected storms. GPS failed us more than once. One campsite flooded. And let's just say, no one really sleeps well the first night in a tent. But you know what? That's what made it an adventure. It tested our patience, our flexibility, and our ability to adapt.

Top Tips for Family Road-Trips

If you're thinking about taking your own family road trip, we highly recommend it. But we also recommend planning seriously.

1. **Make a Plan and Backup Plans**
Have a rough route, but also be open



The kids were mesmerized by the Badlands' eerie beauty, the grandeur of the Black Hills, the geysers of Yellowstone and the sheer scale of the mountains.

Image above: Bridge over the Fox River at Jon J Duerr Forest Preserve in South Elgin, Illinois.



Image below: Bridge connecting trails at Jon J Duerr Forest Preserve in South Elgin, Illinois.



to detours. And always have a Plan B and C for lodging, food, and activities. Some of our favorite stops were unplanned.

2. Pack Light, But Pack Smart

Bring the essentials:

- Bug spray
- Sunblock
- A first aid kit
- Tent and sleeping bags
- Portable grill and cooking gear
- Gallons of water
- Headlamps and backup chargers

3. Alternate Camping and Comfort

We loved camping, but after two or three nights, a hot shower and a soft bed at a motel made everyone a little less grumpy.

4. Watch the Weather Like a Hawk

This saved us more than once. Know when to pivot. A thunderstorm in the mountains is no joke and a rainy night in a tent can be fun or miserable depending on how prepared you are.

5. Let the Kids Lead Sometimes

We let our kids choose some stops. They discovered quirky museums, funky food trucks, and cool trails we never would've found on our own.

What We Gained

By the end of the trip, we had thousands of photos, but more importantly, we had shared experiences that deepened our family bond. We talked more, laughed louder, and even cried together (especially when saying goodbye to Yellowstone).

Our kids grew up a little on that road. So did we.

So if you're considering a road trip, go for it. Plan it, prep for it, and then let the journey surprise you.

Because some of the best family memories are made in smiles and styles

Love or Duty?

Try Both on for Size

He has kids older than me. Grandkids who call him “Papa.” My friends can’t get past it. My parents are threatening to cut me out of the will. But when the heart wants what it wants, the calendar year on someone’s birth certificate starts to look irrelevant.

WRITER: Dara M.

PH: Staff

I’m Dara. I’m 28, a physical therapist by day, concierge at a nursing home by night, and a Hampshire local who thrives on predictability, stability, and planning. Those qualities got me through college without a hitch. I plan my workouts, meals, vacations and yes, my life.

Or at least I thought I did.

Then life, in its infinite wisdom, decided to remind me that “even the best laid out plans” are just invitations for chaos to RSVP early.

But, I’ve never been lucky in love.



Image of Fair in Hampshire, Illinois

My dating history looks like a clearance rack, too many things I thought might work, but didn't. I bounced from dating app to dating app until I got so disenchanted I deleted them all. No swipes, no "hey beautiful" from a guy holding a fish in his profile pic. Just peace.



Images of Fair in Hampshire, Illinois

Then, at work, I met him. Thirty years older than me. Yes, thirty. And not in a "salt-and-pepper influencer" way, he's the real deal.

He has children older than I am, and grandkids who call him "Papa." At first, I thought it might be too much baggage. But then I realized; he's smart, funny, kind, and has that "I've actually lived life" confidence you can't fake.

He's made it through heartbreaks, mortgages, and raising teens, plural. And now here we are, a total curveball in each other's lives.

Of course, my friends have opinions. Hanging out with them has become... complicated.

Some can't get past the "he has grandkids" thing, others crack jokes when he's not around, and a few act like I've joined a cult. They just think it's a weird match. I've stopped inviting him to certain events because I'm tired of reading the room and feeling judged.

The reality of it all is that life's hard, but at least we have each other.

My parents? Forget it. They're not just against it; they've practically staged an intervention.

I'm their only child, and they've made it crystal clear: they want grandkids, preferably from a man who was born in the same decade as me. They've gone so far as to threaten to cut me out of the inheritance if I "throw away my best years" with him. Their words, not mine.

And me? I'm caught between love and duty. I get it; family matters. I'm sensitive to what my parents want. But also... this is my life. Not theirs. The

Some people act like the "right" relationship is about matching ages on paper, checking off boxes, and planning a picture-perfect future. But just because it's fleeting doesn't mean it can't be meaningful. Maybe he's not forever. Maybe he is. Irony is the spice of life and the irony here is that my most stable, loving relationship so far is the one they call "a bad idea."

I'm not saying I've decided. But I am saying this: love and duty aren't always mutually exclusive. Sometimes they're just sitting in opposite corners, waiting for you to figure out how to introduce them without starting a fight.

~Dara

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