Mayor's Message

2.19.26

"You can't go home again, but you can remember the beauty of your past"

On February 16, I had an opportunity to take a journey back to where it all began, and I brought my good friend Frank Pontrelli along for the experience. Frank and I share a meaningful connection to the Village of Norridge; I grew up there, and Frank's wife also spent her childhood and young adulthood in the community. Frank and Jenny were married at Divine Savior Parish, which happened to be the same parish where my family worshipped and where I attended grammar school. For both of us this was more than a drive down familiar streets; it was a return to the foundation of our lives.

On our way back to Norridge, we stopped at the site of Holy Cross High School in River Grove; I attended there in the 1960's, and Frank's son Jim attended in the 1990's. I knew the school had closed in 2004, and that the property had been sold by the Archdiocese of Chicago to a developer. Still, knowing something intellectually and seeing it with your own eyes are two different experiences. Both Holy Cross and its companion girl's school, Mother Theodore Guerin had been razed, replace now by beautiful townhomes and condominiums. While the new development was impressive, we felt a sense of loss. The campus was more than brick and mortar, it was classrooms filled with lessons that shaped us, hallways echoing with youthful laughter, and friendships that have endured decades; it was a cornerstone of my growing up.

When we arrived in Norridge the first spot we visited was the site formerly occupied by Divine Savior Church and school. We were aware that the village had purchased the site, but were surprised to see construction fencing surrounding the facility. It appeared that another part of our shared history was preparing for transformation, as plans moved forward for a new municipal complex on the site.

Our next stop was the home my parents built in 1959; their dream home, and the place where I lived until I married in 1973. Standing there I was struck by the realization that nothing remains unchanged. Our original home had been demolished and replaced by a new two-story dwelling. Though lovely, it was no longer the home filled with my family's memories, I felt in that moment, that my physical connection to that place had quietly slipped away.

Throughout the remainder of the day, we searched other landmarks from our youth; the Jewel Food Store where ironically Frank's wife and I both worked was now a Dollar General, and the Maurice Lenell cookie factory at Harlem and Montrose—once

known for its conveyor belt of cookies and the unmistakable sweet aroma of freshly baked treats, had given way to another business entirely. The sights and scents that once defined our neighborhood exist now only as a memory.

Our visit was filled with reflections on how things used to be, and how they have changed since we left. Time moves steadily forward, communities evolve, buildings rise and fall, institutions close and new opportunities take their place. As difficult as it is to be a witness to change, it is also a reminder of the vitality of a community. Growth and transformation are signs of life; while we may long to preserve the exact image of our childhood neighborhoods, progress ensures that new families will build their own memories in those same spaces.

Frank and I left with a renewed appreciation, not for what once stood physically, but for the enduring gift of having grown up in such a strong and caring community. We are grateful for the lessons, values and friendships, and faith that were rooted in Norridge. Though we cannot return to those days, they remain part of who we are and how we see ourselves. We are thankful to be where we are in life, and we are thankful that we once called Norridge our home. Time may change the landscape, but it cannot erase the beautiful memories that shaped us.