

Growing Together: The Power of Community

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Some kids grow up on football fields or at their auntie's house. I grew up in a grocery store. For as long as I can remember, the sounds of items scanning, handhelds beeping, and customers bustling have been etched into my memory. I spent my formative years at Pick 'N Save Janesville—or, as we affectionately called it, 'Pick.' This grocery store was more than just a place to shop; it was my second home, a community that provided support, warmth, and invaluable life lessons during my childhood. Growing up with a physically absent father and a mother who was all *but* physically absent, Pick became my refuge. There, among aisles filled with groceries, I found a sense of belonging and role models who shaped my character and taught me the values of leadership, empathy and community.

When I think of Pick, two names immediately come to mind: Kurt and Karl. Karl, the Store Manager, was a middle-aged married father with thinning hair, a stocky build, and a laugh that could level a building. In contrast, Kurt, the assistant manager, was a slender, younger, unmarried 'bachelor'—a term he jokingly used to describe himself—with long blonde hair and a passion for music. I affectionately called them Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum.

Kurt and Karl were as close to father figures as I had growing up, and I can't be anything but thankful for that. They taught me what dads should be, providing an almost movie-like depiction of the two sides of fatherhood. Kurt, the playful one, taught me how to enjoy life, reminding me not to take it too seriously or for granted. He'd pick me up and spin me around almost whenever he saw me, and we took the leftover frosting from the bakery they'd throw out and made frosting moustaches on more than one occasion. Karl, on the other hand, had a more serious demeanor, but once you softened his tough exterior, he revealed himself as the goofy Midwestern dad any kid could wish for.

Karl taught me practical skills like writing and math, which helped me excel in school. During our note-writing sessions for all-store meetings, I learned how to articulate thoughts clearly—a skill that's served me well in my academic work. He also guided me in leadership, allowing me to lead small projects and initiatives within the store. One memorable project involved deciding how to arrange different sodas on the shelf. It may not have been the most significant task, but everyone needs to start somewhere.

Karl even showed me how to ride a bike, though I must admit I'm a bit rusty these days. During all-store meetings, I would "help" him write notes. He focused on having good penmanship, which, laughably, I still lack over a decade and a half later. Meanwhile, Kurt and I would often be found in the office, quietly playing scissors-paper-rock or tic-tac-toe.

Kurt and Karl may not have set out to be father figures, but over time, they became the parents I never had at home. Their influence instilled in me a deep sense of responsibility and the importance of community—values I carry with me as I look toward my future.

As I grew older, my experiences at Pick deepened my understanding of community and the bonds we form within it. This lesson was profoundly reinforced during a challenging time in the life of someone I deeply loved—Patti.

Patti was a beloved member of our grocery store family, known for her infectious smile and unwavering spirit. She served as our Receiving Manager and navigated the backroom with a skill that made her an invaluable part of our team. A hug from Patti could brighten even the darkest day; she had a special way of making everyone feel valued and loved. But in early 2014, when I was just six years old, Patti was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer. Her diagnosis hit the Pick family hard, yet we weren't the type to sit idly by.

Instead, the community sprang into action, organizing benefits, charity walks, and heartfelt celebrations—all aimed at supporting Patti during her battle. We rallied around the slogan *Fight Like a Girl*, which adorned every pink and purple shirt made for the cause. Even now, as I write this, I glance at a white band strung with beads, each representing a lap I completed around Traxler Park during a fundraiser for Patti in 2015. Nine years later, it still hangs next to my record player, almost symbolically, as Patti gifted me my first record: the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Patti's illness was a daunting experience for a young child, but it unveiled a new dimension of community and togetherness that I had never known. The Pick family came together in ways that went beyond individual efforts, showing me that real strength lies in collective support. Just as Kurt and Karl had stepped up to fill the void of father figures in my life, the entire community stepped up for Patti, ensuring her medical bills were covered and her final days filled with love and care.

This experience taught me that no one person can shoulder all of life's burdens alone. It instilled in me a deep appreciation for the power of community—how, together, we can create a tapestry of support that uplifts us all, especially in our most difficult times. Patti passed away on July 11th, 2015, just nine days after my eighth birthday and about a year and a half after her diagnosis—a far cry from the few months the doctors initially gave her. Even the way I learned of her passing reflected our closeness:

'We have an angel.'

On September 14th, 2017, I woke up for school on what seemed like an ordinary Thursday—until I received a text on the phone I'd gotten just two months earlier for my tenth birthday. The message was simple, just a link to an article from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* titled *Pick 'n Save Closing Store in Janesville*.

I can't say I was shocked; shock wasn't exactly the word. Instead, it was as if my entire life flashed before my eyes, as though I had some sudden superpower that let me see my past instantly. My

grandmother had helped build that store. My parents met there. And for over a decade, I spent nearly every afternoon at Pick. Without Pick 'N Save Janesville, I wouldn't exist, let alone be the person I am today.

Fifty-one days after the article was published, Pick closed its doors for good. It was a Saturday, which meant I could spend the entire day there. We arrived before sunrise—my family and I, along with Kurt and Karl. Kurt even brought McDonald's breakfast, which I credit for my love of sausage biscuits with cheese. The Pick I knew, however, had already changed. The familiar sounds were gone—no items being scanned, no handhelds beeping. The store was nearly empty, with just the seven of us: Kurt, Karl, my mom, my sister, me, and two corporate employees.

Leaving Pick that day felt like saying goodbye to a chapter of my life that had raised me, a family that had shaped me in ways most people wouldn't expect from a grocery store. Most people might find it strange to feel so deeply about a place of business or to say that a store shaped who they are, but Pick taught me how to read and write, instilled in me the importance of leadership, showed me the value of community, and proved the power of a chosen family.

The last song played on the overhead speakers as we were finally leaving is something I simply couldn't write better: *Linger* by The Cranberries. I'm essentially Pavloved into crying every time I hear it, now.

As I reflect on these memories, I realize the lasting impact of growing up in a community that was so much more than just a store—it was a family built around shared purpose and support. Kurt, Karl, and Patti each taught me that no one shoulders life's burdens alone. They showed me how a true community lifts each other up, creating bonds that go beyond individual lives. Their lessons have become part of me, staying with me as I've found ways to create that same sense of belonging and support in new places.

Now, as I approach a time when the years without Pick will begin to outnumber those with it, I am more grateful than ever for the experiences that shaped me there. Today, as I take on leadership roles, I carry forward the values of empathy, resilience, and teamwork that Pick instilled in me. In every group I join and every role I take on—whether at school, in my town, or in the wider world—I strive to build a community around me, knowing that the most meaningful progress happens when people come together.

This commitment to uplifting others, supporting each other through challenges, and making a collective difference is a lesson I've carried forward. As I moved from Pick to new communities, I found those same values alive and well in RUHS and BTC, where people genuinely care about each other's success. At RUHS, I discovered peers and mentors who inspired me to strive higher, showing me that resilience isn't just an individual pursuit—it's something that grows stronger within a supportive network. At BTC, I've felt that same commitment to community. BTC's environment has only

strengthened my belief that a strong community can empower its members to overcome challenges, reach new goals, and find purpose together. These experiences have shaped me and given me confidence to face future challenges, knowing that wherever I go, I can help build environments that uplift others and foster meaningful contributions.

In everything I do, I am guided by the most important lesson I learned at Pick: that true leadership isn't about the individual—it's about creating a community where everyone can thrive together. And just as those I loved at Pick helped shape me, I hope to create environments where others, too, feel valued and supported as they grow.