##### Harper Talks Episode 34 Transcript- Carrie Fullerton

##### [00:00:00.090] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton and you're listening to Harper Talks, a coproduction of Harper College alumni relations and Harper radio. Today on Harper Talks, I'm excited to speak with Carrie Fullerton. She's a 1992 graduate of Harper College and is the executive director of the Arlington Heights Park District. Carrie, joined me in the newly renovated studios of WHCM in the A building on campus. Thanks for being here.

##### [00:00:23.330] - Carrie Fullerton

Thanks so much for having me, Brian. It's thrilled to be here.

##### [00:00:25.770] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. You said you just got back from a conference in Chicago.

##### [00:00:28.400] - Carrie Fullerton

I did. From the Illinois park and Recreation association and the Illinois association of Park Districts annual conference.

##### [00:00:34.670] - Brian Shelton

Okay. And does everyone there watch the show parks and rec? Is that a requirement?

##### [00:00:39.950] - Carrie Fullerton

I think everybody's familiar with Amy Poehler and her boss, Ron Swanson, but I think it's slightly different in the real world.

##### [00:00:48.220] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. Never watched the show. I just know about it. And I thought, oh, well, I should ask about that because these things happen. Well, thanks for being here. I noticed. So, kind of interesting. You graduated from Harper College in 1992 from the cardiac technology program, and now you're the executive director of a park district. Tell me how those two things go together. Or do they?

##### [00:01:09.000] - Carrie Fullerton

Yeah, well, they kind of do. I started in the cardiac tech program. I had a strong interest in the fitness component of park districts and public organizations. And so it was a great place for me to start and sort of explore that a little bit further.

##### [00:01:24.290] - Brian Shelton

Okay, fantastic. I wanted to ask you, though, you are the Executive Director of the Arlington Heights park district. How does someone, I mean, I know it takes a long time. You got to work your way up through the career and everything like that long way. But what does that job entail? What does that mean to be the executive director of the park district?

##### [00:01:45.390] - Carrie Fullerton

So the executive director of any park district really provides the vision and the direction and the guidance to the agency. So I work directly for the park board, which are a sum of five elected officials. And then I also have 100 full time staff and thousand part time staff. But I am the only employee of the park board and the rest of the employees report to me.

##### [00:02:11.550] - Brian Shelton

Okay.

##### [00:02:12.730] - Carrie Fullerton

So I provide the guidance, the structure, make recommendations to the park board on policy and governance and other functions related to finances.

##### [00:02:24.090] - Brian Shelton

So 1000, like part time employees, what are we talking about? Lifeguards, gym employees, that sort of thing.

##### [00:02:30.080] - Carrie Fullerton

So the Arlington Pikes park district has a higher than usual amount of swimming pools. We have five outdoor pools, and then we have four bodies of water under one roof for a total of nine pools. So we have employ over 300 lifeguards on an annual basis.

##### [00:02:45.500] - Brian Shelton

How do you find that many people? I mean, that's got to be a human resources nightmare all on its own, right?

##### [00:02:50.140] - Carrie Fullerton

I think in some communities it is. But we have this amazing swim team component to our agency. We have in house swim teams as well as very competitive swim teams. And many of those kids who swim with our program really enjoy being around our pools. I started two weeks before the pandemic made us shut it all down.

##### [00:03:09.660] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, tell me about that. How do you respond to something like that?

##### [00:03:13.490] - Carrie Fullerton

Well, just like everybody else in the world, we didn't have a playbook on that one.

##### [00:03:18.030] - Brian Shelton

Right.

##### [00:03:18.210] - Carrie Fullerton

So coming to a new community. But I guess it's important to say that Arlington Heights wasn't completely new to me. I started, I actually interned there in 1993, and actually am now back there as the executive director over the last almost four years. But coming in during the pandemic was completely challenging because I didn't really even know the staff that I was working with or really had worked with my board in the past to be able to navigate all the different decisions that we had to make to push through that period of time.

##### [00:03:47.940] - Brian Shelton

I guess whatever you came to, they had to kind of go along with. Right. I mean, whatever ideas.

##### [00:03:53.350] - Carrie Fullerton

Well, I would say I work for an incredibly supportive board, and they all felt as me and as I and my team did, in that we really wanted to keep as many. We were one of the few park districts that stayed open, kept our swimming pools open during the summer of 2020, and we had to create this very elaborate its system because nobody knew really what was happening with the pandemic, to create, like, hour time slots where only so many people could come in, so you'd go online. We set up this whole system where you could go online, sign up for an hour time slot, and then swim for an hour. And then the next group, we'd have to sanitize it all and then have the next group come in. So it was very complicated to keep our aquatic areas open. But, boy, it really helped families create a sense of normalcy, not only for the adults in their family, but really for the children as well.

##### [00:04:35.430] - Brian Shelton

My follow up question.

##### [00:04:36.380] - Carrie Fullerton

Yes?

##### [00:04:37.750] - Brian Shelton

What lessons did you learn from the pandemic that you have carried over into kind of the daily operation of what you do now? What has been normalized, I guess, from that?

##### [00:04:48.670] - Carrie Fullerton

Well, one thing that we started utilizing was we have people make an appointment online now, or a reservation, if you will, for fitness classes. We used to just have a fitness instructor show up and then whoever showed up for the class. So we can actually are using measurable data now to be able to tell what classes are more popular, where we should give a larger room to, or have more classes at that particular time period. That was very helpful. Also, just having all staff just kind of understand that. I think everyone always knew we were essential, but everyone really understood that at the end of the pandemic. And actually, our numbers at the park district are greater than they were in 2019. Pre pandemic.

##### [00:05:31.300] - Brian Shelton

That's great.

##### [00:05:31.880] - Carrie Fullerton

Yeah, it's fantastic. The participation is amazing.

##### [00:05:34.440] - Brian Shelton

That's great. And it's great that you were able to be open because so many places were closed, and it made it very hard.

##### [00:05:38.730] - Carrie Fullerton

Yeah, we worked really hard to be open, and I'm really proud of my team for the work that they did during that time. Probably my most proud moment in my career is how hard people worked during this time and how hard we worked together.

##### [00:05:51.790] - Brian Shelton

So you were here at Harper College in 92 in the cardiac technician.

##### [00:05:55.110] - Carrie Fullerton

It's beautiful. The buildings were much not as built up, and I'm sure the resources were much less than they are today. To the student, I would imagine.

##### [00:06:04.510] - Brian Shelton

We're in building a. You remember building a, of course.

##### [00:06:07.000] - Carrie Fullerton

Yes. Building a is where all the center of everything happened and a great place to study, like in the hallways or in the.

##### [00:06:13.770] - Brian Shelton

So, yeah, that's the one building that everyone always remembers.

##### [00:06:16.560] - Carrie Fullerton

It seems like great grilled cheese downstairs, great cafeteria, right?

##### [00:06:19.950] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. So you left Harper and went to University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign? Did you feel like Harper really prepared for you for that transferring to the four year degree program?

##### [00:06:31.330] - Carrie Fullerton

Yes, absolutely. I mean, I cannot express how grateful I am to Harper College for helping me not only prepare to become a student at the University of Illinois, but also just helping me to build my confidence to believe that I actually was a really good student. I just wasn't studying something, you know, at high school that was very exciting to me. So when I got here, I started to understand that studying and preparing and really understanding the material was definitely the way to complete the degrees that you wanted to achieve.

##### [00:07:05.790] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, that's fantastic. So you're doing the part district. You went to Harper, and I noticed you've been doing some presentations on girl power. Tell me about girl power.

##### [00:07:15.980] - Carrie Fullerton

Yeah. So just like many industries, for many years, public parks and recreation was more of a male dominated industry in the leadership roles. And so I had a few female role models, but not many as coming up through the system. And so several of my colleagues and I decided to work together to really present sessions to help women be more successful and get into these leadership roles more quickly and really even just to determine if they want a leadership role in general. So we presenting these sessions every year at the Illinois park and Recreation conference for the last seven years, me and my two fellow co presenters, Rita Fletcher from the Bartlett Park District and Mary Fran Leno from the Itasca Park District.

##### [00:08:01.350] - Brian Shelton

Okay. So it's great you're able to bring other groups together and have those conversations. That's fun.

##### [00:08:05.450] - Carrie Fullerton

We just presented this last week and our room was full. There were people sitting on the floor. So I think the session is still very valued and needed. We change up the content every year. It's really a fun group of people to present to. They ask great questions.

##### [00:08:20.270] - Brian Shelton

I don't want to get you in trouble at work or anything like that, but you're the executive director of the Arlington Heights park district. What's, what's next for you? What are you doing?

##### [00:08:27.970] - Carrie Fullerton

I would say that this is really, Arlington Heights is one of the, probably the five largest park districts in the state of Illinois. So this is my last stop. I'm very blessed to be here. It's an amazing community. The community loves its park district. We received three out of the last four years, the best park district in the Daily Herald readership. So it's just a community that if you're going to work in this industry, it's an amazing community to work in, because Arlington Heights really loves its park district, and I've really blessed to work with so many amazing residents who actually really care and are really invested in their park system.

##### [00:09:03.360] - Brian Shelton

That's great. So I ask everybody the same question every time. Have one of the guests on the show. What is your advice for current or future Harper students? If you could sit down with a group of Harper students, what advice would you give them? I know it's a hard, you know.

##### [00:09:19.620] - Carrie Fullerton

I think that, know, just really get invested in what's here. I think many times Harper has students that are probably working at the same time while they're full time, maybe while coming to school. But there's so many resources here now, so many more even than when I was here. So getting really invested in the system here, getting to know your professors and learning the material, know really utilizing this not as just a stop in your journey, but as an actual destination as part of your whole journey.

##### [00:09:49.040] - Brian Shelton

Fantastic. Well, I want to thank you so much for being here today. And for those of you who are listening, we've had lots of technical difficulties today, so you don't know about them because you're listening to a perfectly edited show by Coby Pozo. But anyway. But I'm really excited that you stopped by and came today. Carrie Fullerton is a Harper College graduate and Executive Director of the Arlington Heights Park District. If you're enjoying Harper Talks, please subscribe and while you're at it, rate and review us so that others might find us. Harper Talks is the co production of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. This episode was edited by Coby Pozo and our online content producer is Matt Byrne. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening.