

Voice Column for July 2019

“Rockford, Rockford, it’s for you, baby!”

By John Groh

The shout-out from Rockford’s hometown hero Fred VanVleet after he helped the Toronto Raptors win the NBA National Championships in mid-June could not have been more exhilarating for the 6,000-plus people who had come to watch the final game at the City Market Pavilion in downtown Rockford.

It was just as exhilarating to me to hear that huge crowd chant, “8-1-5!”

Area residents had gathered by the thousands in and around the pavilion twice that week to watch Games 5 and 6. In his first post-game interview, Fred showed his appreciation for the hometown support. What Fred lacks in NBA height, he more than makes up for in spirit and drive -- a combination of natural talent, heart and humility that made him a star at Auburn High School and Wichita State and now, makes him a household name in Canada with a growing fan club. He’s a spark plug for his team – and for us. He’s one of RACVB’s most dedicated “sports ambassadors,” and he regularly gives back to his community through programs that center on helping young people develop skills and character.

Fred shows us time and again how much he loves Rockford, and love is a two-way street, as we all know. When I saw the diverse crowds of people who gathered on two nights in June to cheer on the hometown hero, I thought, “This what it looks like when a city loves its residents and what it looks like for a city to be loved in return.”

Some of you remember when author Peter Kageyama, who wrote “For the Love of Cities: The love affair between people and their places,” spoke at our luncheon in June 2016, which was the first event to be held at the newly opened UW Health Sports Factory. The premise of the book and his speech, in a nutshell, is that city leaders should consider how creating real relationships with their residents can help residents form an emotional attachment to the places they live.

In that vein, I was particularly moved by a picture on the front page of the *Rockford Register Star* the morning after Game 5 that showed a row of young children staring at a big screen with expressions of wonder, anxiety and anticipation as they waited for one of Fred’s 3-pointers to swish. The thousands of little kids and teenagers who came to those two games will never forget it.

If Rockford is the kind of place that welcomes everyone from every part of the community to enjoy this kind of fun, maybe it’s a place that values them and it’s a place they could love for the long term.

The City of Rockford and RACVB pulled together to host the Jurassic Park RKFD events. But, then again, all we did was set the scene and issue the invitation. Thousands of families chose to come downtown to be part of a shared experience that on those nights, defined who we are as our best selves. United. Hopeful. Excited.

The Jurassic Park RKFD events were not a lightning strike, so to speak. What was not possible a decade ago has become the standard, and lightning is striking with increasing frequency. RACVB and our partners keep raising the bar. You see, our staff long ago suspended disbelief about what is possible. I look back to the first Stroll on State. We anticipated a few thousand, and hoped for 5,000. Then, 30,000 people showed up.

People want to love the place they live. Part of the RACVB mission is giving them more to love.

While we rooted for VanVleet, we were, in a way, rooting for ourselves and for 815 as a lovable place. VanVleet's slogan "Bet on yourself," can and should be our city's credo, as well.

This summer, people are talking about the nine wonderful new murals that were installed downtown during the CRE8IV mural festival in mid- May. Residents may be saying to one another: "Did you see the new murals they put in downtown? Have you seen the sculptures they brought in last year?"

As Rockford deepens these emotional connections with residents, conversations may shift to reflect a sense of ownership for the positive things: "Did you see the new murals and the sculptures we got downtown? I love that we do these kinds of things here."

Step by step, RACVB is betting on us, hoping to turn "they" into "we." That's a relationship. That's the basis for love.