

December 2025

SIGNATURE KEY LIVING

MAGAZINE



HOLIDAY RECIPES
From holiday main dishes, drinks and desserts

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MEN'S & WOMEN'S CUSTOM SUITS - STYLED BY KY

FEATURED THIS MONTH



Tamir Bell,
Alderman 13th Ward | City Council Member



Edward Caceres
Managing Director



Mark Henderson
Community Development Director

NEELEY ERICKSON
GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS DIRECTOR
Illinois REALTORS® | NorthWest Illinois Alliance of REALTORS®



Welcome

DECEMBER

2025



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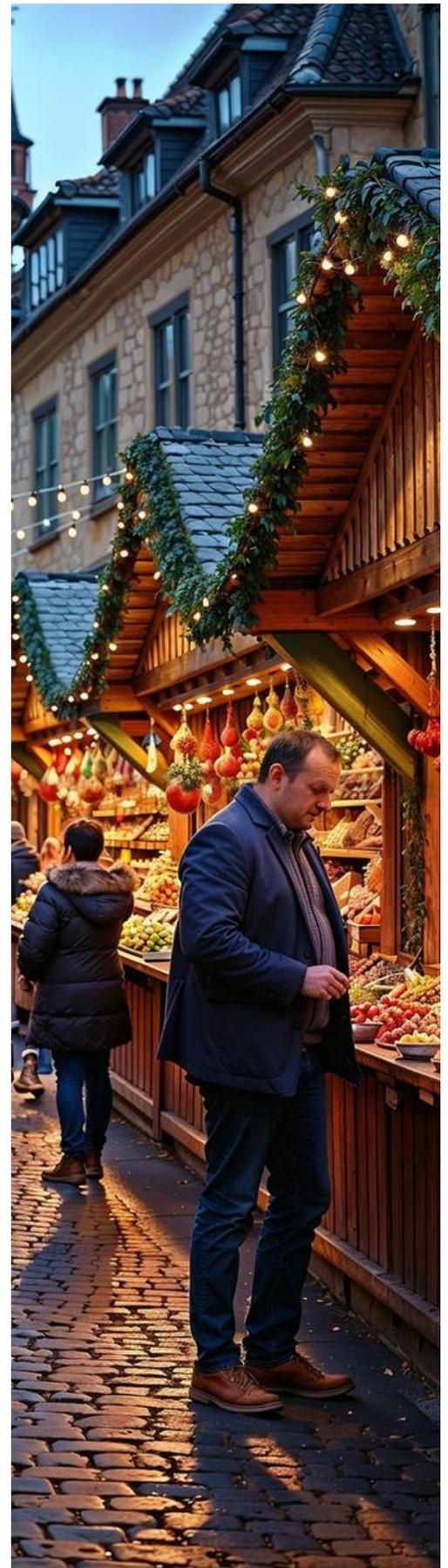
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Elegant, driven, and deeply client-focused, **Monica Williams** brings a modern, thoughtful approach to real estate, blending warmth, professionalism, and unwavering dedication to deliver exceptional results.

Monica began her real estate career behind the scenes at Keller Williams Realty Signature, where she supported one of the firm's top 2 teams. As Director of Operations, she gained invaluable experience managing listings, coordinating transactions, and overseeing closings with precision and efficiency. She went on to serve as Business Development & Marketing Manager at Midwest Title Services, where she strengthened partnerships with leading agents across the region and launched House Talk Magazine as its editor and creator.

With both a bachelor's and master's degree in Information Technology and Computer Science, Monica combines technical expertise with meticulous attention to detail. Today, she unites years of operational experience with a client-centered mindset—offering service that is strategic, seamless, and guided by integrity.

Graceful yet grounded. Professional yet dynamic. Monica represents the modern approach to real estate—blending innovation, integrity, and genuine connection in everything she does.

Interested in buying, selling, or just curious what your home is worth? Contact Monica today!

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LICENSED REAL ESTATE AGENT



Christmas Recipes



Caramel Vanilla Latte

Ingredients:

- 1 cup milk
- 1–2 shots espresso (optional: medium-roast caramel espresso)
- Vanilla syrup, to taste

Method:

- Heat the milk in the microwave for 60–75 seconds, until warm and lightly frothy (140–150°F / 60–65°C). Tip: Stop heating if the milk foams before ten seconds.
- Brew espresso and pour into the warm milk.
- Sweeten with vanilla syrup.

Prepare the Strawberries

- Slice fresh strawberries vertically to highlight their natural color and texture.

Build the Glass

Step A – Add the Latte:

- Drizzle caramel syrup around the inside of your glass.
- Pour latte base, filling just under halfway.
- Add a layer of whipped cream.

- Pour in the remaining latte.

Step B – Add the Fruit:

- Press sliced strawberries flat against the latte for a beautiful visual contrast.

Step C – Finish With Whipped Cream:

- Top with a final swirl of vanilla whipped cream. Optional:
- Use a piping bag to create decorative swirls, mimicking café-style presentation.

Prepare the Baking Sheet

- Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C). Line a baking sheet with parchment and lightly grease it.

Make the Dough

- Heat water, butter, sugar, and salt in a saucepan until boiling. Add flour all at once and stir until the dough forms a smooth ball. Let cool slightly. Add eggs one at a time, mixing until smooth and pipeable,

Pipe the Zeppole

- Use a piping bag with a large open-star tip (Ateco 825/826, Wilton 1M).
- Pipe 3–4 inch rings, stacking a second ring on top for height.
- Leave 2 inches between each pastry.

Classic detail: The star ridges help them rise evenly and look traditional.

Bake With Proper Temperature Technique

– High-Heat Stage:

Bake at 425°F (220°C) for 15 minutes.

– Reduce Heat:

- Lower to 350°F (175°C) for 20–25 minutes until golden, firm, and hollow-sounding.

Optional: Crack the oven door and leave inside 10 minutes for extra crispness.

Cool and Finish

- Transfer to a wire rack, cool 25 minutes.
- Dust generously with powdered sugar for the

classic Saint Joseph's look. Note: This pastry is served unfilled to showcase their airy, delicate interior.

How to Decorate for Christmas

To Match Your Own Style ^(Interior)

Decorating your home for a classic cozy Christmas is about creating warmth, nostalgia, and a welcoming atmosphere. Start with a traditional color palette of deep reds, forest greens, and soft creams. Introduce these colors in multiple ways — throw blankets over sofas, velvet or plaid pillows, table runners, and area rugs. Repeating these colors throughout the space creates cohesion and immediately evokes the familiar, festive feeling of the season.

Next, focus on textures and natural accents to enhance the cozy aesthetic. Layer materials like wool, velvet, and faux fur on furniture, and consider adding knit or embroidered elements in cushions or throws. Incorporate wooden accents, pinecones, evergreen branches, and cinnamon sticks in decorative arrangements on mantels, coffee tables, and shelves. Mix ornaments with different finishes — matte, shiny, or glittered — on your Christmas tree and surrounding displays to create visual interest while maintaining a warm, traditional look.

Finally, lighting completes the cozy atmosphere. Replace harsh overhead lighting with warm, soft lights such as candles, fairy lights, or lamps with amber-toned bulbs. Position lights around windows, mantels, or shelves, and if possible, include a fireplace or electric fire feature to add glowing warmth. Together, these elements — layered textures, rich colors, natural accents, and gentle lighting — create a timeless, inviting holiday space that feels both festive and comforting for family and guests.





Nature-inspired Christmas décor

draws its charm from the outdoors, emphasizing natural materials, earthy tones, and simple, organic beauty. Start with a color palette of greens, browns, creams, and muted reds, reflecting the forest and winter landscape. Layer these tones throughout the room with pillows, blankets, rugs, or table runners to create a warm, grounded foundation that feels instantly cozy and inviting.

Next, incorporate natural textures and enhance the space with rustic wooden ornaments, pinecones, dried orange slices, and cinnamon sticks. These can decorate your tree, garlands, or tabletops. Fresh greenery and ribbons woven through garlands along staircases, mantels, or doorways bring the outdoors inside, while candles in mason jars or lanterns provide soft, flickering light that heightens the cozy atmosphere.

Thoughtful layering of these elements creates a look that feels authentic and welcoming.

Finally, consider small details that evoke the winter outdoors. Wooden figurines, simple ornaments, and pine-scented candles add charm and sensory warmth, while gift wrapping in kraft paper tied with twine or sprigs of greenery continues the organic theme.

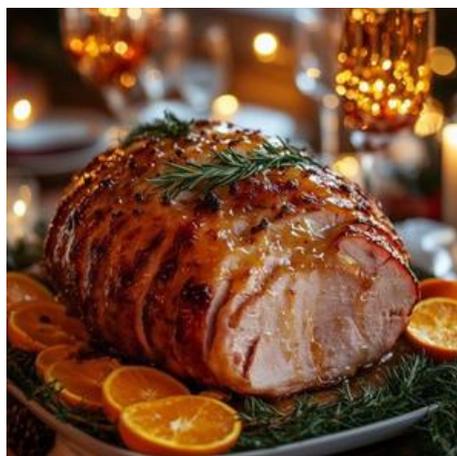
By combining earthy tones, natural textures, greenery, and gentle lighting, you create a calm, inviting space that captures the essence of a winter cabin retreat—perfect for relaxing, entertaining, and celebrating the season with rustic charm.





Christmas Recipes

christmas food recipes







Garlic & Lemon Roasted Chicken

Servings: 4-6

Ingredients

- 1 whole chicken (about 4-5 lbs / 1.8-2.3 kg)
- 2 lemons, halved (1 for stuffing, 1 for slicing)
- 8-10 garlic cloves, peeled and lightly crushed
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp salt, plus extra for seasoning
- ½ tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tsp smoked paprika (optional, adds depth and color)
- 1 tsp dried thyme (or 2 tsp fresh thyme)
- 1 tsp dried rosemary (or 2 tsp fresh rosemary)
- ½ cup chicken stock or water (to keep pan juices)
- Fresh herbs (thyme, rosemary, parsley) for garnish

Instructions

Step 1: Prepare the Chicken

1. Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C).
2. Remove giblets and pat the chicken dry with paper towels – this ensures crisp skin.
3. Season the cavity generously with salt and pepper. Stuff with 4 garlic cloves and 1 lemon halved.
4. Truss the legs with kitchen twine to ensure even cooking.

Step 2: Season the Exterior

1. In a small bowl, mix olive oil, salt, pepper, smoked paprika, thyme, and rosemary.
2. Rub this mixture evenly over the entire exterior of the chicken, under the skin where possible for extra flavor.
3. Arrange lemon slices and remaining garlic cloves around the chicken in the roasting pan.

Step 3: Roast the Chicken

1. Pour ½ cup chicken stock or water into the bottom of the pan to catch drippings and keep the meat juicy.
2. Roast in the preheated oven for 1 hour 15 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes, or until the internal temperature reaches 165°F (74°C) in the thickest part of the thigh.
3. Halfway through cooking, baste the chicken with pan juices to enhance flavor and moisture.

Step 4: Rest & Serve

1. Remove the chicken from the oven and transfer to a cutting board. Tent loosely with foil and rest 10-15 minutes – this keeps it juicy.
2. Spoon pan juices over the chicken and carve.
3. Garnish with fresh herbs and extra lemon slices for presentation.

Serving Tips:

- Serve with roasted vegetables or mashed potatoes to soak up the flavorful pan juices. Optional: squeeze additional fresh lemon over the chicken just before serving for extra brightness. For more flavor, let the chicken marinate in the garlic, herbs, olive oil, and lemon for 2-4 hours (or overnight) before roasting.

This recipe gives you a crispy, golden-skinned chicken with aromatic garlic and bright lemon flavor, and a juicy interior with plenty of delicious pan juices to drizzle over.







Sweet & Savory Honey-Glazed Ham

Servings: 8–10

Ingredients

- 1 fully cooked bone-in ham (6–8 lbs / 2.7–3.6 kg)
- Whole cloves (optional, for studding)

For the Honey Glaze:

- ½ cup honey
- ¼ cup brown sugar, packed
- 2 tbsp Dijon mustard
- 2 tbsp apple cider vinegar or orange juice
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp ground cloves
- ¼ tsp freshly ground black pepper

Optional Garnish:

- Fresh thyme or rosemary sprigs
- Pineapple slices or orange slices
-

Instructions

Step 1: Prepare the Ham

1. Preheat oven to 325°F (160°C).
2. If the ham has a thick skin or fat layer, score it in a diamond pattern, about ½ inch deep. This allows the glaze to penetrate and creates a beautiful caramelized finish.
3. Optional: stud the ham with whole cloves at the intersections of the diamond pattern for extra flavor and presentation.

Step 2: Make the Honey Glaze

1. In a small saucepan, combine honey, brown sugar, Dijon mustard, apple cider vinegar (or orange juice), cinnamon, cloves, and black pepper.
2. Heat over low-medium heat, stirring until sugar dissolves and glaze is smooth. Remove from heat and set aside.

Step 3: Glaze and Bake the Ham

1. Place the ham on a roasting rack in a shallow roasting pan.
2. Brush about half of the glaze over the ham. Reserve the rest for basting later.
3. Cover loosely with aluminum foil and bake 1 ½ to 2 hours, basting every 20–30 minutes with the remaining glaze.
4. During the last 15–20 minutes, remove foil and increase oven temperature to 375°F (190°C) to allow the glaze to caramelize and become golden brown.

Step 4: Rest & Serve

1. Remove the ham from the oven and let it rest 10–15 minutes before slicing. This ensures it stays juicy.
2. Garnish with fresh thyme, rosemary, or fruit slices (like pineapple or orange) for presentation.
3. Slice and serve with remaining pan juices or extra glaze on the side.

Chef's Tips:

- A fully cooked ham only needs reheating – the glaze is where all the flavor develops.
- For a more complex flavor, add 1–2 tbsp maple syrup or molasses to the glaze.
- If you like a slightly smoky flavor, sprinkle smoked paprika lightly over the ham before baking.

This recipe produces a juicy, tender ham with a beautifully caramelized honey glaze that is both sweet and savory – perfect for holidays, brunches, or special dinners.







Grilled Garlic-Butter Lobster

Servings: 2-4

Ingredients

Lobster

- 2 whole lobsters (1-1.5 lb each), parboiled and halved
- 6 tbsp unsalted butter
- 4 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- 1 tsp lemon zest
- 2 tsp fresh lemon juice
- ½ tsp cayenne (optional)
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh parsley
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Lemon wedges, for serving

Instructions

Step 1: Prepare the Lobster

1. Fill a large pot with heavily salted water and bring it to a strong boil. Add the lobsters and parboil for 4-5 minutes—this firms the meat slightly and helps it cook more evenly on the grill.
2. Immediately transfer the lobsters to an ice bath to halt the cooking and cool them completely.
3. When cool enough to handle, place each lobster belly-up on a cutting board. Using a sharp knife, split the lobster lengthwise from head to tail.
4. Remove the stomach sac, the intestinal vein, and any loose inedible material while keeping all tail, claw, and knuckle meat securely in the shells.
5. Pat the lobster halves thoroughly dry with paper towels; a dry surface allows better browning and better absorption of the flavored butter.
6. Preheat the grill to medium-high heat (400-450°F) to ensure even searing without overcooking the delicate meat.

Step 2: Make the Garlic Butter

1. In a small saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat until fully liquid.
2. Add the finely minced garlic and cook for 1-2 minutes, stirring often, just until the garlic turns fragrant and soft. Keep it pale to avoid bitterness.
3. Stir in the smoked paprika, lemon zest, lemon juice, cayenne (if using), a pinch of salt, and several grinds of black pepper.
4. The mixture should taste bright, buttery, and slightly smoky. Adjust seasoning as needed and keep warm so it stays pourable.

Step 3: Grill the Lobster

1. Brush the exposed lobster meat generously with the warm garlic-lemon butter, coating all surfaces and crevices.
2. Place the lobster halves shell side down on the grill. This allows the shells to act as natural cooking vessels, preventing the meat from overcooking. Grill for 5-6 minutes.
3. Halfway through, baste again with additional garlic butter to keep the meat moist and richly seasoned.
4. For a touch of char and deeper flavor, flip the lobster halves meat side down for 30-60 seconds. Keep a close watch—this step should only lightly caramelize the edges without drying the meat.
5. The lobster is fully cooked when the meat turns opaque, feels tender when pressed, and has a faint golden color on the edges.

Step 4: Serve

1. Transfer the hot lobster halves to a serving platter, arranging them shell side down so the meat is visible and glistening.
2. Drizzle the remaining warm garlic butter over each half, allowing it to soak into the lobster meat.
3. Sprinkle fresh parsley over the top and add a small pinch of paprika for added color and warmth.
4. Serve immediately with lemon wedges so guests can add a fresh, bright squeeze over the rich buttered lobster.





Gingerbread Cheesecake Trifle

Servings: 3-5

Ingredients

Gingerbread Base:

- 1 cup gingerbread cookies, finely crushed (or substitute with graham crackers + $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp ground ginger + $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp cinnamon)
- 2 tbsp unsalted butter, melted

Cheesecake Layer:

- 6 oz (170 g) cream cheese, softened to room temperature
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup powdered sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp pure vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp ground ginger
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp ground cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{8}$ tsp ground nutmeg
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup heavy whipping cream, whipped to stiff peaks

Topping & Garnish:

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup whipped cream (for topping)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup crushed gingerbread cookies or gingersnaps
- Candied ginger pieces, optional
- A pinch of ground cinnamon for garnish

Instructions

Step 1: Prepare the Gingerbread Base

1. Place the crushed gingerbread cookies in a medium bowl.
2. Pour in the melted butter and mix thoroughly until all crumbs are moistened and hold together slightly.
3. Transfer half of the mixture to your medium-sized standing bowl.
4. Press the crumbs gently into the bottom to form a firm, even layer. This will act as the base for your trifle.

Step 2: Make the Cheesecake Layer

1. In a mixing bowl, beat the softened cream cheese using a hand or stand mixer on medium speed until smooth and creamy.
2. Add powdered sugar, vanilla extract, ground ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Mix until fully incorporated.
3. In a separate bowl, whip the heavy cream to stiff peaks. This will make the cheesecake layer light and airy.
4. Gently fold the whipped cream into the spiced cream cheese mixture using a spatula. Fold slowly to maintain a fluffy texture.

Step 3: Assemble the Trifle

1. Spoon half of the cheesecake mixture over the gingerbread base in the bowl. Spread evenly with a spatula.
2. Sprinkle half of the remaining crushed gingerbread cookies over the cheesecake layer.
3. Repeat: Add the remaining cheesecake mixture on top of the cookie layer, smoothing it gently.
4. Top with the remaining crushed gingerbread cookies.

Step 4: Garnish & Chill

1. Add small dollops of whipped cream around the top of the trifle.
2. Sprinkle lightly with crushed cookies, candied ginger pieces (if using), and a pinch of cinnamon.
3. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 3 hours, or overnight, to allow the layers to set and the flavors to meld.



Caramel Cheesecake Brownie Trifle

Servings: 8-10

Ingredients

- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter
- 8 oz semi-sweet chocolate, chopped
- 1 ½ cups granulated sugar
- 4 large eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp salt
- 8 oz cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- ½ cup heavy cream, whipped to soft peaks
- ½ cup heavy cream
- 4 oz semi-sweet chocolate, chopped
- 1 tbsp butter
- Caramel syrup, for drizzling
- Chocolate syrup, for drizzling
- Whipped cream, for topping
- Caramel nuggets or pieces, for garnish
-

Instructions

Step 1: Prepare the Brownies

Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease a 9×9-inch pan and line with parchment.

Melt butter and chocolate together, then stir in sugar, eggs, and vanilla. Fold in flour and salt until just combined.

Bake 25–30 minutes, until a toothpick comes out with a few moist crumbs. Let cool, then cut into cubes.

Step 2: Prepare the Cheesecake Layers

Beat cream cheese with sugar and vanilla until smooth. Fold in whipped cream until light and fluffy. Set aside.

Step 3: Prepare the Chocolate Fudge

Heat cream until simmering, pour over chocolate and butter, let sit 1–2 minutes, then stir until smooth. Cool slightly.

Step 4: Assemble the Trifle

In a medium clear bowl, layer as follows:

1. Melted chocolate (thin bottom layer)
2. Brownie cubes
3. Cheesecake layer
4. Brownie cubes
5. Chocolate fudge
6. Brownie cubes
7. Vanilla cheesecake (top layer)

Step 5: Decorate

Top with whipped cream, drizzle chocolate and caramel syrup, and scatter caramel nuggets for garnish.





Vanilla Cherry Roll Cake

Servings: 6-8

Ingredients

Vanilla Sponge Cake:

- 4 large eggs, separated
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup granulated sugar, divided
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tbsp cornstarch
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp salt
- 2 tbsp milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream
- 2 tbsp powdered sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup mascarpone or cream cheese (optional for richer texture)

Topping & Decoration:

- Powdered sugar, for dusting
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream, whipped to medium peaks

Instructions

Step 1: Bake the Sponge Cake

Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C) and line a 10×15-inch pan with parchment.

Beat egg whites with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar until stiff peaks form. Separately, beat yolks with remaining sugar and vanilla until pale. Fold egg whites into yolks.

Sift flour, cornstarch, and salt, then fold into the batter along with milk. Pour into pan and bake 12–15 minutes until springy.

Step 2: Roll the Cake

Invert cake onto a powdered-sugar-dusted towel, peel off parchment, and roll with towel. Let cool completely.

Step 3: Prepare the Filling

Whip heavy cream with powdered sugar and vanilla until medium peaks form. Optionally fold in mascarpone or cream cheese.

Step 4: Assemble

Unroll cooled cake and spread filling evenly, leaving a small border. Roll cake back up and place seam-side down.

Dust with powdered sugar.

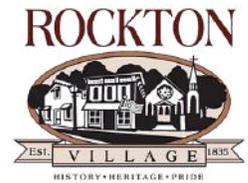
Step 5: Decorate

Pipe four evenly spaced whipped cream spirals on top. Place three cherries on each spiral and top with small edible leaves.



ABOUT

MARK HENDERSON



When northern Illinois skies darken and the wind whips off the Rock River, residents know exactly who to call: Mark Henderson. For more than 22 years, he brought storm systems, snow forecasts, and sunny predictions into living rooms as WIFR-TV's trusted meteorologist.

But in 2025, life threw him a curveball. Instead of fading from the public eye, Henderson took a leap—trading radar screens for rezoning plans and weather alerts for business outreach—as Rockton, Illinois' new community development director.

A FORECAST YOU CAN COUNT ON

Mark Henderson isn't new to reading patterns. Whether tracking the trajectory of a thunderstorm or predicting a season's snowfall, he's always had a knack for seeing what's coming next. Now, he's applying that skill to Rockton's growth.

The village recently restructured its planning office, splitting duties to better focus on development and promotion. Henderson took the helm of the full-time role overseeing planning, zoning, and recruiting businesses, while a part-time promotions coordinator handles events and marketing. "He's outgoing, easy to talk to, fun to be around," says Village Administrator Happy Welch. "He'll bring energy to reaching out to new businesses and helping the village grow."



INSIGHT INTO HIS LIFE

Mark Henderson

Although Henderson's time on television ended abruptly in May 2025, he didn't disappear. He launched Mark Henderson, a social media-based weather platform that quickly amassed over 26,000 followers. His followers tune in for forecasts, storm updates, and local weather insights—all delivered with Henderson's signature approachable style. "Serving the community through the Weather Hub lets me still scratch that weather itch," Henderson says. "It may look different, but my commitment to the people hasn't changed."

WHY ROCKTON HIT THE JACKPOT

Henderson's unusual career pivot comes with some serious advantages for Rockton:

- **Familiarity:** Locals already know him from his time on-air, making him a natural bridge to residents and business owners.
- **Communication Skills:** Explaining complex weather systems isn't so different from explaining zoning laws or development plans—Mark knows how to make it understandable.
- **Community Commitment:** He's proven that public service is about more than a title. Whether forecasting storms or planning village growth, Henderson genuinely cares.

BUILDING A VILLIAGE WITH HEART

Henderson sees Rockton's growth as a balancing act.

From fence permits to major commercial projects, he approaches every task thoughtfully

"Smart growth isn't just about more shops or revenue," he says. "It's about development that respects what's here and amplifies what could be."

Even as he transitions from meteorology to municipal planning, his core mission remains the same: serve the community.

QUICK FACTS ABOUT MARK HENDERSON

- **Years on Air:** 22 at WIFR-TV
- **New Role:** Community Development Director, Village of Rockton
- **Side Venture:** Mark Henderson's Weather Hub, 26,000+ followers
- **Family:** Moved to Rockton in 2016, instantly fell in love with the village
- **Favorite Thing About Rockton:** Its growing, tight-knit community and potential for smart, intentional development

THE BOTTOM LINE

Mark Henderson's 2025 journey reminds us that resilience and reinvention can create new paths for service and impact. From radar loops to zoning maps, from televised forecasts to guiding a village's future, he remains committed to the people of northern Illinois. And in Rockton, with Henderson at the helm, the forecast isn't just sunny—it's promising.

Connect with Mark Henderson, Community Development Director for the Village of Rockton, IL, to discuss development opportunities, community projects, or partnership ideas that help our village grow stronger.

📞 Phone: 815-624-0935

✉ Email: henderson@rocktonvillage.com



WINTERIZE YOUR HOME

As temperatures drop, winterizing your home helps you stay warm, cut energy costs, and avoid expensive repairs. Start by sealing drafts around windows and doors and adding insulation in attics, basements, and crawl spaces to keep heat in.

Prepare your heating system by replacing filters, clearing vents, and scheduling a furnace inspection. If you use a fireplace, have the chimney cleaned. Protect plumbing by insulating exposed pipes and maintaining steady indoor temperatures.

Outdoors, clean gutters for proper drainage, trim storm-prone branches, and store or cover outdoor furniture. With a few simple steps, you can enjoy a warmer, safer, and low-stress winter.



THE QUIET ARCHITECT OF COMMUNITY GROWTH:

How Edward Carceres Builds Better Futures Through Business, Service & Education.



Biz Advice & Solutions

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In the mosaic of leaders shaping the economic landscape of Illinois and Wisconsin, few embody the cultural heartbeat of the region and the rare blend of intellect, humility, and community devotion quite like Edward Caceres, MBA. He brings a sense of clarity and calm that quietly reshapes the environment around him. Those who know him describe him as a strategist, a mentor, a connector, and above all, a steadfast believer in the transformative power of education.

Today, Caceres serves as a Board Trustee at Rockford University, an institution he once walked through as a student earning his MBA. He also shares his expertise directly with students as a teacher of Introduction to Entrepreneurship, nurturing the next generation of business leaders. For many alumni, giving back is symbolic. For Caceres, it is a calling.

From Business Advisor to Community Catalyst Professionally, Caceres is recognized for his work as a Business Advisor and Digital Marketing Specialist with Business Advice & Solutions in Delavan, Wisconsin. His expertise spans strategic

planning, digital transformation, and business growth—guiding small and mid-sized businesses throughout the region—businesses that form the backbone of local economies and often the histories of the towns they serve.

In his role as Director of the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the Rockford Chamber of Commerce, his team provided consultancy and guidance to over 1,400 local businesses across Winnebago, Boone, and Stephenson Counties between 2020–2022.

Those experiences shaped his understanding of how businesses grow, communities flourish, and people thrive when given the right guidance and tools.

His counsel is known for realistic, actionable, and practical guidance that truly moves businesses forward. Yet what distinguishes him is that, even though he works in the realms of strategy, data, and grounded planning, he never approaches his clients with coldness or detachment. Instead, he brings warmth, intelligence, and a rare compassion for the people he is helping.

EDWARD CACERES,
MBA



Leadership That Strengthens Community

Beyond education and business consulting, Caceres is deeply invested in fostering inclusive economic growth. He leads Adelante Janesville, the Latino outreach program of Forward Janesville (the Janesville Chamber of Commerce), focusing on Latino entrepreneurship development and workforce initiatives among the largest Latino employers in Rock County. He also serves as a Board Trustee at Health Net of Rock County, demonstrating his commitment to community health and well-being.

This blend of business acumen, educational mentorship, and community service positions Caceres as a rare leader who doesn't just contribute to communities—he actively builds their capacity to succeed.



The Scholar With Heart

Caceres possesses a natural scholarly presence—measured, analytical, distinctly articulate. Yet what sets him apart is his equal capacity for compassion. He is a leader who listens before he speaks, who asks before he answers, and who believes that data and empathy can share the same sentence. He moves seamlessly between classrooms, boardrooms, and community initiatives, always anchoring his approach in education and knowledge. For Caceres, knowledge is not an achievement—it is a responsibility to pass it on.

A Good-Spirited Guide in a Changing World

Despite the seriousness of his work, Caceres remains approachable, engaging, and refreshingly good-humored. He is the kind of leader who will share a lesson, a laugh, and a life insight all in the same moment. There is a certain lightness to the way he carries the weight of responsibility—never diminishing its importance, but always elevating the people around.



In a world increasingly shaped by rapid change, economic fluctuations, and digital transformation, community pillars like Edward Caceres are rare. They steady the pace. They raise the bar. They remind us that leadership, at its highest form, is simply the active pursuit of leaving people and places better than you found them.

As we spotlight community influencers who shape the culture, growth, and future of our region, Edward Caceres stands out as an exemplar of purposeful leadership—quiet, kind, deeply knowledgeable, and profoundly impactful. And perhaps that is his most impressive legacy already in motion: not the accomplishments he lists, but the lives he lifts.



EMPOWERING ENTREPRENEURS

ROBOTICS, 3D PRINTING, AND COMMUNITY IMPACT



The photo features representatives from the companies that supported the inaugural Robotics and Automation Expo in Rockford in 2022, an event that showcased cutting-edge technology and connected local businesses with innovators in the field. That same year, under his leadership, the Rockford Small Business Development Center launched the region’s first 3D Printing Lab for Entrepreneurs, providing local business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs with access to advanced prototyping tools and resources previously unavailable in the area.

Together, these initiatives had a profound impact on the community, directly benefiting the 1,400 clients served during his tenure as Director of the Rockford SBDC from 2020 to 2022. They reflect a broader vision of fostering innovation, supporting economic growth, and empowering entrepreneurs to turn ideas into viable businesses. Through these achievements, he demonstrated not only a commitment to business development but also a dedication to creating opportunities that strengthen the Rockford region and inspire the next generation of innovators.



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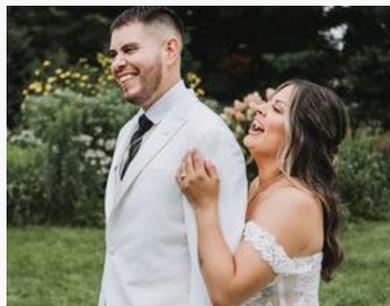
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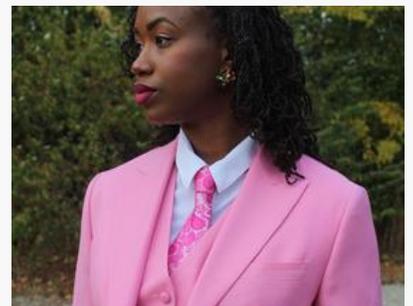
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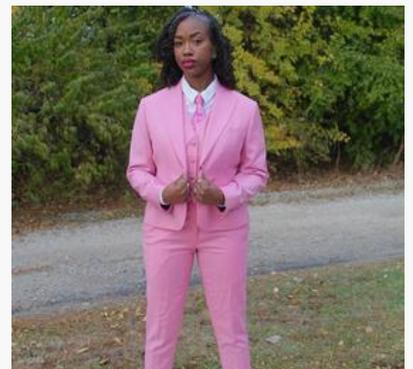
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MALE SUITS



FEMALE SUITS







Top sites to visit for local events

If you're looking for December events—whether family activities, kid outings, or business gatherings—these four websites make it easy to find exactly what you need. Each one highlights different types of events, so you can choose the best match based on what you're looking for.

Mommy Poppins

Mommy Poppins is a top resource for kid-friendly and family-focused events. It covers everything from holiday festivals and crafts to free activities and local outings for children. If your main goal is to find events specifically for kids or whole-family experiences, this site is a perfect starting point.

Upparent

Upparent also centers around family events, but it's unique because parents share their own recommendations and experiences. You'll find community-approved ideas, seasonal activities, and trusted suggestions from other families. It's a helpful option when you want family events suggested by people who have actually done them.

Illinois Local

For business owners or anyone looking for Illinois business events, Illinois Local is the site to check. It highlights networking opportunities, small-business markets, workshops, and other entrepreneur-focused events throughout the state. If you want events strictly related to business and local commerce, this one fits perfectly.

GoRockford

GoRockford provides a broad calendar of Rockford-area events, covering nearly every category—family outings, holiday celebrations, adult nightlife, community gatherings, sports, and even some business-related happenings. It's the best all-around option if you want a wide mix of local events in one place.

Which Site Should You Use?

- Family & kid-only events: Mommy Poppins,
- Upparent
- Business-only events: Illinois Local
- All kinds of local Rockford events: GoRockford



Holiday Events

December 1st

All Aglow Holiday Lights Display at
Nicholas Conservatory & Gardens

December 4th

Illuminated lights at Anderson
Japaneese Garden

December 4th

2025 Festival of Lights at Sinnissippi
Park

December 5th

Rockford IceHogs vs. Colorado
Eagles at BMO Center





Alderman - 13th Ward

Tamir Bell



A New Generation Leading Rockford's West Side

When the young voters of Rockford saw someone who looked like them, spoke their language, and believed in their power – they found Tamir Bell. In 2025, at just 21 years old, he became the youngest alderman in the City of Rockford history, settling into the 13th Ward seat not as a placeholder – but as a catalyst for change.

From Grassroots to City Hall

Bell's journey began long before his name was on a ballot. A lifelong Rockford resident, he first stepped into community organizing as a young precinct committeeman, energized by a simple belief: young people must have a voice.

His early advocacy wasn't flashy – it was real. He partnered with local organizations to bring healthy snacks to under-served schools and youth centers, delivering more than \$50,000 in nutritious food to students across Rockford. It was grassroots work rooted in compassion, community pride, and a sense of responsibility.

Bell quickly emerged as more than just a community volunteer. He took on leadership roles: Political Director for state-level campaigns, Board President of Jackson Charter School, board member of YMCA of Rock River Valley, and Vice Chair of the Tommy Corral Memorial Foundation. Each role reflected his belief that true change grows from many hands working together.

A Generation's Voice on the Council Floor

In February 2025, Bell challenged the status quo

Photo: www.rockfordil.gov

FROM VISION TO VICTORY

INSPIRING STEPS FOR ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS

— and won decisively, earning 63% of the primary vote in a crowded field. By May, he took his seat on the Rockford City Council, bringing youth, energy, and fearless optimism to a room often dominated by long-standing incumbents.

From the very start, Bell vowed to represent not just voters — but neighbors. “We ran this campaign on simple things: connecting with our voters, not just our voters, but my neighbors,” he said after his win. His agenda is deeply personal. Bell is fighting for affordable housing, expanded access to fresh food, and revitalization of neglected neighborhoods — all with a boots-on-the-ground, block-by-block approach.

Building a Real Hub: The 13th Ward Office

Believing that representation shouldn’t be limited to campaign season, Bell helped launch a new 13th Ward Office — a dedicated community hub at the Boys and Girls Club.

It’s a place for residents to access city services, share ideas, and collaborate on neighborhood improvements. “That’s one step forward,” Bell said at the ribbon cutting. “A hub where you can get the resources you need all in one.”

Young, Bold — and Guiding with Heart

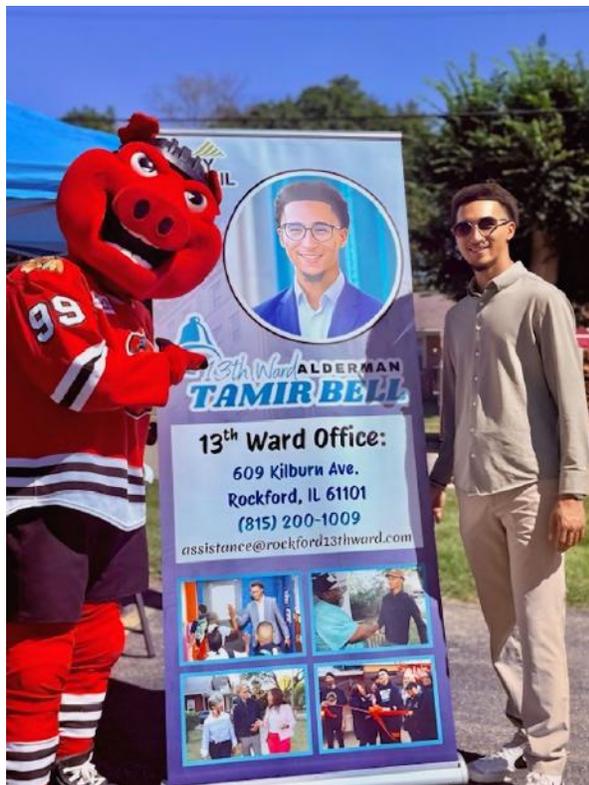
Bell’s leadership style isn’t defined by political posturing — it’s defined by relationships. He reminds everyone he meets that youth isn’t a

"RISE & THRIVE: YOUR GUIDE TO SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP"



liability; it's a source of fresh ideas, energy, and hope. In a city where generations sometimes grow apart, Bell bridges the gap, using empathy and personal experience to shape policy.

When he talks about food deserts, school support, or housing, it's not abstract. It's personal. It's neighborhood kids, parents, neighbors — people he grew up with or met walking his ward.



“Our 13th Ward deserves a future where everyone has the chance to thrive.” (Inspired by his vision for housing, food access, and empowerment)

What's Next — and Why It Matters

As Rockford stands at a crossroads, Bell believes the path forward must be paved by inclusion, opportunity, and trust. His platform calls for affordable housing options, job training, community empowerment — but also a renewed sense of shared responsibility.

His message is simple, but powerful: you don't need decades of experience to lead — you need vision, courage, and a willingness to listen.



If Rockford is to evolve, it may be because a 21-year-old alderman refused to wait for change — and decided to build it instead. “That’s one step forward,” Bell said at the ribbon cutting. “A hub where you can get the resources you need all in one.”



Tamir Bell, Alderman - 13th Ward | City Council Member
The City of Rockford

“Your voice matters. Reach out, share your ideas, and let’s work together to make the 13th Ward a stronger, safer, and more vibrant community for everyone.”

Tamir Bell

Alderman - 13th Ward
The City of Rockford

City Council Member

☎ Phone: (779) 895-4349

✉ Email: tamir.bell@rockfordil.gov

🌐 Website: www.rockfordil.gov

📍 Office: 609 Kilburn Ave., Rockford, IL 61101



“Elegance is not about being noticed, it’s about
being remembered.”
— Giorgio Armani



Mexican Atole

Ingredients (1 Serving)

Base

- 1 ½ tablespoons masa harina (white or yellow; Maseca works well)
- ¾ cup whole milk
- ½ cup water
- 1-2 tablespoons piloncillo, grated (or 1-2 tablespoons dark brown sugar if unavailable)
- 1 small cinnamon stick (or ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon)
- ¼ teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

Optional Flavor Variations

- A few drops of almond extract
- 1 teaspoon Mexican chocolate shavings
- A pinch of nutmeg

Instructions

1. Prepare the masa slurry

- In a small bowl, add:
 - 1 ½ tablespoons masa harina
 - ½ cup water
- Whisk thoroughly until completely smooth with no lumps.
 - Tip: Whisk for 30-45 seconds to fully hydrate the masa.
 - The mixture should resemble a thin cream consistency.

2. Heat the dairy and spices

- In a small saucepan, combine:
 - ¾ cup whole milk
 - Cinnamon stick
 - Pinch of salt
- Place over medium heat.
- Heat for 3-4 minutes, until the milk is steaming but not boiling.
 - Stir occasionally to prevent scorching.

3. Add sweetener

- Add:
 - 1-2 tablespoons grated piloncillo (or brown sugar)
- Continue heating for 2 minutes, stirring until fully dissolved.



4. Incorporate the masa mixture

- Slowly pour the masa slurry into the hot milk while whisking continuously.
 - This prevents lumps and ensures a silky texture.

5. Cook and thicken

- Maintain medium heat.
- Cook for 6-8 minutes, whisking every 20-30 seconds.
 - Atole should gradually thicken to the consistency of a thin pudding or a very thick hot chocolate.
 - If it gets too thick, add 1-2 tablespoons milk to adjust texture.

6. Finish with vanilla

- Turn heat to low.
- Add ¼ teaspoon vanilla extract.
- Simmer for 1 additional minute to marry flavors.

7. Serve

- Remove the cinnamon stick.
- Pour into a mug.
- Enjoy immediately while hot, creamy, and aromatic.





MEET

NEELEY Erickson



In a world where bricks and mortgages often stand in for homes and hope, few people bring as much heart, clarity, and conviction to real estate advocacy as Neeley Erickson. As a Government Affairs Director for Illinois REALTORS®, she doesn't just interpret policy — she helps shape it, always with a focus on fairness, opportunity, and community well-being.

From Public Service to Real Estate Advocacy

Neeley's path to real estate advocacy is rooted in public service. Before stepping into her current role, she spent six years as a legislative aide, gaining firsthand insight into how government decisions affect daily life across Illinois. She later served as an elected trustee and finance chairwoman in her hometown, deepening her understanding of local needs and fiscal responsibility. These early experiences shaped her steady, informed approach to navigating complex policy landscapes.

When Illinois REALTORS® welcomed her to their State Government Affairs team in 2018, she quickly became a vital bridge between REALTOR® members, local communities, and policymakers. Representing Northern Illinois, she advocates on issues ranging from housing and development to zoning and property taxes — always placing the needs of families, homeowners, and communities at the center of her work.

Advocate for Property Rights and Housing Stability

In her role, Neeley champions private property rights and works to ensure that homeownership remains accessible. She helps guide local associations, collaborates with community leaders, and engages with lawmakers to support responsible, balanced policies. Her influence extends even beyond Illinois; in 2025, she was elected Chair of the National Association of REALTORS® Government Affairs Directors Advisory Group — the first from Illinois to hold the position. Her leadership on the national stage highlights her forward-thinking approach and the respect she commands within the advocacy community.



ABOUT NEELEY ERICKSON

CHAMPION OF HOMEOWNERSHIP, ADVOCACY,
AND COMMUNITY IN ILLINOIS

Community Builder and Grant Facilitator:

One of the distinguishing aspects of Neeley's work is her dedication to strengthening communities at the local level. She has helped facilitate grants for projects focused on accessibility, sustainability, and public space enhancement, empowering local REALTOR® associations to become key partners in community improvement. Through her vision, these projects evolve from ideas into lasting neighborhood assets.

Leadership With Heart and Purpose:

What sets Neeley apart is not just her mastery of policy — it's her character. She brings a balance of analytical insight and compassionate leadership to every conversation. Whether she is speaking before policymakers or engaging with a small group of local members, she offers clarity, perspective, and confidence that elevates the entire room. Her purpose is to help build thriving, inclusive communities where opportunity is real and homeownership remains within reach.

Why Her Work Resonates:

Housing challenges continue to shape the future of Illinois because of affordability gaps, shifting demographics, increasing demand,-

and regulatory complexities. In this ever-evolving landscape, leaders like Neeley are essential. She combines advocacy with education, vision with action, and policy understanding with the dedication of someone who genuinely cares about the people behind the paperwork.

As Neeley continues to shape conversations around housing, economic growth, and community well-being across Illinois, one thing is clear: her influence reaches far beyond policy discussions and legislative meetings. It is felt in neighborhoods strengthened by thoughtful advocacy, in REALTORS® who feel supported and informed, and in the families whose path to homeownership becomes more attainable because of her tireless work behind the scenes. Her leadership is both strategic and empathetic — leaving a lasting impact on communities while uplifting the people within them. To give readers a closer look at the expertise and values driving her work, Neeley generously shared her insights, experiences, and perspectives for this feature. Her thoughtful responses offer a meaningful window into her journey, the challenges she champions, and her vision for the future of real estate in Illinois.

IN HER OWN WORDS: NEELY ERICKSON

Q1.– Connecting REALTORS® to Policy

When you first stepped into your role as Government Affairs Director, what was your vision for connecting REALTORS® in Northwest Illinois to state-level policy, and how has that vision evolved?

When I first stepped into the Government Affairs Director role, my vision was to help REALTORS® in Northwest Illinois understand how closely their day-to-day work is connected to government policy. Unless someone is a policy enthusiast, politics can feel like an uncomfortable word. The reality is that government regulates nearly every aspect of the real estate industry and directly influences buyers' and sellers' access to the market.

From the beginning, I wanted our members to see that if REALTORS® are not at the table, someone else will be making decisions that affect their profession. No one understands the details of real estate better than the people who work in it every day. My goal was to bring state-level policy into a local context so members could clearly see why their voice matters and how their expertise shapes stronger outcomes for consumers and communities.

As time has gone on, that vision has evolved through the relationships I have built with our members. I have learned that the most effective advocacy starts with listening. The stories brokers share and the challenges they describe have made me a stronger advocate. The more I understand what REALTORS® experience in the field, the better I can translate those insights into meaningful policy conversations at the local and state levels.

In many ways, the evolution of my vision has been about partnership. Advocacy is not something I do alone. It is something we accomplish together. Their knowledge fuels my work, and our collaboration is what allows me to be the strong and consistent advocate this industry deserves.





Q2. – NAR’s GAD Advisory Group & Advocacy

You were recently elected Chair of NAR’s GAD Advisory Group. What does this role mean to you, and how do you hope to leverage it to uplift advocacy efforts in Illinois and beyond?

Being elected Chair of NAR’s GAD (Government Affairs Director) Advisory Group is an incredible honor. This role gives me the opportunity to support more than 500 Government Affairs Directors across the country as they navigate the unique policy challenges facing their states and local communities. At its core, the role is about sharing resources, strengthening communication, and being responsive to the rapidly evolving landscape of housing and property rights.

Illinois is a fast-moving state and often ahead of the policy curve, especially on issues that other progressive states are beginning to confront. This allows us to contribute in meaningful ways by sharing ordinance language, statutory models, and practical talking points that have already been tested at home. It also gives us a chance to provide guidance on how to approach complex housing issues that many communities are just starting to encounter.

One of the things I value most is the diversity of experience within the GAD community. Every region faces different political dynamics, yet many of the underlying challenges are the same. Governments often look to one another when adopting policy, which means collaboration among GADs is essential. When we work together, we are better positioned to anticipate trends, prepare our members, and defend private property rights and housing affordability with facts, real-world examples, and data-driven analysis.

This role allows me to help connect the dots nationally. My goal is to uplift the entire network by encouraging information-sharing, elevating successful local strategies, and ensuring that Illinois remains a leader in shaping thoughtful, practical public policy solutions. Effective advocacy does not happen in isolation. It happens when we bring our collective knowledge forward and use it to serve our communities and the broader real estate industry.

Q3. – Innovating Housing Solutions Through Collaboration

You've played vital roles in community-impact projects such as river access improvements, bike repair stations, community gardens, and accessibility initiatives. Which project stands out most to you, and why?

This is a tough one to choose. I really loved the project with the HomeTown Association of REALTORS®, where we collaborated with the DeKalb Regional Office of Education, DeKalb County Community Gardens, the DeKalb Park District, and Basics DeKalb County to create a Toddler Garden designed to support brain development for children from birth to five. It was a powerful example of how REALTORS® can contribute to early childhood development and community well-being.

However, the project that stands out the most to me, though, is the aging-in-place initiative in Woodstock. This project brought together the City of Woodstock, AARP, the Woodstock Community Unit School District, and the Heartland REALTOR Organization to address a growing need: creating homes that allow residents to age safely, comfortably, and independently in their own community.

I helped Heartland secure a fifteen-thousand-dollar Housing Opportunity Grant from the National Association of REALTORS® to develop architectural drawings through RL Mace Universal Design. These plans were created specifically for the school district's Trades Program, which allows high school students to build real homes as part of their curriculum. The goal was to design housing that incorporates universal design principles so that residents can remain in their homes as their mobility or accessibility needs change over time.

This project stands out to me because it combines so many meaningful elements. It supports intergenerational learning by giving students hands-on experience with real construction. It advances community stability by creating housing that meets the needs of older adults. It demonstrates what collaboration looks like when local government, education, nonprofit partners, and REALTORS® come together with a shared vision. Most importantly, it creates a model that other communities can replicate as the demand for accessible, adaptable housing continues to grow.

For me, this project reflects what community impact should be: practical, forward-thinking, and rooted in the idea that everyone deserves a place to call home throughout every stage of life.

For you: If you'd like to watch a video or read the article about the project you can visit this link to watch the Woodstock Community Unit School District video: <https://www.nar.realtor/on-common-ground/universal-design> It's towards the bottom of the article.





Q4. – RPAC & Lobby Day

For readers who may be unfamiliar: Would you describe the importance of RPAC and the annual REALTORS® Lobby Day in Springfield when it comes to protecting private property rights?

RPAC, the REALTOR® Political Action Committee, is one of the most important tools we have for protecting private property rights and maintaining a healthy housing market. Many members are surprised to learn how deeply real estate is shaped by local and state policy. Everything from transfer tax proposals to point-of-sale mandates, rental regulations, and zoning decisions can directly affect a REALTOR®'s business and an individual's ability to secure-affordable homeownership or rental opportunities.

RPAC enables our members to actively educate and engage policymakers on market impacts and to advocate for fair, predictable housing policies. It also supports consumer education, helping explain the realities of housing and homeownership.

Lobby Day in Springfield is the most visible example of this work. Hundreds of REALTORS® travel to the Capitol to meet with their elected officials, share client stories on housing affordability, and discuss how proposed legislation will affect the housing market in their communities.

Policy is almost always well-intentioned, yet it can carry unintended consequences. REALTORS® are uniquely equipped to explain what the market needs to remain strong and how certain proposals could help or hinder buyers and sellers.



Lobby Day

PHOTOS - Springfield, IL



Lobby Day also shows the strength and unity of our industry. When hundreds of REALTORS® arrive at the Capitol on the same day, the impact is unmistakable. Legislators know we are coming, they take the meetings seriously, and they genuinely want to hear from us because they recognize the value REALTORS® bring to their districts.

Together, RPAC and Lobby Day give REALTORS® a strong, unified voice on the policies that directly affect private property rights and housing opportunities. They ensure that decisions about the real estate market are informed by the people who work in it every day.

Q5. – **Balancing Safety, Affordability, and Fair Housing**

Without sharing anything confidential, what are some of the key real estate policy challenges or themes you're tracking this year at the local or state level?

This year we are watching several trends that have significant implications for housing affordability, property rights, and community stability. These are being worked at the local and state level in one form or another.



1. Balancing Rental Regulations With Housing Affordability

Many communities are revisiting their rental housing ordinances, and the intentions are usually positive: improve safety, maintain quality, and support tenants. The challenge arises when policies unintentionally increase costs or remove housing from the market. One recent example involved a proposal requiring all rental units to meet the full standards of the 2021 International Building Code, which is designed for new construction. In that community, more than 40 percent of the housing stock was built between 1940 and 1969. Applying new-construction codes retroactively could have made much of that housing noncompliant, effectively reducing available rental options and potentially displacing residents. Our focus is helping communities strengthen safety and stability without creating barriers that make housing even harder to find or afford.

2. Ensuring Rental Ordinances Align With Fair Housing Laws

We continue to monitor “crime-free housing” ordinances and similar rental programs that can unintentionally conflict with state law and the federal Fair Housing Act. Some versions of these policies require housing providers to take actions that resemble law enforcement or to remove tenants without proper due process protections. This can create serious fair housing concerns, as well as legal risk for both municipalities and housing providers.

There are also broader civil rights implications when ordinances encourage or require housing decisions based on arrests, calls for service, or other information that may not reflect criminal activity. These practices can disproportionately affect protected classes and undermine access to stable housing.

Our focus is helping communities strengthen safety in ways that comply with state law, respect due process, and uphold fair housing protections. We work with local governments to design approaches that improve neighborhood well-being without creating barriers for responsible renters or placing housing providers in roles they are not authorized to perform.

3. Zoning Reform and the Need for Diverse Housing Types

Communities across Illinois are evaluating their zoning codes to address the shortage of attainable housing. This includes discussions about accessory dwelling units, smaller lot sizes, and gentle density options that fit within existing neighborhoods. The goal is not to change the character of communities, but to remove outdated barriers that prevent the creation of homes people can actually afford.





Q6. - The Power of Relationships in Advocacy

Your work requires strong relationships with legislators, association leaders, and REALTORS®. Could you share a meaningful connection, partnership, or mentor who has shaped your approach to advocacy?

One person who has profoundly shaped my approach to advocacy is Julie Sullivan. I used to joke that even as an adult, I was still figuring out what I wanted to be when I grew up. That changed the first time I walked into the Illinois REALTORS® building as a legislative aide for a state representative with a group of interns and met Julie. We were there so the interns could meet a lobbyist. Seeing her in action made something click. In a world where the word lobbyist can make people cringe, Julie carried that title with pride.

While I worked as a legislative aide, I often reached out to Julie on behalf of the representative to discuss emerging issues. People trusted her insight, her knowledge, and her integrity, qualities that many insiders will tell you are not always easy to find in politics. Even after her retirement, following thirty-one years of state housing lobbying and advocacy, Julie remains a name carried in the halls today. Her influence continues to shape expectations for professionalism, preparation, and ethical advocacy.

Julie never treated any question as too small or too simple. She understood that every complex policy issue begins with someone who is willing to ask the basic questions. She believed that compromise was not a loss, but a practical and honorable outcome rooted in listening, respect, and problem-solving. That philosophy has stayed with me throughout my career.

After a robust round of interviews to secure my position as a Government Affairs Director with Illinois REALTORS®, I walked back into the conference room still thinking about that first conversation with Julie. That was the moment I realized I had found my place. Her example showed me what thoughtful, ethical, informed advocacy could look like, and it set the standard I continue to hold myself to.

Working with REALTORS® across Northern Illinois, I carry those lessons with me every day. Advocacy is not just about policy or legislation. It is about trust, relationships, and a commitment to doing the right thing for the communities we serve. Julie showed me that, and it still shapes the way I work.



Q7. – Advocacy Achievements

What is one advocacy victory — large or small — that you look back on with pride because it overcame a significant challenge?

One advocacy victory that stands out to me is the long effort to eliminate impact fees in Boone County. For years, these fees were treated as a necessary part of the development process, even though the county was experiencing stagnated growth and losing new construction to surrounding communities. The turning point came when REALTORS® showed up, testified, and spoke openly about how these fees were driving up the cost of housing and limiting opportunities for families at every stage of the housing ladder.

The testimony was powerful because it came from people working on the ground who understood what buyers could afford and what builders needed in order to start new projects. REALTORS® explained that Boone County had room in its schools, parks, and conservation districts, which meant the fees no longer served their intended purpose. These types of fees are designed to offset the strain that rapid population growth places on public facilities, and they can only be used for new brick-and-mortar expansions, not for maintenance or day-to-day operations. When there is already capacity in these systems, those fees become barriers rather than tools.

Removing the impact fees was about more than just reducing costs for builders. It was about creating a future where young families can return to Boone County, where there are homes for people to grow into, and where the community can remain competitive in attracting new residents and employers. The decision also reinforced the importance of taking a data-driven approach to development policy. Communities benefit when they regularly reassess whether long-standing fees still make sense or whether they are slowing the very growth they hope to encourage.

This victory matters to me because it reflects what strong advocacy can achieve. When REALTORS® bring real stories, market insight, and a clear understanding of community needs to the table, policymakers listen. Boone County now has the opportunity to jump-start new housing production, improve affordability, and support families who want to build a life there. It is a reminder that thoughtful policy change can open the door for long- term community stability and growth.

Q8. - Finding Joy and Learning Between the Pages

Outside your professional work, what is something you love to do — or something people would be pleasantly surprised to learn about you?

Outside of my professional work, I do not think people would be surprised to learn that I enjoy reading, but they might be surprised to learn that I read my height in books. In 2024, I set a personal challenge to read my height in books, and I actually did it. That totaled 58 books. It became a fun way to unwind after long days at meetings or on the road, and it pushed me to explore genres and authors I might not have picked up otherwise. Reading that many books in a year reminded me that curiosity and learning are not just part of my job, they are part of who I am. It keeps me grounded, inspired, and always thinking about the world in new ways.



Christmas Drinks



Winter Pomegranate Tea

Servings: 2

Ingredients

Herbal Base

- 2 cups water
- 2 tsp dried hibiscus (for a ruby-red color and tart floral flavor)
- 1 tsp dried pomegranate seeds, or 2 tsp fresh pomegranate arils (adds natural sweetness and depth)
- 1 tsp dried rose hips (optional – enhances the fruity notes and boosts richness)

Spices & Sweetener

- 1 cinnamon stick
- 2–3 whole cloves
- 1–2 tsp honey or maple syrup (adjust depending on how sweet you prefer your tea)

Garnish

- 2 orange slices 4–6 fresh or
- maraschino cherries

Instructions

Heat the

Base:

- Add 2 cups of water to a small saucepan and bring it to a gentle boil over medium heat. This should take about 3–4 minutes, just until small bubbles begin to rise.

Add Herbs &

Spices:

- Once the water is simmering, add the dried hibiscus, pomegranate seeds or arils, cinnamon stick, whole cloves, and optional rose hips. Stir gently so all the ingredients are submerged. Reduce the heat to low to maintain a soft, steady simmer.

Simmer for Flavor

Development:

- Allow the mixture to simmer for 5–7 minutes. During this time, the hibiscus will release its deep red color, the spices will infuse their warmth, and the fruit elements will build a bright and tangy fragrance. The longer you simmer, the stronger and deeper the flavor becomes.

Strain &

Sweeten:

- Remove the pot from the heat. Strain the tea into two mugs, catching all herbs and spices to ensure a smooth drink. While the tea is still warm, stir in honey or maple syrup until fully dissolved. Taste and adjust sweetness as desired.

Garnish &

Finish:

- Top each mug with a fresh orange slice and 2–3 cherries. For an added burst of citrus aroma, gently squeeze a touch of orange juice into the mug before serving. This enhances the brightness and complements the natural tartness of the tea.



DECEMBER 2025



www.monicawilliams.kw.com

Monica Williams
Real Estate Agent

kw SIGNATURE
KELLERWILLIAMS REALTY

4201 Galleria Drive

Loves Park, IL 61111

(815) 918-1170



Monica Williams

Realtor Estate Agent



815-918-1170



monica.williams@kw.com



4201 Galleria Dr., Loves Park, IL 61111



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