

MAY 2026

Highland Park

N E I G H B O R S



*Everybody
Knows Jess*

Cover Photo by Erin Loughlin

POWERED BY



BEST VERSION MEDIA

Cover Feature

Highwood Has a Way of *Making You Fall in Love*

By Paul Clements | Photos by Erin Loughlin

How Jess Ortega built a village for families — and stepped up to lead Celebrate Highwood

On a bright weekday afternoon in Highwood, you can sit outside Tala and watch the town walk by. On this particular afternoon, as Jess Ortega settled in at a table outside the café, there was a steady stream of something beyond the usual foot traffic: greetings.

Everyone seemed to know her.

People walking past stopped to wave, call her name or lean in for a quick hello. Kids lit up when they spotted her. In just four years, Jess has become one of those rare small-town fixtures — the kind of person who somehow knows everyone, and whom everyone recognizes in return.

It is not an accident. It is the natural outcome of how she lives her life: building community on purpose.

She does it through Giggles, the calm, beautifully curated children's play space she opened in downtown Highwood in May 2023. And she does it through her new role as president of Celebrate Highwood, the volunteer-driven nonprofit behind the town's beloved festivals and events. For a city that prides itself on being scrappy, welcoming and full of heart, Jess Ortega might be the most "Highwood" newcomer Highwood has ever had.

FROM THE PHILIPPINES TO VIRGINIA BEACH

Jess's story begins far from the North Shore. She was born in Santa Cruz, Zambales, on the island of Luzon in the Philippines, and moved to the United States at age five, landing in Virginia Beach, Virginia, where her father and much of her extended family served in the U.S. Navy.

Her childhood was defined by two constants: family and food.

Saturdays often meant basketball and brunch — garlic fried rice, bacon, longanisa (a sweet Filipino sausage), biscuits and gravy, and eggs every which way. It was the kind of meal that never stopped at just one plate. Sundays meant bowling, with competitive stakes — whichever adult scored lowest picked up the tab for everyone's meal.

Some of her most vivid memories involve late-night crabbing trips.

"We would go out at high tide — sometimes 11 at night or midnight — and stay out for hours," she said. "By the time we got back, it would be two in the morning, and then we'd cook those crabs right then and there, and eat; sometimes, before we knew it, the sun was starting to rise. A lot of my childhood was centered around family, food and being together. I think that's where my instinct to gather people and create spaces where they feel connected really comes from."



"We don't have villages like our parents or grandparents used to have. Giggles is a place to build your village."

Virginia Beach, shaped by its enormous naval presence, brought together people from all kinds of places and backgrounds. But it could also feel like a place where it was easy to get lost. Her own high school had around 2,000 students.

"There was just so much going on," she said. "It was big, busy, spread out."

That would make her eventual discovery of Highwood, and its intimacy, feel all the more remarkable.

FINDING ILLINOIS

Jess moved to Illinois in 2016, after her father first raised the idea. At the time, she was working as a preschool teacher at a Navy child development center and was able to transfer to Naval Station Great Lakes. Illinois offered the chance to experience something new — and to see what existed beyond the borders of the Commonwealth.

What captivated her about the Chicago area was something she had never encountered growing up: distinct town identities.

"When I moved here and I experienced all of these towns — Skokie, Evanston, Lake Bluff — where each town had its own culture and events, I was struck by that," she said. "That felt really new to me. I really loved that each place had its own identity."

She also noticed the housing stock — blocks that felt different from one another, layered with history and personality, nothing like the copy-and-paste subdivisions she had grown up near in Virginia Beach.



She and her partner, Noah, bounced around — Morton Grove, Waukegan, Vernon Hills — before settling in Highwood in April 2021. And the city set its hook early.

The owners of the duplex they rented told them the story of the property: Two brothers had met and married two sisters. Wanting to stay close and raise their children side by side, the two families built a duplex on their grandmother's lot. Jess and Noah were only the third family ever to live there.

"We really appreciated the origin story of our home," she said. "It set the tone for what we were able to see in Highwood — its history, its culture, everything."

A FACEBOOK GROUP AND A BIRTHDAY PARTY

The moment Highwood started feeling like home didn't happen at a grand event. It happened through a Facebook group.

Shortly after moving in, her next-door neighbor, Abbi, introduced her to Free Box — a buy-nothing group where neighbors give away items they no longer need or ask for things they're missing. Jess joined right away and found something unexpected: a way to actually know her neighbors.

"I started getting to know my neighbors based on the things they were giving

away," she said. "You start to get a sense of what people need and what season of life they're in. If I was giving away something specific, I could usually remember who might need it and offer it to that person first."

The local group founder, Lori, has described it as a mashup of Buy Nothing and a Free Box, with two goals: challenging habitual consumerism and fostering hyperlocal connections among neighbors. It worked. Jess was soon being invited to small gatherings, including a birthday for a neighbor. Because she had already been interacting with many of the guests through Free Box, it didn't feel like walking into a room of strangers.

"That really drove the point home for me," she said. "That's when I knew Highwood was the place I wanted to put down roots."

GIGGLES: A SPACE BUILT ON EIGHT YEARS OF WATCHING

Jess spent three years as a preschool teacher and five as a private nanny before she started building the idea for a space of her own. Her first nanny position, caring for two autistic brothers, crystallized something she had sensed but couldn't yet name: The North Shore had almost no sensory-friendly indoor play options, and most spaces skewed heavily toward

gross motor play at the expense of everything else.

The space she envisioned would be calm, intimate and intentionally designed, built on a Reggio Emilia-inspired approach — one that sees the environment as a third teacher.

"The environment has to be designed with intention," she said. "We wanted the overall space to feel neutral and calm so everything else — well-made pieces, some even upcycled from Free Box, and open-ended heirloom-quality toys from sustainable, eco-friendly companies — could really stand out."

"We don't have villages like our parents or grandparents used to have. Giggles is a place to build your village." — Jess Ortega

She had been exploring a space in Highland Park when, driving home from the gym one December morning in 2022, she spotted a "space available" sign in a downtown Highwood storefront window. She stopped the car.

"I looked in and I could just see it," she said. "I thought: Why wouldn't I open a business where I live? Why wouldn't I want to build something right here?"

She toured the space the following week, signed the lease shortly after, got permits,

in early March, and opened Giggles in May 2023 — just 76 days after permit approval.

“That tells you how business-friendly Highwood is,” she said. “Things moved quickly, and that made it possible to open when we did. Now we’re about to celebrate Giggles’ third anniversary!”

Two of the women who now help Jess during the week started out simply as members — moms who brought their kids in and never really stopped coming. One of them was Melody, who first began visiting when Giggles helped to host children’s storytimes for the Highwood Library & Community Center while the library was under renovation. She became a member, and her son, now in preschool, still comes in several mornings a week.

“The biggest thing here, beyond the educational aspect, is community,” Jess said. “Especially after the pandemic, a lot of families are looking for places to connect. We don’t have villages like our parents or grandparents used to have. When people come in, everyone gets welcomed. Friendships form here. Families meet at Giggles, then start seeing each other beyond open play and become part of each other’s lives. It’s a place to build your village.”

FROM LITTER PICKUP TO CELEBRATE HIGHWOOD PRESIDENT

Her path to leading Celebrate Highwood began, improbably, with a trash bag.

Right before Giggles opened in spring 2023, Jess organized a community litter pickup — partly to get more involved and partly to quietly spread the word about her new business. During that effort, she met Jennifur Condon, the new executive director of the Highwood Chamber of Commerce. By August 2023, just months after opening Giggles, Jess was on the Chamber’s board.

That same effort also connected her with Alderman Andy Peterson, whose own early-morning ritual was picking up litter after Celebrate Highwood’s Wednesday evening markets. For Jess, it reflected a kind of civic care that would come to shape her own approach to community involvement.

“I thought it was really admirable,” she said. “You don’t often see an elected official picking up litter after their own events.”

Later, she began joining Peterson for those litter pickups and attending city council meetings — the kind of steady involvement that helped her find her footing in Highwood’s civic circles. Around that same time, Eric Falberg invited her to a Celebrate Highwood meeting — her first introduction to the nonprofit.

Falberg had won an aldermanic seat in 2009 on the same ticket as mayoral candidate Charlie Pecaro, and both had arrived in Highwood with a shared



conviction about what the city could become. Pecaro — now in his fourth term as mayor, and the subject of an upcoming feature in this magazine — has named Celebrate Highwood among his proudest accomplishments in office, giving the credit to Falberg and to Ilyse Strongin of Ripple Public Relations. Together, the three formed the core team behind Highwood’s transformation into a North Shore event destination: Pecaro providing the civic backbone and government support from City Hall, Falberg driving the creative vision, and Strongin supplying the public relations firepower that made the outside world take notice. Falberg launched the Great Highwood Pumpkin Fest in 2009; by 2012 it was prominent enough to appear on HGTV’s “Pumpkin Wars,” pitting Highwood against Keene, N.H., in a battle for the world record for lit jack-o-lanterns — and putting Highwood, quite literally, on the map.

That was the legacy Jess was stepping into. Only once she saw Pumpkin Fest from the inside in October 2023, did the scale of it all come into focus.

“That event is a beast,” she said. “It attracts around 100,000 people to town and takes months and months of planning. When I learned that there were fewer than twenty people on Celebrate’s board, I was floored. It’s magical — to know that a festival of that scale can be put on by so few people, all motivated because they love this town and want others to visit and experience everything that’s been built here. From that point on, I knew I wanted to be part of it.”

Any time Celebrate Highwood needed help — graphic design, communications, an extra pair of hands — she showed up. By then, she had already learned how to build a business from the ground up, figuring out whatever needed figuring out along the way. Those skills transferred directly.

“There’s power in showing up,” she said. “A lot of community work comes down to consistency, follow-through and being willing to jump in where you’re needed, even if no one asks you to. That’s what I tried to do.”

In September 2024, Falberg told her he was stepping down and that he wanted her to succeed him.

“He said, ‘Jess, I believe you are the right person to carry us forward,’” she recalled. “I was honored, and I understood the weight of what he was asking. Those are big shoes to fill. I was nervous, and I also worried about what it would mean for my very new business.”

She took months to decide. But Highwood had come to mean a lot to her, and the work, though demanding at times, offered a kind of purpose she found hard to turn away from. In February 2025, she was voted in as president of Celebrate Highwood.

CARRYING A LEGACY FORWARD

Celebrate Highwood produces more than a dozen events annually — Pumpkin Fest, the weekly Evening Gourmet Market, Nashwood, Bloody Mary Fest, Garlic Fest, the rebranded Taste of Highwood and more — drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors each year and directing proceeds to local charities. In 2025, Pumpkin Fest benefited SaLT (Service and Learning Together), a volunteer-driven nonprofit co-founded by Ida Fiore, who grew up in Highwood and has built an organization that mobilizes student volunteers to serve food-insecure families, provide academic tutoring and partner with local groups. SaLT’s teams showed up for every phase of Pumpkin Fest, from setup through cleanup — a model of partnership that Jess describes as exactly what she is looking for more of.



“SaLT has been such a steady, heart-forward presence in Highwood,” she said. “Their leaders have deep roots here, and their passion for building the next generation is something I’ve always admired.”

For Jess, that history is personal. Highwood was built by immigrants who arrived with little more than a willingness to work and a belief in community — people like Lenny Innocenzi’s family, who came from the mountains outside Rome in 1907, turned a relocated Fort Sheridan barracks into a butcher shop, and eventually gave the city Buffo’s. Jess arrived from the Philippines at age 5. The details are different; the arc is the same. “As an immigrant myself,” she said, “I find that part of Highwood’s story especially meaningful.”

As president, her primary focus is sustainability — building the systems and structures that allow Celebrate Highwood to outlast any single volunteer or leader. She is actively recruiting new board members, with emphasis on younger residents and more women. She has already begun refreshing the event calendar: Taco Fest became Taste of Highwood in 2025, a change designed not only to broaden the appeal but to better honor the city’s owner-operated restaurant culture.

“About 80 to 85% of Highwood businesses are owner-operated,” she said. “You walk in and you see the owner there. Go in enough times and you get to hear their story — how they built it, all the challenges and triumphs. It’s inspiring.”

She is clear-eyed about the legacy she is carrying. Readers of this magazine know that Celebrate Highwood is not just a calendar of festivals — it is the engine that has driven Highwood’s reinvention from “Whiskey Junction” to one of the most distinctive dining and events destinations



on the North Shore, a transformation built by people like Falberg, Strongin and the tight-knit core of volunteers who have poured years into it.

“If tomorrow I said I’m done, I want Celebrate Highwood to be in a position where it can continue. Highwood needs Celebrate Highwood. In my head, it cannot go away.”

“My biggest priority when I said yes was making sure Celebrate Highwood lasts beyond me,” she said. “Beyond Eric, beyond any volunteer. If tomorrow I said I’m done, I want it to be in a position where it can continue. Highwood needs Celebrate Highwood. It’s necessary to our culture, necessary to our businesses. In my mind, it cannot go away.”

It is a conviction that sounds a lot like what she says about Giggles, about Free Box, about the family dinners in Virginia Beach that stretched til the sun rose over a pot of freshly caught crabs. The shape of the village changes. The idea behind it stays the same.

When Eric Falberg first settled in Highwood two decades ago, he described it as a place where you could know your neighbors, walk everywhere and feel at home. Jess Ortega arrived years later, from the other side of the world, and found the same thing — and then set about making it more true for everyone around her.

“Highwood has a way of really making you fall in love,” she said.

You can see that she means it.