**Harper Talks – Episode 28 – Mayor Craig Johnson
Transcipt**

##### [00:00:01.490] - 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 Craig Johnson. Craig is a 1980 graduate of Harper College and has served as mayor of Elk Grove Village since 1997. Craig is a 2017 Distinguished Alumni Award recipient. Craig Johnson joined me for Harper talks over Zoom.

##### [00:00:29.030] - Brian Shelton

Hi, Mayor Johnson. Thanks for being here today. How are you doing?

##### [00:00:32.140] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Great. Thanks for having me on this beautiful day.

##### [00:00:34.460] - Brian Shelton

I appreciate it. Yeah, we were originally supposed to talk in February, and it was freezing cold, and now we're in this beautiful late April day. So time to get outside and enjoy some sunshine in the village, right?

##### [00:00:45.310] - Mayor Craig Johnson

No question. It's about time, my friend. Having snow earlier this week was kind of a rude awakening. We haven't gotten out of winter yet.

##### [00:00:53.120] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, I was not ready for that myself. Hey, I was looking and you graduated from Harper College in 1980, right?

##### [00:01:02.230] - Mayor Craig Johnson

That's right.

##### [00:01:03.570] - Brian Shelton

I was kind of curious. Someone like yourself, who you graduated from the college in 80, and you've been the mayor of Elk Grove Village for, what, 27 years, right. What have you noticed about Harper College and how that's changed over the years since you were here as a student?

##### [00:01:21.770] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Well, I mean, it's really changed kind of dramatically when I think back, the days, walking across a pretty wide open campus back then, the wind blowing on cold, snowy days and stuff like that. But, yeah, what I think is great, just show you how much I love Harper, I get off path. I apologize a little bit.

##### [00:01:39.420] - Brian Shelton

No, that's okay.

##### [00:01:41.150] - Mayor Craig Johnson

My dad had a rule in the house. He goes, if you go to Harper for two years, I'll then pay for you to go to any state college, university, 100%. And so my brother didn't take advantage of that, but my sister and I both did. My sister, she went through the nursing program. She got her RN degree from Harper College one year after me. In 81, she graduated, and I went through my two year degree there. I got my Associates in Applied Science, and my wife was the same age as me. We graduated high school together. She got her dental hygienist degree at the same time I was going to Harper. So we took advantage of my dad's offer, and I went on to become a teacher. I went to Northeastern University after that, got my teaching degree. My wife went into her practice, and my sister became an RN after that. But I liked what my dad thought was, and I believe so much in Harper that I had the same rule with my four kids. And all four of my kids did their first two years of college at Harper College. Matter of fact, my youngest son was a wrestler at Harper College, so he also did sports besides academics.

##### [00:02:51.750] - Mayor Craig Johnson

I had a chance because my youngest daughter just graduated from Harper seven years ago. I had a chance to go see the college recently over time, and it's amazing what they've done, from culinary to science to just everything, athletics. It's amazing how they've expanded, expand the sphere of what they teach, expand what they want to reach out to students about, yet they still keep their core connection with the students. My kids talk about their professors at Harper like I used to talk about my professor at Harper. They're accessible, you can talk to them and they say it's quite a difference, at Harper, compared to a university or a four year college. You don't have that same connection that you have. That's why I always liked about Harper. It's a great transitioning time from high school to college level. You still got their connection that you don't get a big university. So it's not such a dramatic shift from high school that, boom, you're at a university, you can transition into it. And the nice thing is, the quality of the education is rivals a university. I actually did better at the university grade wise than I did at Harper because Harper was a tough academic school.

##### [00:04:16.020] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Those professors held us to our rigorous standards that they had. At your university could slide a little bit compared to Harper. So I always think so highly of it. It's advanced, it's kept up with the times. They now have four year degrees being offered through Harper and association. And that's why my grandkids, which I have nine, the oldest one, is only about seven years away from Harper. I know my son that was the wrestle there is already telling the kids, Harper first, then the university.

##### [00:04:48.160] - Brian Shelton

I love it. We should just take this and just put you on television and that's it. We'll just run this over and over again. You're the best advertisement for Harper College ever. I love it. It's great.

##### [00:04:57.870] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Well, I'm being honest. Like I say, when I was a kid, you probably heard this before, we used to call Harper either Harper High or Southern Palatine University. And so you had almost a mindset when you first went there. Oh, it's really not a school. I'll tell you, it didn't take too long, one, to realize it is a college, and two, you better do your job or you're not going to make it there, which is great, because it is a little eye awakening for you and it's great. But again, you've got a different field there which is more welcoming, inviting than you do at other colleges and universities. You just don't have that. And that's what I think is good for young people to remember when they are going to school. One, you're setting your future foundation up when you go to Harper because college sets you up for your future endeavor, whether it's work or whatever you do in life. And that's why it's good. You have that kind of quality to get you going there. And once I started there, I never had any complaints. I never called it Harper High or Southern Palatine University, because that is not what it was.

##### [00:06:08.310] - Mayor Craig Johnson

It truly was a quality education at a college level.

##### [00:06:12.070] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's one of those things, too, that those of us who are in academia that's our career path is that Harper is the kind of community college that you aspire to work at. You want to be here. You kind of push your path to be at a place like Harper, and it's just a fantastic place to work and to live and to be a part of the larger Harper community. So I totally identify with what you're saying. I always love the University of Southern Palatine, though. That was always my favorite of the monikers to go with it. You talked about this a little bit, but you were here, what, 78 through 80 through

##### [00:06:51.000] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Yeah, graduated in 78 from Elk Grove High School, and then the two years of Harper. Graduated in May of 1980.

##### [00:06:58.390] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. So what was campus like during that time? I started here in 2014, so obviously the campus is way different from back then. What was it like for you when you were here?

##### [00:07:07.800] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Well, the big thing, like I say, all the buildings that exist today did not exist back then. There was no connections between buildings, and it was pretty a wind, I mean, wintertime, you felt it. I mean, you're walking, and the parking was there, but you still had a pretty good walk to go to your classes, and, I mean, you felt it. I mean, that wind would whip across. They had open areas by the campus, and you felt it. But it was nice was it was still a beautiful campus back then. Even though it's still developing and building with the water feature and all the rest, it was still a beautiful campus. But what I remember most about being there was the accessibility of your teachers. They're right in the hallways there, and, I mean, you had your big lecture halls, but you also had a lot of small classroom time. And the nice thing was, at least while I was there, I haven't been there for a while, but when I was going there, your teachers, your professors were accessible, and you'd be walking down the hallway. More than one time, I had a professor say "Hey, Craig, how are you doing? Oh, hi, Professor Smith. Good to see you." They would reach out to you. When I went to Northeastern, that didn't happen. And I know when my kids went to full universities like Northern, they didn't reach out and talk like that. So you had a nice, warm connection, which I thought was important, because I actually got a lot out of my talks one on one with my professor, as I did in the class sometimes. And they would give you that time. They would say, hey, come on, and have a seat, Craig. Say, hey, professor, last week you were talking about ABC. I didn't quite get what you meant, what I meant on that. But it was nice, and you actually got to know them, and that was a big advantage to it. And so that's something I liked about it. It's down to earth school, so as far as buildings go, to me, back then, it was like a school. But what I did like, though, was the people working at the school. That's what made a difference at Harper. You had quality people. And talking to my kids, like, say, my youngest one graduated seven years ago.

##### [00:09:18.000] - Mayor Craig Johnson

I think they still continue that, because she would talk about that. She'd say, oh, yeah, well, yeah, dad, I was taking my Psychology 101 class, and the professor was telling me something. So we talked afterwards for 20 minutes. It didn't hesitate. That's what's important, I think.

##### [00:09:31.690] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, I totally agree with you that's my favorite part about working here, quite honestly, is the connection that you have with the students outside of the classroom and being able to have those conversations and keep it going. It's so much more enjoyable that way. And we keep the classes small. I mean, very rarely do you have a class with more than 30 people in it. So it's great you actually get to know people and know names and have lunch in the cafeteria, whatever. It's a great experience. So I appreciate you talking about that. I know that you left here, you went to Northeastern, but you own an insurance business, and I read that it's the oldest continuous business in Elk Grove Village. Is that true?

##### [00:10:09.750] - Mayor Craig Johnson

That's 100% true. We realize mayors are now full time jobs out in the suburbs, what they pay us. I actually had to make more money working at the local McDonald's. But you also have a business. So what it was was originally when I started off at Harper, I thought about maybe going to medical. Then I was going to go into business and end up going into education. And my original job when I graduated Northeastern was I was a teacher at Wheeling High School. And actually my big love was coaching, actually more than teaching sometimes, but I was a history teacher and a PE teacher at Wheeling for a short period of time. So what happened was my parents moved to Elk Grove. Elk Grove was found in 1956. The first people moved into Elk Grove in October 57. My parents moved in in January 58. They're the 300th family to move in. Well, my dad and mom actually owned an insurance agency. They sold insurance, they lived in Chicago. They moved it from Chicago into the garage in the first section of homes that they bought in Elk Grove. Now, growing up as a kid having a business right in your house, people come by. When I was ten years old, come by and make a payment. I could do a receipt at ten years of age for a payment for the policy and do it. So I was part of it. I swore I would never do it. No way. I lived insurance all my life as a kid growing up, never do it. Became a teacher. Well, in the early 80s when I graduated, got teaching, they were closing schools, enrollments dropping, population dropping. So I lost my position at Wheeling. Last hired, first fired. And so my dad made an offer. He said, come into the business with me. And he goes, I'll let you keep coaching. So to me that's fine, I got to do what I really love, the coaching part, and I went into the business. So now, 40 years later, I'm still in the insurance business. We are the oldest business. They moved in when the village first started. We're the oldest business, Elk Grove Village. And remember, Elk Grove was home to 5600 businesses. So to be the oldest continuous business is quite an accomplishment. I'm still involved in it. It gave me time to not only coach, which I did for a long time, but also be the mayor.

##### [00:12:25.380] - Mayor Craig Johnson

And again, a lot of those business classes, I still remember Accounting 101 debits and credits, and all the stuff I learned at Harper, I still use. Never thought I would, but I still do. So taking Accounting 101 and business psychology and some of the other stuff I took when I was starting in the business world, I still use to this day. And I jokingly, tell people as mayor. One thing I learned at Harper that I used to this day is Pavlov's dog. I'm not sure if you've learned about that in psychology, but that's one where you put the right stimulus in front of them, they start to drool. Well, when you're mayor, I put the right stimulus in front of the people of this community, they drool and they support me. So I did learn something from Harper that I used to this day.

##### [00:13:07.680] - Mayor Craig Johnson

That's a great story, I love it. How did you become mayor? How did that happen? Can you walk me through briefly the process of that? Where did you get started? You started as like a councilman or something like that?

##### [00:13:17.890] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Yeah. What happened was, remember my parents, the very beginning of family. My dad was the first treasurer of the Jaycees. My mom helped form the first women's club. They helped build one of the very first churches in Elk Grove. So growing up as a child, I saw how much they gave back. My dad was a Cub Master and the Cub Scouts, my mom was a troop leader. They really gave a lot back. So now I'm in Elk Grove. My wife, who I graduated high school with in Elk Grove, went to Harper with for two years. Elk Grove, we all together families, and our kids are here now. And I was a Cub Master start getting involved coaching little league sports. I thought I want to give back like my mom and dad did. I want my kids to have the benefit of an Elk Grove that I had. And I only had it because our parents put their time in. I thought it was our turn to put our time in. So I was actually going to run for the Park District board. Being sports, being a coach, natural marriage. Well, the mayor whose children I grew up with was mayor second long is after me for 22 years.

##### [00:14:21.590] - Mayor Craig Johnson

He kind of talked me into running for the village board. They had openings and they wanted to get young people involved. So I decided to run for village trustee. I was the first one in the village history, born and raised in Elk Grove and to get on the board. And then after four years the mayor I served with, and I not the longtime mayor, he had stepped down. He and I didn't always get along the best. So I was kind of encouraged to run for mayor. He chose not to. I won pretty big margin of the gentleman that did run, a fellow board member and for 26 years now we're going on 27. The rest is history. I got involved. I did a lot to help my kids. And if I can tell you thing I'm most proud of, one of the most things I'm proud of in my life, my oldest son eight years ago came to me and said, dad, I'm going to run for office in Elk Grove. And I said, Wait. I said, you're running for mayor? He goes, no, I'd never want to be mayor. He actually ran for the library board.

##### [00:15:25.320] - Mayor Craig Johnson

And I said to him, I said, I always thought you regret it. The time I had to take away from the family for me to be mayor and away from things you want to do. He goes no, dad, I appreciated what you did. Because Elk Grove was better because of what you did, like it was better for you because of what Grandma and Grandpa did. So he ran for the library board, was successful. His term came up this time and now he just went and ran and won on the school board. So he's now following the same footsteps I followed with my parents. So I'm very proud of that. That made me feel good, that he appreciated what I did, didn't resent what I did, and appreciate so much that he's now running and get an office because he's got three children growing up here in Elk Grove. My other son has three children growing up here in Elk Grove. My daughter's in Elk Grove and no one leaves. So they all stay, they all are a part. So we're doing something right to attract the kids to be here. And one little quick piece of trivia you're going to find amazing. As I said, my wife and I both graduated Elk GroveHigh School, class of 78. We had the biggest class ever at Elk Grove High School. 624 of us, our 40th reunion, which is a few years ago, 200 of us still live in Elk Grove. That's unheard of in today's world. And there's still five couples that graduated from Elk Grove High School same year that are married, living in Elk Grove. Again, something you would never think you'd see anywhere in this world. That's what's unique about this community. And I give some of that credit to Harper because Harper taught us you don't have to go away to get what you need in life, like quality college education. You can stay in Elk Grove and still get that.

##### [00:17:10.780] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. It's so great that your son is getting involved as well. He might take your job one day. You better watch out, he's going to come after you.

##### [00:17:20.410] - Mayor Craig Johnson

You never know.

##### [00:17:21.660] - Brian Shelton

So I know that as mayor, there's no average day, right? But walk me through a little bit. Like? What does the mayor of Elk Grove Village do? What's the gig? What's the standard?

##### [00:17:34.850] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Well, I always tell people when I talk, especially I love talking to students, young people, a lot of fun. They ask that question all the time. I said, well, just picture this picture being on TV and you're juggling. Well, you're not juggling balls or bowling pins, you're juggling three cats. That's what being mayor is like every day. You never know what's going to come. You never know where it's going to go, never going to get off. You get Claude or you can get a kiss. You just never know what's going on. But being a mayor of a local town is unique. And being an obviously mayor as long as I have, I've been offered, I've actually been offered to see as a state senate, a state rep when there's vacancies. I've been encouraged to run for Congress, everything else. And I've never done it. And the reason I haven't done it is because being a local mayor, you get things done. Now, it takes a lot of time, takes a lot of effort. The joke was, and my kids, a little, they didn't want to go to McDonald's with me. And I said, well, why not?

##### [00:18:31.520] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Because dad, you're going to be there 2 hours talking to people. I'm not going to go to Jewel with me, dad, because you be there and ice cream is going to melt while you're talking to people. So you're basically working 24/7, and as long as you know that going into it, you're fine with it. Me, you can see from today, I don't mind talking, I don't mind meeting people. If no one's around, I'll talk to the wall. So I enjoy that and I enjoy working with people. I love it. It's my fellow neighbors. We live in the community. We're all neighbors together. So usually what happens on a mayor is during the day, even though I may be in the insurance office, I probably spend 60% of time doing Village stuff, or I might be going my grandkids games. Now I'll spend 50% time talking to someone about an issue with their waterline or their tree or the road in front of the house. So you're pretty much working all the time. But mostly my life starts. I go in a house, I get up in the morning, I go to local park district fitness center, spend half the time working out, half time talking to the residents.

##### [00:19:31.850] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Then I come home, take a shower, go to my office. In my business, half the time I'm doing my insurance work. Half time I'm talking to either village staff or residents that come in or call me. And then usually evenings I have meetings or make phone calls when I return calls to people. Little trivia. I'm probably the only mayor in the world. I do not have a cell phone. My kids say, dad, you're the only human without a cell phone. So what happens? I still have a landline. I go home from my office at night. My answer machine is blinking five, six messages, have something quick to eat. I go to my little bedroom I made into an office. I call everybody back. So pretty much all the time I'm working on things. And what do we work on? I can work on anything from contracts with policemen, to building new buildings, to fixing water main lines down a street, to helping a resident's who has got an argument with his neighbor. Can I mediate it for him? So we pretty much put in time all the time. I'm not alone. I talk to mayors all the time.

##### [00:20:29.320] - Mayor Craig Johnson

All of us do the same thing. Mayors truly are government to the average person, and we love it. We wouldn't do it if we didn't love it because of the time we do put in. We probably put in 40, 50 hours a week without realizing that you do. If Sunday afternoon I'm at a softball game for my great granddaughter, I'm working because I'm talking to someone that's got an issue, and I don't mind it. Actually, I enjoy it. And I wouldn't be doing it for 26 plus years if I didn't enjoy it so much. But yeah, the nice thing is I could tell people all the time, Brian, I apologize going on here, but I tell people all the time, is.. This is true government. When you work with the local government, try calling Joe Biden on the phone. I've met him. He came to Elk Grove last year. But I can't pick up the phone and call him. Or if someone picks up the phone, they can call and talk to the mayor right away, or they knock on my door. We are the true government of the people. They can talk to us.

##### [00:21:24.800] - Mayor Craig Johnson

They reach out to us. They give us great ideas. A lot of stuff we do. We didn't pull that out of our backsides. We heard it from people. They give us the ideas. We think it's great. We start them, we do it. And that's the way government should be. Of the people, by the people, for the people. And that's what's great about it. And like I say, you can't get much done in Springfield, you can't get much done in Washington. But look at local government, they get things done, they get it done right, and they involve the people the way it should be. They don't leave them behind. They include them in the process and the solution. And that's what counts.

##### [00:22:02.370] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. Love to hear that. Clearly, you're a tireless champion for Elk Grove Village in the surrounding area. I'm just curious, if I were a person or a business thinking about locating in Elk Grove Village, what's the pitch?

##### [00:22:14.950] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Well, the main pitch is number one. If you come to Elk Grove, you come to the biggest business park in North America. Elk Grove is the number one business park in North America based on size. We're over 5,500 businesses. Over 60,000 people work in Elk Grove every day. We're home to the data center capital of the world, to manufacturing, second only to Chicago in the state of Illinois. We got such a variety. But what we have for businesses is location, location, location. We're next to O'Hare airport. We border it on our east. We have every major expressway surrounding and touching Elk Grove. We have rail lines running through the heart of Elk Grove, and we've got the lowest taxes in all northwest Cook County, unfortunately for Mayor Schwantz in Palatine, yes. Lower than Palatine, lower than Arlington Heights, Schaumburg, mount Prospect. We're the lowest. We have a great workforce available, well educated. Matter of fact, we partner with Harper College, with Elk Grove High School on doing a manufacturing lab that helps young people learn today's technology for manufacturing and work in our industrial park. And it continues on from Elk Grove High School into Harper. So we have that partnership.

##### [00:23:39.500] - Mayor Craig Johnson

So we have a well trained, well educated workforce. And that's the number one complaint my businesses have. They don't talk about taxes because we're the lowest. They don't talk about great police because we have the best police, fire, public work. They talk about getting skilled workers for the business. So that's why we, for the past 13 years, have a partnership with Elk Grove High School and Harper College to train, educate and prepare tomorrow's workers. So they can walk out of Harper College after two years and walk into a six figure job, (snaps) like that. So that's why you want to come to Elk Grove. Low taxes, location, all the updated infrastructure, and we got the best workforce you could ever have.

##### [00:24:23.670] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. Love it. I'm going to move. I'm on my way. I'm going to go pack up the house in Hoffman and head over.

##### [00:24:32.630] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Brian, talk about moving if you're a business owner right now, it can be a little tough. We only have a 1% vacancy rate in our business park all time low. Remember, Brian, that's based on 65 million square feet of business space, only 600,000 sqft available. If that doesn't tell you Elk Grove is a place to be.

##### [00:24:56.770] - Brian Shelton

Pretty amazing. I was going to ask you one last question. You've kind of hit on it a little bit as we've gone through here, but I always ask everybody who's on the show, what advice might you have for someone who is either currently at Harper College or is considering coming here?

##### [00:25:14.500] - Mayor Craig Johnson

Don't underestimate Harper College. That was always the talk, even when I was young. My kids even talked about that before they went to Harper. Oh, dad. It's just a junior college, dad. No big deal. I can tell you this. Harper College is one of the most respected community colleges in the country, bar none. And I know that for a fact. Talking to all the different universities my kids went to Northern, Loyola, Elmhurst College, they went all over my kids. And when I would go with them to talk to counselors, all the rest, when I would mention Harper, no problem, Mr. Johnson. All the classes would definitely transfer. Harper's well respected in our eyes. No hesitation on that. Secondly, don't underestimate the quality of education you're going to get. It's a lot harder. I told you before, I got better grades at Northeastern than I did at Harper. They have hard, good quality curriculum there at Harper College. And you have fine, top notch teachers working at Harper College. So don't go in there think it's going to be a cakewalk or a breeze. Walk into knowing you're going to be working, you're going to be learning, and more importantly, you're going to be building your base for future success.

##### [00:26:31.840] - Mayor Craig Johnson

So if I was considering any college start my career, Harper would always be number one. And I'll tell you something, one of the greatest honors that I've ever received in all the years I've been involved as mayor, as a coach business owner was when I was the Alumni of the Year at Harper College. That really is something I wear with a badge of honor to this very day. I have hanging up in my office here at the Village, my certificate, my recognition as Alumni of the Year at Harper College. And that's something I'm very proud of and I always will be.

##### [00:27:03.420] - Brian Shelton

Well, that is so great. Thank you so much for taking time out of your very busy schedule to be with us today. Please keep up your great work in Elk Grove Village. And please keep up your great work, evangelizing Harper College, I certainly appreciate that. That's fantastic.

##### [00:27:16.770] - Mayor Craig Johnson

We've got a guaranteed partnership for life, that I promise you. Thank you very much.

##### [00:27:20.960] - Brian Shelton

Thank you, Mayor.

##### [00:27:21.410] - Brian Shelton

Craig Johnson is a graduate of Harper College and has served as mayor of Elk Grove Village since 1997. 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 a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. This episode was edited by me, Brian Shelton. Our online content producer is Erica Berger. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening!