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Aaron Levin Shares his Experience as a New Resident of Bloomington-Normal

Charles Schlenker
WGLT, Illinois State University

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WGLT Interview with Aaron Levin, Jan. 20, 2023

Charlie Schlenker: State Farm employee and Illinois Wesleyan assistant basketball coach Aaron Levin also says knowing the history of a place helps him feel connected but sometimes even the most basic Bloomington-Normal things are a mystery.

Aaron Levin: One thing is... well people ask me 'well you live in Normal, Illinois how did it get its name' I don't have a response for them you know but it's something I'd like to learn.

Schlenker: In point of fact the Town of Normal used to be called north Bloomington. As public schools started to form in the state there was a need for teachers to staff them back when town founder Jesse Fell schemed and finagled to bring what became Illinois State University to the area, it was to be a normal school part of a broad effort to create the profession of teaching. The normal school movement originated in Massachusetts in 1839 and spread nationwide. Legislation to create Illinois State Normal University was signed in 1857, the town changed its name from north Bloomington to Normal in 1865.

Levin: Makes a ton of sense when people say 'oh it's a great school for education' I think that is the fabric.

Schlenker: The Town of Normal had only a couple dozen houses back then. Further in the past there was a much bigger town in Mclean county in the seventeen hundred's the grand village of the Kickapoo had up to a thousand Native American people living near Elsworth. Between the French and British fur trade proxy wars fought with tribal allies, disease, and westward settlement in the US, the village was much reduced by the time a US army force under the command of future president Zachary Taylor burned it in 1813.

Levin: We forget that we weren't the first ones here and so I think knowing that almost gives a further and deeper appreciation for where we are now.

Schlenker: Levin grew up in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park. He says more recent political history matters to him too. Bloomington-Normal has contributed a couple governors to the state, Joe Pfeiffer and Adlai Stephenson the second, the US vice president, Adlai Stephenson the first, several leaders of the women's suffrage movement, the first woman state senator in Illinois, Florence Fifer Bohrer and on and on. It was a regular stop for a young lawyer named Abraham Lincoln and was a founding area for the Republican party. Bloomington-Normal has sent a democrat to Congress only a few times since state hood. All that political history helps Levin make sense of the current climate.

Levin: Looking at the state of Illinois and seeing the map of all that blue in the north east corner of the state and then kind of seeing the red sprawl here. It's just eye opening.

Schlenker: Then there's that tiny little Bloomington insurance company of the 1920s, not so tiny anymore. Levin says the State Farm museum of corporate headquarters taught him the roots of the company were in policies for farmers and as a mutual instead of a traded stock company. He says that helps explain company culture.

Levin: The fabric of it now and how it's different types of insurance all into one and seeing that has to me is how Bloomington- Normal kind of is different pockets but all stitched together in one company and one community is pretty fascinating.