

Many Stories, One Illinois
Built Different

When I first ordered a hot dog in Chicago, I was surprised to get a true Chicago dog: mustard, relish, onions, peppers, tomatoes, and a pickle—no ketchup. At first, I didn't understand why so many toppings were needed. The answer became quite obvious after a couple of years. Now, I can't imagine my hot dog without all the ingredients. Even though many people around the world may not be pleased to try it when they come to Chicago, it works because one individual addition to the hot dog keeps its own flavor. The chopped onions don't become the tomato, nor does the relish become the pepper. Each part remains unique, yet together they create something special to us.

This is how I experience Illinois. I hear many languages in stores, see traditions old and new, and notice communities with different stories coming together. Before, I often perceived belonging as finding the right place and molding myself to fit into it. However, Illinois has taught me something else. Here, belonging isn't solely about changing to become like everyone in the community. It is about sharing your own flavor (experiences, traditions, and perspective) with the community. As in my own community, I notice more meaningful parts of Illinois. Everyone participates in orchestrating community events that bring different cultures and generations together. Seeing diversity and appreciation not as a slogan but as part of our everyday lives gives us the opportunity to express our flavor alongside others.

My understanding of Illinois has shaped how I see myself in the community today. Just like every ingredient on the *true Chicago hotdog*, every person is able to express freely and contribute something eloquent. Whether it is shown through leadership, service, or just an open mind, making others feel belonged, each one shapes the place we live in. As our

differences are not a disturbance to the hot dog, they are contributions that make it better and prouder.

When I think about “Many Stories, One Illinois,” a Chicago hot dog comes to mind. Individually, each ingredient has a distinctive story, but together they create something memorable that represents Illinois. This applies to our state and our nation. Growing up, I've learned that the authentic American voice isn't just one story but millions of cultures, experiences, and backgrounds, all woven together without erasing what makes each unique. Like a true Chicagoan hot dog, it is the collaboration of differences that makes it unforgettable.