

# **Granite City High Graduate Anna Valencia Makes Mark As Chicago City Clerk, Has Fond Memories Of Back Home**

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
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**GRANITE CITY** - Anna Valencia, a 2003 graduate of Granite City High School, is currently making her mark as the City Clerk of Chicago, but hasn't forgot about her roots in Granite.

In a wide-ranging interview that was recorded recently for the Granite City School District's YouTube channel, Valencia talked about her memories of the town, the high school, her devotion to public service and how she wants to help families and others in Chicago.

"My parents are still there, on 27th Street," Valencia said about her experiences growing up in Granite City, "I loved growing up in Granite; I had some of the best years, always walking around the (Wilson) Park, hanging out with friends, going to football games, being part of the Student Council. I know they're getting ready to do their Student Council Christmas basket drive, which I know is a little bit different this year, but does not amaze me to see the amazing people from Granite, and alumni, step up in a big way. I know Mrs. (Linda) Ames (the Student Council faculty advisor) had talked to me about they're going to be able to do more that they thought for Christmas baskets, not just the spirit of Granite City, but it's so good to talk to you about growing up there, and what's happening. So I loved it. I loved my time there."

Valencia graduated from the University of Illinois in 2007, the first in her family to earn a college degree from a four-year school. She said that it was instilled into her by her parents that she was going to go to college, and she credited the help from teachers such as Ames that helped Valencia apply for financial aid, apply to the schools themselves and visit the campuses. She and her mother then picked out three nearby schools to apply to --- Illinois, SIU-Carbondale, and the University of Missouri in Columbia --- and visited all three. Valencia picked those schools because she knew that's where people went to school from the area.

"I remember always wanting to apply to Notre Dame," Valencia recalled, "but I had someone tell me that they didn't think I would get in. I don't believe that person's still at Granite City High School, but it discouraged me, and if I were to give any advice to young people, apply everywhere. Apply to a rich school, apply to a safe school. But don't let someone tell you that you may not be able to get in, because you don't know. Things are changing; you could have a great essay, you could have a great GPA or ACT score, or resume, or a recommendation that would allow you to get into your school. So don't make sure anyone else tells you what you can't do."

After enrolling at Illinois, Valencia was able to earn a scholarship in her freshman year, a year which saw her family's home catch fire, after which-state Representative Brad Hallbrook invited Valencia to his office to inform her and her family that she had won a full-ride scholarship to her first year in school. The scholarship helped Valencia immensely, and with the help of other scholarships and grants, she was able to complete her degree.

During her time at Illinois, Valencia was able to study in Spain, and was able to meet people from different cultures and experiences that helped her to widen out her perspective.

"I couldn't have done it without my parents," Valencia said, "and I couldn't have done it without amazing teachers at Granite City High School that encouraged me and helped show me the way."

Valencia encouraged high school students to take advantage of any available grants or scholarships that can be found all over the internet.

"Apply, apply, apply," Valencia said. "I mean, please apply for scholarships, because I think, you think you might get discouraged, or you might not get it, but you do not know what it out there. Scholarships basically helped get me through college, so please apply. I know they're time-consuming, but they're worth it."

While working on her international studies degree from Illinois, Valencia served various internships, and began networking. She always had a summer job, and interned at various jobs such as with the Gateway Grizzlies professional baseball club, in the restaurant industry, and even babysat to earn extra money. She gave credit to former Madison County Circuit Clerk Mark Von Nida for his help, and also credited her father for helping her gain an internship in the county clerk's office between her freshman and sophomore years in college.

"Although voter registration cards, and a lot of filing, it still helped me to prepare to dress into going into a professional setting, and meeting people there," Valencia said. "And going with the clerk to meetings, and exposing myself to what could be a possibility of working in the county. And then, another internship that really changed my trajectory was going into the summer of my senior year of college. Again, my dad helped me get on a campaign with Dave Hylla, who was running for judge at the time. And I was this college student coming in, I didn't really know what a campaign really was, or what I was doing. But I had so much fun. I would plan parades, we would get all the volunteers to the parade, we would go door-to-door, I would help with fundraisers, anything that was asked of a campaign staffer, I did. And I loved it. And I got to meet someone named Robert Stephan from Alton, and at the time, he was downstate director for Barack Obama, the U.S. Senator. And I remember going into my senior year of college, and my dad wanted me to go to law school. At the time, everyone in Granite thought like doctors, lawyers, that's what success looks like."

Valencia took the LSAT test, and was preparing her personal statement when she thought that she didn't want to go to law school, and it really wasn't her passion. She then thought she would teach for a year in South Korea, and then in her final semester in

the spring of 2007, her former campaign manager called and suggested she interview for a position with Obama's first presidential campaign. She bought her first-ever suit, went to a Starbucks shop in Champaign, and met with a person from the campaign.

"And I didn't get the job, which was kind of crushing," Valencia recalled. "But what did happen was another friend of mine, a former Granite City alum, her sister sent my resume to Virginia to a friend at the Democratic state party of Virginia, they called me and said 'hey, you want to be an organizer?' And I said 'sure, don't know what that means, but I need a job, and I don't want to go to law school.' So two weeks after I graduated college, I moved down to Virginia, and lived in supporter housing, and knocked on doors seven days a week. And my poor father was like 'this is just a phase, she'll get a real job someday,' because I was living with volunteers. And I didn't have my own place, and I was knocking on doors every day. But I loved it, and that's why I got into campaigning. And because of networking, because of internships, I worked hard, people saw it, and they recommended me for other positions. And after Virginia, I came back to Illinois, and in the world of politics, and especially federal campaigns, it's a small world, and if you do well, people know each other and kind of start shooting your resume around the country.

"And that's how I kind of got started," Valencia continued, "and I always tell young people and those in high school now, it's never too early to start interning. Ask for a job shadowing opportunity if you see someone you're interested in a career, ask them if you can job shadow with them for a day. It doesn't cost you anything, and 90 percent of the time, the person will say yes because someone did something for them. And they feel like they need to give back. And so, have that confidence to ask for an internship, whether it's paid or unpaid, just so you can get that experience, and meet people that can help you later in the future."

Valencia was first elected to City Clerk in Chicago in 2016, being installed in 2017 as one of three city-wide elected officials. And it's something that if anyone asked her or her family, they never would have believed it could happen.

"I was talking to my mom about this interview this morning," Valencia said, "if you told my parents that this was going to happen, they would not have believed you, and neither would I have. Especially from growing up in Granite to Chicago, it's a big difference. But I came here in 2010 on another campaign, so I went from Virginia, I went back to Illinois, I worked in Michigan for a congressional race, I came back to Illinois and worked in Chicago for another congressional race, and then landed in the state senate Democrat down in Springfield, where I worked there for a year-and-a-half."

A friend from another campaign Valencia worked on called her and asked her to join Rahn Emmanuel's campaign for Chicago mayor at the age of 25. Valencia worked as the

campaign's field director. After Emmanuel won his first term as Chicago mayor, Valencia worked in the Government Affairs office, helping companies pass their agendas. She was also hired to work with various City Council members, also helping get their agendas passed into law. She then helped U.S. Senator Dick Durbin with his 2014 campaign, then started her own consulting firm afterwards, being called back by Emmanuel to be appointed City Clerk as legislative director, being only the second woman, and the first woman of color, to be appointed to the position. She worked with Springfield, Chicago and Washington representatives on legislative agendas.

After supporting Hillary Clinton's campaign for President in 2016, Valencia, realizing that more women need to be running for office, raised her hand and was eventually appointed City Clerk to replace Susana Mendoza, who was elected state Comptroller. After interviewing with Emmanuel about how she was qualified for the job of City Clerk, Valencia was appointed to the office to serve Mendoza's unexpired term, then was elected to a full four-year term in 2019.

Valencia's duties include running City Council meetings and the vehicle sticker program, which brings in \$130 million per year. Her office employs 100 people, and enjoys her job tremendously. She also created a mock City Council, which involves high school students who learn how the Chicago Council works, along with lessons on how to debate and create legislature. True to her belief in young people, Valencia has also created a program that teaches girls how to close the gender gap in Chicago, has helped lead the way in signs and fees reform, making sure that the raise in fees aren't put on the backs of the poor and most vulnerable residents of the city, and modernizing the City Council operations, working with current mayor Lori Lightfoot to bring the Council's operations into the digital age. It includes livestreaming Council and committee meetings, electronic voting, and other projects.

"I think the best thing about my job is creating my own agenda," Valencia said. "For so long, I've worked for others that had their own agenda, and mostly men. And now, I can create my own agenda that works for people. And I have a platform to do good, and I'd like to share that platform with other people. I love being out in the community and hearing people's stories and what they need, and try to connect them to resources. And be a bridge builder."

Valencia remains a solid advocate of women and young people being involved in politics, and with women's rights.

"I love to give back to young people," Valencia said, "and particular young women and girls. In the political and government field, there weren't a lot of us, and I feel like that's what's missing. And I just want to make sure we have an opportunity to be at the table to help make decisions, too. And have that confidence to ask for that internship, ask to help

someone mentor you, ask for those opportunities. I think that especially talking to my husband, he has not problem with confidence, self-confidence in asking for things he's qualified for, or wants to do. So, yes, I think that is something like my North Star, why am I doing this work? So when I look back on my legacy, what do I see? And I hope it's young people have opportunities, whether working in my office, interning in my office. I do a lot of coffees, now Zoom coffees, with young people, whether they're college students or high school students, whoever asks to get on my calendar, I try to make it a point to give 15 minutes. And when you come and get those 15 minutes, make sure you have your questions ready, make sure you have a pen and paper to take notes, and ask for what you need, whether it's connecting to someone in my network, connecting to another opportunity.

"So I think it's important," Valencia also said. "I have been given so much, I have been given so many opportunities, I've been given so many people in my life that have invested in me, taken a chance on me. That only feels right to do the same for someone else. And I think if all of us can do that in our own little way in this world, show some kindness to other people, to show empathy and compassion to other folks, that they're not looking for a hand out, they're looking for a hand up. And if you can be that hand that reaches out and pulls people up, we can have a lot less problems and issues here in this country. So that's my life's mission is, when I look back in my life, what were the people, who were the people that I was able to have a small or large impact on their life for the better? And so, that's what drives me."

Valencia and her husband had their first child, a daughter, Rihanna, in April of 2020, and she's had very positive experiences being a mother, especially in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"You know, I didn't know how much it would change me, going through it," Valencia said. "And I have so much respect for my mother; I always tell her my sister and I are a year and 11 days apart. And like how did you do it? We're basically twins, and she said 'I don't even remember, we just did it,' because she was a working mother, too. My dad worked as well, and so I don't know how they managed it, but they did. And I just have one. And so, I have so much respect for moms, whether they work, or even if they stay at home, because that's a full-time job too. My heart really goes out to the parents that are remote learning and trying to work from home, because it's impossible, because you're set up to fail.

"I remember trying to come back from my maternity leave, and come back to the office here. And it was like impossible, and we don't have family here; my husband is from Ohio, my parents are still in Granite, and so, we don't have family here. And with COVID, it was very challenging. Luckily, child care opened back up, and we were able to get our daughter into child care, which is life-saving. Now, it's motivated me even

more to ensure I'm helping families, I'm helping moms, specifically even moms. Because no one really has that conversation about postpartum, or the physical aspects about how long it takes to bounce back. Or the mental aspects of, especially during COVID, leaving your children, or not feeling like you're doing both right, being able to be a mom and being up to work, and support your family and have a husband.

"My husband said this last night," Valencia continued. "'You know, the dog came up on my lap, you shouldn't get to have a lot of love lately, and the dog loves you, the baby loves you and I love you. How do you manage? You give so much to all of us.' And I'm like, I haven't been caught, so it's easy for me. But I know that there are moms out there that are struggling, and I want to make sure that, in my public life, as much as I can, what are policies that I can change that can help working families, or advocate for? You know, more paid leave for mom and dad. The fact that, here in the city of Chicago, we only have four weeks for natural birth, and six weeks when you have a C-section, and that is not enough time to have off to fully recover from major surgery or a major hospital stay. And dads too, also, that's critical time that they can spend with their family. And I've seen that during COVID, with Rihanna and I home more, and working from home, we haven't been able to spend more time with Rihanna, And just think about how much that can add value to families that would have more time of that critical moment that the first few months of a baby's life.

"And then, flex time for mom," Valencia continued. "Can you think about a more flexible schedule for mom? People didn't think we could work remotely until now. So going back into the new normal, is there an opportunity for companies and other places to allow moms and dads to work from home at least one day a week, so they can spend time with their family, and have that family unit time. Or having that flex time that they can go to the recital, or go to things. not feeling guilty that they're missing out on work. So for me, it's really opened my eyes even more to what it means to support our families as a country, and as a state. And I'm more fired up to do more of that when we come out of COVID, and how do we ensure that there's really good policy and infrastructure that can help support women working, women at home, and families to thrive."

Valencia concluded by inviting young people and anyone who's interested in government and politics to contact her at anytime for a Zoom meeting or E-mail, where she will share her experiences.