

A 25-YEAR STROLL IN THE PARKS

In January 1957, the Des Plaines Park District gave 21-year-old John Kiraly his first real job since his arrival in the United States. The work was a godsend for the Hungarian immigrant because he was broke and he couldn't speak English. "We volunteered to go anywhere so long as we could make some money, because we had nothing," he said. But the job turned out to be more than just a way to make a living. Kiraly, now 46, was recently honored by park district officials for completing his 25th year with the district. Since he started, he's risen through the ranks from maintenance man to golf course maintenance and operations supervisor. During the winter, he is in charge of maintaining the district's ice skating rinks, and he also cares for the Lake Park rose flower bed. Kiraly said he came to the United States in December 1956 after deserting from the Hungarian army. He said he left his homeland with a group of fellow soldiers when the unsuccessful revolution against the Communist government broke out. He was living in Chicago when he heard the Des Plaines Park District needed workers. When he first started, he lived in the Rand Park field house before moving into an apartment and then buying his own home in Des Plaines where he married and raised five children. Seven years after he started, he was put in charge of the golf course at Lake Park at Lee Street and Howard Avenue, even though he still didn't speak English very well. He said he knew even less about golf. But Ferdinand Arndt, then park district director, was confident that Kiraly could do the job, and in 1964 named him as the greenskeeper for the 18-hole course that was built the year before. Kiraly said he found the park work similar to the work he did on his father's farm in Hungary. He said he still enjoys the challenge of working to maintain the immaculate condition of the golf course turf. He said he also enjoys starting his working day at 6 a.m. "I like the beautiful, peaceful mornings," he said. Kiraly said he has even learned how to play golf and enjoys the playing game along with his sons.

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