

# CRAIN'S

CHICAGO BUSINESS®

CHICAGOBUSINESS.COM | APRIL 16, 2018

## BEST PLACES TO WORK SPOTLIGHT

### First Bank of Highland Park values employees—just ask them



First Bank of Highland Park staff and summer interns volunteer at Bernie's Book Bank.

and one of the five largest privately held banks in Chicago. Employees feel that creates the bank's family-like culture. Longtime employee Sortino says the family really cares about employees and wants them to be happy. "They take care of us and regularly show their appreciation," she says.

Ephraim adds that the respect employees have for each other starts with the family who owns the bank. "They set the tone," says Ephraim, a CPA who grew up in Highland Park and has lived there most of his life.

First Bank of Highland Park has its flagship location in north suburban Highland Park. It also has a branch in nearby Northbrook that provides commercial and retail banking services as well as housing many of the bank's back-office operations.

With 120 employees, the bank is expanding. It has added 10 new employees already this year.

The employees are the right people to ask why First Bank of Highland Park has been named one of Chicago's Best Places to Work for 2018.

"This is the best place to work because we are actually treated with respect," says Loretta Sortino, personal banking officer at First Bank of Highland Park, who has worked there for nearly 20 years. "You are somebody here."

Other employees agree. They describe a work environment that's family-oriented, respectful, appreciative, professional, accessible, caring and fun. The benefits are generous, such as a robust health insurance plan and 401(K) match and profit sharing.

An open-door policy keeps communication flowing and projects on track. Bureaucratic bottlenecks are not part of the routine.

There's room for advancement and employees are expected to do their jobs well. But there's also an acknowledgement that everyone has a life outside of work.

The first goal of the bank's strategic plan is to foster a productive work environment where people feel valued and contribute to the success of the bank. "We focus on treating people well," says Eric Ephraim, President/COO at First Bank of Highland Park. "It's a nice way to live and to work."

Opened in 1955, First Bank of Highland Park is family owned

*"Hire good people and treat them well. You will get so much more for that in return."*

- President/COO Eric Ephraim

First Bank of Highland Park has more than \$1.6 billion in assets and is growing at about 8 to 9 percent a year. "The Road to \$2 Billion" is the name of its strategic plan to hit that goal.

The bank plans to open a new office in Skokie in 2019, and then perhaps one in Chicago in 2020. "We offer our employees a lot of opportunity for growth," Ephraim says.

#### Career tracks

Employees are promoted from within. Scott Elza has worked at First Bank of Highland Park for six years. He had previously worked at other banks, and started at First Bank of Highland Park in the loan documentation department. "I worked my way up," says Elza, who is now VP of loan operations.

The bank has created a path for his future advancement, Elza says. Along with two co-workers, Elza is attending the Future Leaders Alliance, an innovative program offered by the



# BEST PLACES TO WORK SPOTLIGHT

Illinois Bankers Association for aspiring bankers that emphasizes education, community service and networking.

The leadership program brings together talented bankers from across the state who meet regularly to learn more about the business of banking. "It's a good program to prepare me as I take on more responsibility," Elza says.

Employee education is a priority at First Bank of Highland Park, President/COO Ephraim says, emphasizing that banking is a regulated industry and it's important for employees to stay up to date on current regulations. Beyond the basics, he believes the more employees know, the better they are at their jobs. "That's important to us," he says.

## Community involvement

First Bank of Highland Park takes seriously its role as a community bank. The top of its website says, "Where Community Is First!" Supporting community development initiatives is part of the bank's strategic plan.

Employees provide more than 2,500 hours of volunteer service annually to nonprofit organizations throughout Lake and Cook counties. These include social service agencies, affordable housing services and economic development programs. First Bank of Highland Park also provides financial education classes for youth as well as college scholarships for students demonstrating a financial need.

During tax season, bank employees volunteer at Ladder Up, a free income-tax preparation service to help low-income workers access critical tax refunds.

Monika Martynkova, who co-manages the teller team in Highland Park and Northbrook, likes the fact that the bank supports worthy causes. "First Bank of Highland Park works closely with the community," she says. "It creates a positive environment."

## Treat people well

Stacy Raven combines community outreach with her role as marketing event coordinator at the bank. She's on the gala committee to raise funds for College Bound Opportunities, a Highland Park-based organization that mentors high-achieving, under-served college-bound students. First Bank of Highland Park is the lead sponsor of the event, and bank employees also mentor students in the program.

Responsible for client appreciation events, Raven recently organized a March Mania party as a thank you for commercial banking clients and guests. The event was held at a local restaurant where attendees watched the NCAA basketball tournament

and socialized. "We take care of our clients," says Raven. "We appreciate their business."

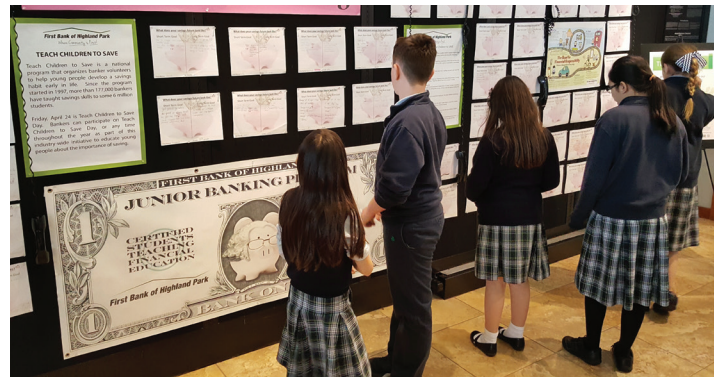
It all comes back to the bank's first strategic goal, which is to treat people well, whether they are clients or employees.

Tricia Poisson is a good example. The bank in Chicago where she had been working for 15 years closed down. A former colleague, Abraham Ho, who works in deposit operations at First Bank of Highland Park, told her about an opening there. Though she calls herself a "city girl," Poisson interviewed for the job and got an offer, though she worried about commuting to the suburbs, especially since she has a young child.

Noticing her concerns, a bank manager pointed out that the Metra train stopped right across the street from the bank. That sealed the deal. She took the job as assistant VP/senior branch operations manager.

Her co-workers know she can't miss her train at night because she has to pick up her child. "They are respectful of that," Poisson says. "They're flexible."

The story illustrates why employees are so loyal to the bank. "Hire good people and treat them well," says President/COO Ephraim, "You will get so much more for that in return."



Students from St. Patrick's School in Wadsworth toured the bank as part of their financial education class provided by First Bank of Highland Park. The art wall display is filled with tips on how children can save.

## First Bank of Highland Park

Where Community is First!

CRAIN'S CUSTOM MEDIA ADVERTISEMENT