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The Splendor of Cities

By **DAVID BROOKS**

Chicago

The people who run the federal government spend almost no time outdoors. They get driven from home to work and move through corridors from meeting to meeting. So it was a little odd after all those times interviewing Rahm Emanuel when he was the White House chief of staff to be chasing him, outside, down an icy Chicago street.

He was underdressed for the weather, as all politicians feel compelled to be, in a leather jacket and jeans, and he was knocking on doors as part of a campaign for mayor. Emanuel was a colorful figure in Washington, but back home he's off the leash.

He's clearly a much happier person — glowing, bouncing, reminiscing and hugging. Gone are all the death-grip battles with Republicans and the Washington interest groups. Now startled people in sweatpants greet him when he shows up at their doorway, sometimes wrapping him in an embrace and sometimes bringing their kids out to pose for pictures. Nearly every single person he meets gets an ebullient high-five, though the cause for each celebration is not always clear.

I was struck by how many voters wanted to talk to him about education. Chicagoans have clearly internalized the fact that their city can't prosper so long as so many public school students are dropping out. So Emanuel rips through his school reform agenda, which is like Obama's national agenda, except on steroids.

He's got a Chicago version of the Race to the Top in which schools that reform the fastest get a pot of money. He's for school performance contracts in which school leaders vow to meet certain goals or risk losing control of their schools. He's for sending school report cards out to parents so they can measure how well their own schools are performing.

As people come and talk to him, everything has a marvelous concreteness. In Washington, it's sometimes hard to connect the abstract laws that are being passed to the actual effects

on neighborhoods or families. But in a mayoral race, people talk about this specific playground or that recycling center or the police precinct over there. Many of us are drawn to the big power politics of Washington, but city politics is better than national politics because the problems are more tangible and the communication is more face to face.

This is a point Edward Glaeser fleshes out in his terrific new book, “Triumph of the City.” Glaeser points out that far from withering in the age of instant global information flows, cities have only become more important.

That’s because humans communicate best when they are physically brought together. Two University of Michigan researchers brought groups of people together face to face and asked them to play a difficult cooperation game. Then they organized other groups and had them communicate electronically. The face-to-face groups thrived. The electronic groups fractured and struggled.

Cities magnify people’s strengths, Glaeser argues, because ideas spread more easily in dense environments. If you want to compete in a global marketplace it really helps to be near a downtown. Companies that are near the geographic center of their industry are more productive. Year by year, workers in cities see their wages grow faster than workers outside of cities because their skills grow faster. Inventors disproportionately cite ideas from others who live physically close to them.

For years, cities like Detroit built fancy towers and development projects in the hopes that this would revive the downtown core. But cities thrive because they host quality conversations, not because they have new buildings and convention centers.

The cities that have thrived over the past few decades tend to have high median temperatures in January (people like warm winters and other amenities). But even cold cities like Chicago can thrive if they attract college grads. As the number of college graduates in a metropolitan area increases by 10 percent, individuals’ earnings increase by 7.7. This applies even to the high school grads in the city because their productivity rises, too.

When you clump together different sorts of skilled people and force them to rub against one another, they create friction and instability, which leads to tension and creativity, which leads to small business growth. As Glaeser notes, cities that rely on big businesses wither. Those that incubate small ones grow.

Recently, Emanuel visited Valois: See Your Food, a South Side institution that gives new meaning to the phrase “greasy spoon.” As he made his way from table to table — from cops

to middle-class families, graduate students, the unemployed and single moms — he fell into a dozen intense and divergent conversations.

Chicago has its problems: it suffers under one of the biggest debt loads in the country. But it has thrived because it has had good leadership, a constantly updated housing stock, a good business environment and an ethos that attracts talent and celebrates blunt conversation.