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A New Foundation

Gay leader hired as CEO of educational nonprofit

by Ben Ferguson

“I was trained as an actor—I’m supposed to have an Oscar by now, but this is nice, too,” says Dan Ryan, joking about his July 28 appointment as CEO of the Portland Schools Foundation, a nonprofit organization that finds private funding for public education.

Ryan’s commitment to the students of Portland is clear. During the past 11 years, he has been an unexpected yet invaluable part of Portland’s public school system.

As an openly gay man without children, Ryan’s involvement with the education system stems from a sense of communal duty and a genuine drive to facilitate progress. “Only 20 percent of the larger population are parents of these children,” he says, “but I think that the remaining 80 percent should be just as involved.”

Ryan, a Portland native, began his educational career by volunteering at his former school, Roosevelt High. There, he was a guest teacher and mentor to teenagers, among other roles. He helped start Roosevelt’s Gay Straight Alliance, along with the support and leadership of the school’s staff.

After eight years of volunteering, Ryan decided to further commit himself to public education by running for a position on the Portland Public Schools board, where he soon became co-chairman. During his time on the board, his most cherished achievement was leading the search for the district’s newest superintendent, Carole Smith. Ryan is proud of Smith’s “right intentions

and integrity,” which he believes will influence the entire system from the top down. Although embarrassed by the amount of attention his colleagues paid to his farewell, Ryan describes his last board meeting as warm and nostalgic.

Now, after a unanimous vote by its members, Ryan will be directing the Portland Schools Foundation in a vigorous drive to further fund public education. The foundation was started 11 years ago in response to a growing need for private funding in public schools. According to Ryan, it is the “philanthropic and political arm of the school system.” He will be an active fund-raiser and an advocate not only for equality in education, but equity as well. He stresses the importance of equity in response to the growing divide between higher-income and lower-income families involved in Portland’s schools.

“The majority of a student’s life isn’t spent in the classroom,” says Ryan. “They spend it in the community, and that is where we should be investing.”

Some neighborhoods and families require more support than others to attain an equal opportunity, which is the goal of the foundation. “We [as a country] have to invest shamelessly in public education to close this divide,” says Ryan.

According to Ryan, being gay has rarely, if ever, felt like a hindrance in his career. Although he occasionally encounters a stray splinter of homophobia in a parent or student, he moves beyond it with grace. Occasional homophobia is offset by the value in members of the queer community rising to positions of prominence. In his role as an educator, Ryan can inspire youth struggling with their own sexuality and work to combat homophobic stereotypes.

The problems that Ryan will work to tackle for the young queer community are much different from those of his own childhood. “Young queers are not in the same space that out queers in authority of today were in 20 or 30 years ago,” he explains. “Most of us were extremely closeted while in high school.”

While Portland’s progressive personality makes it one of the easier cities in which to grow up gay today, new issues are arising. In his position at the foundation, Ryan hopes to help tackle the perplexing discrepancy among white, privileged gays and gays of color. He has noticed another layer of homophobia that racial minorities face when coming out.

“The youth of today are miles ahead of most adults in terms of cultural competency,” Ryan says. “We need to hear their voice and accept their leadership.”



Former Portland Public Schools board co-chairman Dan Ryan continues his profession in education by leading the Portland Schools Foundation.

BEN FERGUSON is an English major at Davidson College in North Carolina.

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