

Riverdale senior is political activist looking to improve education

By Jack Rubinger
The Southwest Portland Post

Riverdale High School senior Gabe Abdellatif said he is reaching out to elected officials, school administrators and others to address urgent concerns impacting all young people in Portland.

Those concerns include the results of our recent national election, ethnic diversity, and key Portland school district policies currently in place.

Abdellatif is the youth liaison to Portland city commissioner Amanda Fritz. The two met in mid-December to discuss youth reactions to the outcomes of the election, and about what they want their elected leaders and other adults to do to support those feeling frightened and vulnerable.

"Meeting with Gabe always leaves me hopeful that the next generation will keep pressing forward in positive directions, and I am determined to do my part to support them in their journeys," said Fritz.

Abdellatif and Fritz are actively talking about the issue of making TriMet youth passes available to all students in Portland, year round and for every student.

Earlier in the year Abdellatif said he participated in Portland's Black Male Achievement Program.

Abdellatif said that he and several other black youth helped the city's Office of Equity and Human Rights plan a community event to spread awareness about the reform of Measure 11, an Oregon law passed by initiative

petition in 1994 that requires mandatory minimum sentences on certain major crimes.

Abdellatif and others have expressed frustrations with the law as they believe there are currently large racial disparities amongst those convicted.

Abdellatif said he counts President Barack Obama as one of his inspirations. He said he also looks up to Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate.

The teen said he was attracted to Riverdale High School mostly because of its small size and teacher support. One drawback? The school's lack of racial and ethnic diversity.

Over the past year Abdellatif said he has collaborated with faculty and students to develop course work that explores whiteness, privilege, and allyship — a practice of identifying bias in oneself paired with an active and consistent practice of unlearning and re-evaluating.

As a member of the Multnomah Youth Commission (Portland's youth advisory board), he said he focuses on improving local policies that directly affect youth.

Serving on the Education/Youth Voice Committee, Abdellatif and his fellow youth commissioners have pushed to decrease rates of chronic absenteeism in local high schools.

Last year, Abdellatif and others met with groups in alternative schools and traditional schools struggling with chronic absenteeism to obtain input on their policies. The committee is currently

advocating delaying school start times.

Reasons cited included the physiological (in regards to adolescent health) and societal (in regards to decrease auto accidents) benefits of delaying school start. Most parents see the struggles their teens face with getting up in the morning.

Abdellatif doesn't take much time off in the summers either. Last summer, he participated in the SummerWorks program and was matched with a paid internship in the office of Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury.

He said he provided general office support, supported constituent relations, and also attended meetings about Portland's housing crisis.

"Like others on the Multnomah Youth Commission, Gabe is knowledgeable, thoughtful, engaged and constructive. He keeps me informed on the priorities of youth, since the youth commissioners choose which issues to pursue," said Fritz.

There's a certain type of person that gets politically active relatively early in life. Abdellatif's parents have been on board since he was just a child, when he hosted a mock presidential election in kindergarten.

"My parents encourage me to



Gabe Abdellatif (center) is an active member of the Black Male Achievement organization. (Photo courtesy of Gabe Abdellatif)

express my feelings regarding what is happening in the world, and stand up for what I believe to be right. It was not uncommon for my family to have a spirited discussion about politics around the dinner table, even when I was still very young," said Abdellatif.

Abdellatif said he plans to study either political science or sociology in college. After college he said he sees himself either working for the government, a non-profit or a social organization to make changes specifically in the realm of education. He said he would also like to spend some time with Teach for America after college.

Abdellatif is a member of Riverdale's site council. He said he participates in Model United Nations, and competes with Riverdale's mock trial team. For fun, he said he enjoys spending time with his friends, cooking, photography, and reading about social justice.

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