



LOWELL SCHOOLS FUND

Interview with Shamir Rivera-Quintal

Tiana: How did Lowell High School help you shape who you are today personally and professionally?

Shamir: I graduated 20 years ago so it's been a long time, but I would say that my high school experience was unique because I was in the Latin Lyceum. I had classes in a cohort of students and I definitely think that impacted my experience going to college. It prepared me in a way that I'm not sure I would have had in mainstream classes or going to a different high school. So for that I'm very grateful.

I also had the opportunity to take interesting electives at Lowell High School and participate in a lot of clubs. The great thing about going to a large high school is that you can try things that you didn't even know you were interested in. I was involved in a lot of activities and clubs and got to take interesting classes in the communications department. I don't know if it still exists, but I was on *The Morning Show* and things like that. It's something I wasn't even considering pursuing, which I didn't end up doing, but you don't always get those kinds of opportunities in other places.

I can't remember all of the different things I did, but I know we started an environmental club to encourage recycling and teach people about the importance of protecting our environment. I was in the student council. I participated in the Gay-Straight Alliance. I was in the language club. The amount of clubs and activities were just so diverse; which also can make it hard to focus, but I'm so grateful to have had all those experiences. It allowed me to meet a lot of students outside of the Lyceum.



I also did two sports which gave me the opportunity to meet even more of my peers. It was great that we had so many sports teams! Back then rowing was not as popular as it is in the Merrimack Valley today, so it's really cool to have been at the forefront of that. Rowing had already existed at Lowell High, but so many of the other towns didn't have that. We showed them what a really strong Rowing program looks like and so now it's in a lot of other cities and towns in the area. I also ran cross country, too. I think all of this provided me with experiences and opportunities to learn so that when I graduated I felt really well-rounded.

Tiana: Is there a moment, class, or experience at Lowell High School that really stuck with you?

Shamir: So many! It's all coming back to me because I graduated 20 years ago and we're talking about our 20th reunion, so a lot of this stuff is flooding back.

This is a hard one. I think I would pick taking communications courses. I even almost considered switching out of the Lyceum and like focusing on communications as a pathway. Having those experiences really took me outside of my comfort zone. I didn't like to be in front of a camera, hear myself speak, or have too many people paying attention to me. The teacher who taught the class really helped kids figure out what we could be good at and pushed them into trying things that they would have never even considered. I think that's what opened my eyes to the fact that there are so many possibilities out there.

When I was thinking about, "Do I want to go to college? Where do I want to go to college? What do I want to study?," having that particular teacher who spent the time to get to know each of the students provided space for us to be a little uncomfortable, or push back on her. It was really positive! She's actually a Dean at Middlesex Community College now.

Tiana: What advice would you give current Lowell High School students as they think about their life after graduation?

Shamir: I think one of the most important things for young adults to consider is that they need to be open-minded about the possibility of their future.

Even when I was graduating, I was afraid to go to college because I didn't know what I wanted to study and I thought it would be a waste of money and resources. No one in my family had graduated from college before. I'm very grateful to my mom and my family, especially my older sister, and of course my teachers and guidance counselors for encouraging me to go to college.

The thing is, you don't have to take one path. I went to college, and then I went into the tech sector, and then I ended up at a nonprofit, and then another nonprofit, and here I am now. The path doesn't have to be linear. You can totally change careers.

Something my mom always told us was "preparation meets opportunity." It means you need to be prepared and open-minded for when opportunities come so that you can take advantage of them. I feel as if I did that with each of the different jobs I had after high school and college.

Bringing it back to your original question, students should remember to have an open mind and consider different possibilities and opportunities. I would also tell them to always be prepared so that when an opportunity comes they can take advantage of it.

Tiana: What does success look like to you today and how did your time at Lowell High School influence that view?

Shamir: At this point in my life, success looks like waking up and being happy with what's about to unfold in your day. I'm a mom, a wife, I have two little kids and a really big family. Now, with having the opportunity to work at Project LEARN as The Interim Executive Director, I wake up in the morning excited for the day to begin. I'm excited for my family and the chaos and all the work that comes with being here at Project LEARN. I'd say that's what success means to me at this point in my life.

I feel really fortunate that even in such a large high school, I got to know a lot of my teachers and other faculty and staff at the high school, and they got to know us too. I felt really close, and am actually still close, with some of my teachers and my student activity director. You could tell that they really loved what they did and were really passionate about it. That was what I knew that I needed in life. I wanted to find something where I actually wanted to get up and go to work everyday. I saw that exemplified in our student activities director, who's still teaching at Lowell High.

Tiana: From your perspective now, why do strong public schools matter to Lowell as a community and how can the Lowell Schools Fund support that work?

Shamir: Having really strong, equitable, and positive public school experience for students is what's going to set them up for the future. Being able to support that through the Lowell Schools Fund and providing additional funding and programmatic capacity is something that can create a positive impact on public schools, and we've already seen that happening.

Without equitable access and experiences, schools can't provide the same opportunities. I really love the Lowell Schools Fund because it provides funding to continue pursuing this work and bring additional money to the public schools in a way that they wouldn't be able to do on their own.

Tiana: What drew you to Project LEARN and the Lowell Schools Fund and how does that role connect back to your own experience as a Lowell student?

Shamir: When we think about career paths, life experiences and how you get where you are, I think mine is sort of interesting.

After graduating high school, I went to college where I had a double major in sociology and Africana Studies. In a lot of ways, I'm not even really using my major, but I sort of am because you learn about interacting with other folks and working together. After college I didn't know what I wanted to do. I got a job at a for-profit technology company and was there for five years. Then I got recruited to a cybersecurity startup. I was there for a few years, but I didn't like it.

About a week before I quit my job, I ran into LZ Nunn, the former Executive Director of Project LEARN. They had a part-time position, which eventually turned into full-time doing programming and alumni relations, and I took it. It felt really appropriate while I tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. After being at Project LEARN for three years, I took a role at another non-profit organization, Coalition for a Better Acre. I was there for five years as their Director of Operations. When the opportunity to come back to Project LEARN as their Interim Executive Director, it just felt exactly where I was supposed to be.

What drew me to back to Project LEARN and the Lowell Schools Fund is my love for my public school experience. All of those experiences made me who I am today and having the opportunity to be able to give back some of myself to these schools and the students here in Lowell is exciting and energizing. We have a really strong Superintendent who has great ideas and passion and vision for the Lowell Public Schools and I think the Lowell Schools Fund is how we can take that next step in supporting this community.

Tiana: Looking ahead, what excites you the most about the future of Lowell Schools and the work you're helping to lead at Project LEARN and the Lowell Schools Fund?

Shamir: I've only been here for two weeks, but I've already learned about a couple of the different programs, like Early College, and got to chat with different folks from the Community Schools. What excites me is that there's so much potential we can continue to support to build additional capacity for the schools. The schools have to focus on graduation rates, safety, supporting the teachers, maintaining the buildings, all sorts of things. Project LEARN is able to take a step back and work with the schools, Superintendent's Office, Central Office, and with Middlesex Community College, UMass Lowell, and other community organizations to be a strategic partner.

Lowell is such an incredible place to live and work and the people who live in Lowell really love Lowell. I haven't left Lowell much – I went to college and I've traveled a little bit, but you just don't see this in other places. The passion and love that people have for their city is so unique here, and I feel it too, of course. I grew up here, stayed here, bought a house here, and now my kids will go to Lowell Public Schools, too. I think the possibilities are endless and I'm really excited for all of it.