
March Alumni Donor Spotlight: A Conversation with Shamir Rivera-Quintal

Shamir Rivera-Quintal loves to love Lowell. Since she was a little girl, philanthropy has been ingrained into who Shamir is. She credits her mom, who has always been a dedicated member of the community, with inspiring her passion for helping others and for getting her involved in volunteerism. When she was growing up, Shamir's family even participated in the Annual Acre Clean Up hosted by Coalition for A Better Acre, where she currently serves as the Director of



Operations. Shamir is also a former Project LEARN team member! During her time with us, Shamir focused on Programming & Alumni Relations and loved all things BookNooks.

Growing up, Shamir attended the C.G. McDonogh Arts Magnet School in Downtown, and after graduating from Lowell High in 2006, Shamir attended Bowdoin College. A small liberal arts college in New Brunswick, Maine, where she majored in Africana Studies and Sociology and even studied abroad in South Africa.

This month, our Alumni & Programs Coordinator, Madelaine, Zoomed with Shamir to discuss what it was like going to a magnet school, how Lowell High students can get involved in their community today, and why small liberal arts colleges deserve some recognition!



FUN FACT #1

Shamir is a twin! Her & her sister Shalmai are the youngest of 7 seven siblings.

Madelaine: Tell us a little bit about what it was like for you growing up in Lowell.

Shamir: I've actually lived in four different neighborhoods in Lowell! When we were little, we lived in the Acre, then we moved to Centralville, and when I was in middle school, we moved to Pawtucketville. After college, my husband and I, he was my boyfriend at the time, lived in the Highlands, then we decided to move to Centerville, and now we're in Pawtucketville! So, clearly, I've done a lot of moving around the city, but I really enjoyed growing up in Lowell.

I went to the C.G. McDonogh Arts Magnet School downtown, but now it's the Joseph G. Pyne Arts Elementary School. I went from kindergarten to eighth grade and made, truly, lifelong friends with both the students and teachers. I know that it sounds cheesy, but I did! I even met my husband in fifth grade. All of us being together from kindergarten to eighth grade definitely made us all very close. We had a little group of friends that would walk home from school together, and of course, we would take the long way just to hang out and would drop everyone off along the way. So, we would walk from Downtown, up to Bridge Street, around the bottom of Christian Hill, then we walk into Centerville, and eventually, we'd make it back home to Pawtucketville.

I always felt like Lowell was a "small big city." My mom volunteered a lot and she'd get us to join and do different things around the city, too. When I was little, she actually worked at our school, and then she went to a different local nonprofit. It seemed like she just knew everybody.

I'll never forget this one day. I was walking home from school and when I got home, the first thing my mom said was "So-and-so called me to tell me that she saw you walking with a boy today." I was mortified! That was so Lowell. It's just that kind of community of friends who are really more like family. So, I knew people were looking out for my siblings and I, but I also knew I was never going to get away with anything! That's what it was like growing up here.

Madeline: I love that you've known your husband since the 5th grade! What is your life like now, together, in Lowell?

Shamir: We got married in April 2019, so we're coming up on three years. The very same month that we got married, we actually put an offer on our house, too, and we were able to move in that June. As for family life, we're about to have our first child very soon! It's a boy and he's due right in the beginning of April. We're really excited right now and just waiting for his arrival.

Family is definitely very important to both of us. We actually bought our home near both of our parents. My husband's parents, grandmother, and brother all live one street over from us, and my parents and grandfather live about four streets in the other direction. We wanted to find a home in the neighborhood that we both grew up in, and we did, which is really cool. Sometimes, we'll walk around the neighborhood and my husband will even point out the houses that he used to deliver to on his paper route. I think the best part is how excited he is to be bringing up our son in this area, my favorite is when he talks about how he'll be getting on the bus right outside our house, at the same exact stop that my husband did when he was a kid.



FUN FACT #2

When she was in high school, Shamir was a member of the Lowell Latin Lyceum.

Madelaine: After graduating from Lowell High, what did you do? Where did your studies take you?

Shamir: After graduating from Lowell High in 2006, I attended Bowdoin College in Maine where I double majored in Africana Studies and Sociology. To be completely honest,

when I was in high school I was not totally sure if I was going to go to college when I graduated. I was so nervous about having to pick a major and the possibility of picking the wrong major and then wasting money and time studying something that I didn't know if I wanted to pursue further. My sisters and I were the first generation in our family to graduate from college, so it was definitely scary and a little overwhelming to make such a big decision.

I'm very lucky that I had my older sister and my twin to get through it with, though. Our older sister took us on college visits and even helped pay for college application fees. She always made it a point to say something like, "Don't worry about it. If you want to apply somewhere we'll figure it out." My mom also was a big supporter of our education. It was her dream for all of us to graduate from college, and I am so grateful for that.

Bowdoin was incredible, I can't speak more highly of it. It was a lot smaller than Lowell High, it had about half the amount of students and it's more of an open campus. But, living away from home in a small town in southern Maine was just so different. I did dorm while I was there, which my mom was very nervous about, but I'm glad I did. I had so many amazing experiences when I was at Bowdoin. I even studied abroad and earned credits in South Africa! Had I not been at the school, I don't know if that was something I would have ever considered doing.

Madelaine: You've boasted numerous leadership roles at reputable businesses and organizations, including Constant Contact, IBM, and even here at Project LEARN. Today, you're the Director of Operations at Coalition for A Better Acre (CBA), one of the longest-running nonprofit housing associations in the city of Lowell. How would you say that your background in liberal arts has contributed to your success?

Shamir: My liberal arts degree has helped every position I've held since graduating from college. It really sets you up to be a more well-rounded student and the kind of person who can go into the world with an open mind, problem-solving skills, and the ability to communicate well, both on paper and in person.

At Bowdoin, all of our classes were a lot smaller, so we all really got to know one another and had the ability to interact with our professors very closely, compared to someone in a class of 100+ students. In some ways, it was a little bit scarier because the professors always knew how you were doing. On the other hand, though, I had the ability to go to office hours and get help whenever I needed it, which made a big difference in my education. The classes were definitely hard, and so, it was very frustrating sometimes for me to see myself struggle, but I learned how to work through that and to be more successful.

They really challenged me at Bowdoin and made me who I am today. I'm definitely grateful for the education that I received. So, if anyone's curious about where to attend college, I'd definitely say check out those smaller liberal arts schools that sometimes get overlooked.

Madelaine: What was your favorite part about being on the Project LEARN team?

Shamir: My absolute favorite part was interacting with students and really seeing how what we were doing had the ability to make an impact on them, even as a small organization. We were always hosting events, like the Kids Summer BookFest, and we'd have hundreds of Lowell youth and their families come to celebrate reading! We did fun educational activities, they'd get to take a book home for free, and they would even have a craft to do, like making their own bookmarks. You could always see how much they were enjoying it and it filled my heart. There were a lot of STEAM activities too, it was just so much fun.

The BookNook program is something that is very special to me because I love to read, both now and as a kid. My twin and I would spend hours at the Pollard Library choosing books. We would borrow literal canvas bags of books filled to the top and come back just a few days later to return them days later to get more! To me, there's something really special about holding a book in your hand and flipping through the pages, versus reading on a computer or a tablet. I also just love having books in my house. Even if I've read them before, I would probably reread

Madelaine: In addition to your job as a director at CBA, you also dedicate time volunteering at local organizations, including Project LEARN, Girls, Inc., the Lowell Community Health Center, the Developing Leaders Council, and most recently, Mosaic Lowell. What motivates you to volunteer in your community?

Shamir: My family has been volunteering and participating in community events for as long as I can remember. I can't think of a time when we were ever not volunteering. Like I said before when my siblings and I were little we lived in the Acre, and my mom was actually a volunteer with CBA before I even was born! So, of course, we would participate in the Annual Acre Clean Up every year and any of their other events. It just became something that was ingrained into us and into our family. It was never a question of if you were volunteering, it was always, "What are you volunteering for?" Advocating for mental health awareness is another topic that is really important in our family. So, we raised money to participate in the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) Walk and got a group of Lowell High students who wanted to go with us!

Being a volunteer was a big part of my education, too. I remember in middle school, we got a new music teacher and she started a student chorus group that would sing at local elderly facilities. Even as young as in the fourth grade, we were tasked with helping the Kindergarten teacher walk her class to lunch, recess, and back because the kids had so much energy. We always thought it was so fun to do things like this, it never felt like a chore.

There were a lot of opportunities to get involved at Lowell High, too. I was in the Student Council and National Honor Society, both of which had volunteer requirements. We would try to find fun things to do as a group, like ringing the bell for the Salvation Army or having a competition to see who could collect the most pennies for UNICEF. We even started a recycling program at Lowell High because they weren't doing that at the time, and it still exists today! We were able to contact a company, get the big recycling

dumpster in the back, and place recycling bins around the school. It was something that we were passionate about and so we were dedicated to getting it started. It makes me so proud and happy to think back on that!

I'd say that volunteering and supporting Lowell is really just a natural extension of who I am, and that all comes back to my mom and our family. She taught us that it's just the right thing to do because this is our city and our neighborhood. If we're not willing to do it, whether it's picking up the trash, volunteering at a soup kitchen, or reading with kids, who's going to? It's our responsibility as community members to give back, and I feel really fortunate that I've always been able to do that.

Madelaine: What advice do you have for students at Lowell High who want to get involved in the community and in volunteerism?

Shamir: I would say, for students, one of the biggest challenges when it comes to engaging in volunteering is not overextending yourself. If you try to volunteer for absolutely everything and say yes to everything that is asked of you, you'll start to get burned out and won't find any joy in engaging with the community. I think a lot of the time, high school and middle school students feel like they need to do everything right now because it looks good on college applications or job resumes, but I think what matters more is having a couple of organizations or groups that they are consistently engaged with, year after year.

My advice would be to really think about one or two causes that you enjoy or that you're passionate about and mean something to you. From there, you can reach out to find out if you're connected to someone that's a part of that community and if they're able to point you in the right direction. Luckily, for our Lowell students, there are hundreds of nonprofit organizations in this city that could use your help and are excited for you to get involved, but make sure their mission is something that you care about. Just start out with a couple and see what opportunities they have!

Madelaine: Who is the teacher that impacted you the most while you were a student at Lowell High?

Shamir: This is a really hard question for me because I had such amazing teachers at Lowell High! I'd say there's one teacher that I had a pretty major impact on my life, Jen Campbell, who is now Jen Bauer. At the time, she was the head of the Communications Academy, as well as the Crew Team Coach, which I rowed on every spring.

Jen encouraged me to take a couple of communications classes, which really helped to get me out of my comfort zone in a way that I never could have imagined. Even though I didn't pursue communications, she opened my eyes to the fact that there are endless amounts of paths you can take to achieve so many life experiences. You don't have to take this straight path from high school to a particular major in college that lends you a particular job in a particular field. I really got to see that and experience that in her classes.

Her classes were, and I'm sure still are, really interesting! There weren't any others like hers at the time. I learned all of the different parts of running a live broadcast production, I had to commentate on a high football game, we interviewed folks, there were just so many things in that class that gave me that extra push I needed to crack open my shell. Jen knew I needed it too, she basically signed me up herself because she knew I wouldn't have done it on my own.

We had a lot of opportunities where we could be more creative in what we were learning and what kinds of projects we wanted to work on. Jen would always give us the space to disagree with her, and with each other, and argue our points while still being successful and completing our projects. Having taken those classes, and having interacted with her, allowed me to see that things don't have to be so black and white, or straight down the middle. She had a really big impact on my life, both in this sense and as my Crew Coach.

Madelaine: I had her too, she was amazing! How do you think experiences like this prepared you for where you are today?

Shamir: I've always wondered about things like this, like what if I hadn't gone to Lowell High, or hadn't taken high honors and AP classes? Would I ever have gotten into Bowdoin, to study abroad, and have this really amazing small liberal arts college experience?

We can never really know what kind of impact all of these small decisions can have on our lives, but I know that being a Lowell High student definitely helped shape me into whom I've become. Lowell High has so many things to offer its students. I was in big classes, small classes, electives, languages, gym classes, communications classes, I got to participate in sports and clubs. I felt like our school had it all. I even got to participate in trips to places like Canada and the MidWest, in addition to all of the smaller

trips we took around Massachusetts. These are all things that, normally, as the youngest in a big family, I wouldn't have had the chance to do, but, because I went to Lowell High, I had all of these wonderful opportunities.

In my work today, I have a lot of different responsibilities that are important to our team, both internally and externally. I feel like, because I had so many experiences at Lowell High and was able to learn how to balance different parts of my life at an early age, I am better able to switch gears and focus on the many different tasks I have now, without becoming overwhelmed.

Madelaine: Now, on to my favorite question. What is your favorite place to grab a bite to eat in Lowell?

Shamir: This is another hard one! We have so many good restaurants here. I have to say, living over in Pawtucketville, we get a lot of Egg Roll Café and Tacos Lupita. If we're talking during the day, like a work lunch, my go-to's are either Purple Carrot or Sizzling Kitchen. There is no way I can pick just one, so I guess you'll have to check them all out!

Madelaine: In your spare time, when you're not working and volunteering, what do you like to do for fun?

Shamir: Spending time with family definitely is at the top of that list. We have a big family! My twin and I are the youngest of five immediate siblings, and we have two half-siblings. So, seven kids in total!

I also really enjoy running. There are so many great nonprofits that do 5k fundraisers and I love participating in them. I started running in middle school and it's been a part of my life ever since!

I think that I have run in every neighborhood in Lowell, but someday, I want to say that I have run on every street in Lowell! I know there are some folks in this city who have done it, and I want to be one of them, too. I think it would be fun, I'll keep you updated!



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