

THE WARRIOR

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Dignam Departing

As he prepares to leave Lane, Dr. Dignam reflects on the place that first sparked his interest in education.

By Bianca Sanchez

Atop the desk is a deck of business cards.

They face straight towards the stiff bluish, greenish chairs set up for guests, towards the door with the sign above looming "Principal."

Lane's address is on the right side of the ivory cardstock. The Lane logo off to the left. His

name and position on the bottom.

Christopher A. Dignam, Ed.D.

Lane Tech College Prep High School

Behind the cards sits their owner, Dr. Dignam: Lane alumnus, former Lane science teacher, former Lane assistant principal, current principal. And this is his last Warrior interview.

On Feb. 19, Dignam shook the Lane community with his email announcement.

"As I have reflected on all our accomplishments, I have come to realize it is time for me to move on to other challenges in my professional career," Dignam wrote. "I have made the decision to move on to another chapter in my life as a school leader. I ... have accepted the position as principal with Deerfield High School effective July 1, 2015."

Dignam has brought several changes to Lane, including the creation of new curriculum and programs – such as the Makers Lab, Aquaponics, Robotics, and Sound Engineering – the cafeteria facelift, the rise in average ACT composite score to an all-time-high of 25.1, and the maintenance of athletic programs and extracurriculars.

Though current Lane students know Dignam only as a visionary and guitar slashing principal, Dignam's past with Lane began in 1984 when he first walked Lane's halls as a student.



Serving Lane as a Science teacher, Assistant Principal, and Principal - as well as being a former student - Dignam has been a fixture at Lane.

"I was a stupid, goofy, tall, lanky teenager – with long hair," Dignam said.

Mr. Keating, current Lane substitute teacher, taught at Lane during Dignam's four years. He was Dignam's science teacher – as well as neighbor. It was in Keating's class that Dignam first felt like education could be his career.

"He was younger and cool to talk to," Dignam said. "That was the first time I thought 'I would really like to be a teacher.' I was really into music, big time. But to talk about stuff I liked – I always liked talking about science – I thought, 'Wow, that is something I would really like to do.'"

His interest in education did not hold him back from his music, though. Keating's first impression of Dignam was his talent.

"He was very musically talented in high school. That's what stuck out. He was a really accomplished guitarist," Keating said.

It was also in Keating's class where Dignam found himself in the most trouble. While working in the greenhouse he thought he would amuse Mr. Keating by locking a girl – who had a crush on him – in the clocktower.

"I slammed the door. I thought it would be funny to lock her in the clocktower... I thought he would have found her – but at the end of the day he hadn't found her. She was still locked up in the clocktower. So I felt really bad... He called my mom, handed me the phone, and made me tell my mom what I did."

Dignam would not lock a student in the clocktower now, but he does admit in many ways he still feels like his 18-year-old self.

"The next birthday I have with a zero is going to be 50. So I am not young anymore, but I realize I am also not old. I feel the same way I did when I was 18. I still think the same way ... I still have the same personality I did when I was 18 or 20 years old. So I really empathize with the student body."

It is for this reason that Dignam loosened the reigns on rules like the cell phone policy and dress code.

"When I came in as principal, we had all these antiquated policies that were just there because they were there," Dignam said.

It was not only the antiquated policies Dignam wanted to change, starting as an assistant principal – after years of being a science teacher and a stint as a CPS Science Coach – but also the antiquated programs.

"I would always say, 'We need more tech programs here – this was a tech school when I went here. This is something I think we need to bring back to Lane,' Dignam said. "But I would always hear, 'I'm not going to invest in technology because technology changes.'"

Dignam walked around and noticed nine former shops that were filled with junk or used as office space. He soon saw small aspects of the room that would be good for remodeling. He noticed holes behind cabinets that could turn into windows. He then began discussing new programs with teachers – the first being the Aquaponics program.

To Ms. Gonzales, Assistant Principal – who was hired by Dignam – these programs are Dignam's legacy.

"His legacy is making sure those programs were stable, intact, and in place, so that children for who knows how many years will be able to get that curriculum that is so unique to Lane Tech," Gonzales said.

Mr. Solin, the head of the Innovation and Creation Lab, believes he is a part of the "World's Best Computer Science Department." He credits this to Dignam.

"Dr. Dignam's support and vision have been vital in making this lab a reality," Solin said. "We were able to create something that hasn't been seen before in an Illinois high school, that exists in some form at only a handful of schools across the country, and rarely if ever done at this scale."

The new program ideas began falling into place, but two years ago, Lane experienced a budget crisis. Dignam and his team of assistant principals had to figure out how to cut \$2 million of the budget without losing student services. It was during this time that Dignam saw his assistant principal team step forward.

"All the assistant principals and I would not have assistants to help with things. They never complained one time about it ... I have been blown away with how talented they are. They should all be principals in a school. I am hoping one of them will be the next principal," Dignam said.

The assistant principals reciprocated the praise.

"He is a visionary," Assistant Principal Ms. Hanly said. "He knows what he wants and – this isn't meant to sound bad – he does what he needs to do to get it done. If he needs funds, he finds out a way to go talk to people for fund raising."

"He is a visionary leader," echoed fellow Assistant Principal Ms. Thompson, on a different day – in a different office. "He puts a lot of trust into his team to carry out what is in the best interest for students."

Another thing they agreed on was his dedication to the students and their education.

"His legacy has been putting students first," Thompson said. "That's in regards to changes to the building, adding new staff, increasing programs, pouring into non-core classes – such as art and music. Really pushing forward with the concept of a 'STEAM' [Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math] school."

The students were the hardest part of his departure. Dignam explained that his favorite part of Lane has always been the student body.

"There is someone for everybody to be friends with. What I have loved about this school and the students here is no one really cares how wealthy or how poor you are... It is a melting pot," Dignam said.

This hits home for Dignam, who was born of Irish immigrants who did not attend college. For a multitude of reasons, Dignam found himself having to pay for many of his college expenses. Dignam worked his way to his bachelor's degree and continued on to several advanced degrees.

"He had an intense desire, an intense drive for education," Keating said. "He just kept on going and going and going and as soon as he got his bachelor's degree, you knew right away that that was not the end of the road. He was going to keep on going and going and going."

Dignam places a high value on education, because of all the hard work.

"There was a philosopher who said, 'Only the educated are truly free,' and that stuck with me," Dignam said. "I want to be a life-long learner."

Learning, Dignam will do. On July 15, he will officially become the principal of Deerfield High School where he will find a slew of new lessons to learn.

When asked if he had any last words for Lane, Dignam offered these.

"In everything I have done in life I have tried to do the best I can. Whether it's my studies as a student, or my efforts as a principal, my love for learning to play an instrument, being a dad, being a husband – I have tried to do those things the best I can. And I hope that after I leave Lane that the programs and initiatives I have put in place will help the school be a better school."