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Dare to be Great : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Monday October 16, 2023

Dare to be Great

By Eric F. Spina

As a Flyer Promise Scholar, Aidan Mornhinweg hears his success coaches and professors tell him, “Dare to be great,” and he’s taking those words to heart.

“I’ve done the most introspection since I’ve been here. What’s best for me? What’s my route? What will make my family proud, my community proud?” said Aidan, a Dayton native who will graduate next spring with a degree in history and a minor in computer science. “I want to get out of that generational struggle, so it’s not the same old story. It will be greater.”

As a geographic information systems (GIS) intern in UD’s Human Rights Center, Aidan worked with the American Association for the Advancement of Science to produce an updated report on the status of mass graves and missing people in Syria during a decade-long conflict. He’s developing even greater skills in remote sensing and data engineering through an internship with Riverside Research.

“I wake up grateful every day,” he said. “I want to be a role model for my family and find my path in life.”

Aidan shared his story at a community-wide celebration of the University of Dayton’s national recognition as a “High-Flier.” I could not be prouder of the poise and passion displayed by Aidan and his peers in a panel discussion that Dan Porterfield, president and CEO of the Aspen Institute, and I moderated. They proved once again that there is no talent gap — none — for students from low-income families. Only an opportunity gap that can be bridged through financial support and a high-touch campus experience that fosters a true sense of belonging.

As Dan so eloquently observed, “These students show the beauty of the human face of our future.”

UD is helping to write the script on how to help underserved students be successful and graduate, and our efforts are not going unnoticed. We’re one of 28 colleges and universities, including Ivy League institutions, elite liberal arts schools and public flagship universities, designated by Bloomberg Philanthropies and the American Talent Initiative as “High-Fliers” for the way we’ve made steady progress in recruiting, supporting, and graduating lower-income students, many in our own backyard, thanks to programs like Flyer Promise Scholars, the UD Sinclair Academy, and the Kessler Scholars Collaborative.

These initiatives have helped increase the enrollment of graduates from the Dayton Public Schools by 150 percent since 2016. Since that time, we’ve enrolled 1,000 new transfer students and increased the percentage of Pell-eligible students from all ZIP codes by 50 percent.

I was honored that Dan Porterfield, one of the most passionate and articulate advocates for justice and opportunity in the country, and Fred Wilpon and Robin Wilpon Wachtler, whose foundation helped UD create the UD Sinclair Academy Kessler Scholars Program for first-generation students, along with their teams made a stop at UD to hear the stories of our students and learn more about our strategy.

As Dan noted, UD doesn’t have “an endowment that rivals the GNP of some countries” like the Ivy Leagues, but I know that we have institutional will and the support of the Board of Trustees and a growing number of donors who believe we must swing open the doors of opportunity more widely and create a fully inclusive and welcoming campus for all talented students.

I’ll close with Dan’s heartfelt words to trustees that mirror my beliefs, too.

“When we see the gifts and talents of others, we grow ourselves — and that will lead to breakthrough experiences for everyone.”