

Profiles in Excellence: David Nicholson

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.

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David Nicholson has some big shoes to fill.

Come Dec. 2, Nicholson officially takes over as the executive director of Headwaters Foundation for Justice. The post was previously held by Trista Harris, who left to head the Minnesota Council on Foundations. Harris is nationally recognized for her efforts with nonprofits, so a bit of a spotlight will be shining on Nicholson once he officially takes the helm at Headwaters. But Nicholson, who served as the Headwaters' program director for the past nine years, seems to be taking it all in stride.

“(Harris’) leadership led me to say this is something I could do. She’s the one that really inspired me,” said Nicholson, who said he was actually a part of the selection committee that hired Harris at Headwaters.

Headwaters was established in 1984 around a grant-making model that places funding decisions in the hands of the community. To date, Headwaters has directed more than \$9.3 million in 3,405 grants to various organizations representing communities historically excluded from resources and power – in particular African- and Native-American organizations.

Nicholson, who was born in St. Paul but raised in Braham, Minn., spent his entire professional career in the nonprofit arena, though he arrived at such a place quite by chance.

“I was in college and was hired as a cook at Ain Dah Yung, (a youth center in St. Paul) and it was really an accident because they pulled the wrong application,” said Nicholson. “I realized what an incredible privilege I had to work with these incredible runaways who were so strong in their own way. It was there I realized people’s lives can be changed by your actions. I get a lot

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of reward from serving and being a part of the community.”

Prior to joining Headwaters, Nicholson worked at the Department of Children, Family and Learning as the director of the Children’s Trust Fund, a statewide program working with local communities to end child abuse. Headwater’s new director earned a Bachelor of Science in human service administration from Metropolitan State University. As the new executive director of Headwaters, Nicholson said the mission and focus will continue on with a seamless transition.

Currently Headwaters funds nearly 35 nonprofits to the tune of about \$500,000 annually. In addition, the foundation raises about the same amount from outside donors, which it also distributes annually.

Of the programs Nicholson touts heavily, the one he’s most proud of is the African American Leadership Forum. The forum is a movement of African-American leaders and stewards across six metropolitan areas – the Twin Cities, Portland, Seattle, Des Moines, Tacoma, and Omaha – committed to the revitalization and sustainability of a vibrant African-American community.

“That effort began locally and has been taking off in other states, as they look to the Twin Cities as a model,” said Nicholson.

“We could not be more thrilled to have David as our new executive director,” said Headwaters board co-chair Leigh Stepan. “We feel that his extensive experience in nonprofit management coupled with his proven ability as a strong leader, collaborator and visionary will serve our organization well as we move into the future. The board is committed to working in partnership with David to continue to strengthen our programming, deepen our base of support and build on the foundation developed in nearly 30 years of addressing the root causes of injustice.”

For someone who has spent nearly 25 years working in the nonprofit/social service arena, one might have bolted for greener financial pastures, but Nicholson said his work is a life calling.

“A lot of people who start doing this type of work want to change the world and when I talk to them later it’s about how this work changed them for the better,” said Nicholson.