

Thursday, February 12, 2009

Former OU student leader chairs county Democrats

By Eric Reikowski, media relations assistant

Former OU student body President Mike McGuinness recently added another highlight to a long list of impressive accomplishments. Just 25 years old, he received a unanimous vote from a 174-member Executive Committee to become the chair of the Oakland County Democratic Party (OCDP).

"My main objective is to strengthen the OCDP internally and position it to make further gains at the ballot box," McGuinness said. "Our biggest challenge is to maintain the momentum on the heels of our successes in 2006 and 2008."

As chair, McGuinness is tasked with running the Executive Board and Executive Committee, which is comprised of state legislators, commissioners and other party leaders from around the county. He said that much of his job is devoted to increasing OCDP membership and boosting support of local Democratic leaders and candidates.

"I have been heavily involved in our county party for many years," McGuinness said. "It is an honor to serve my fellow activists and friends in our drive to advance Democratic values in support of working families."

McGuinness credits his time at OU with helping him develop the skills to be an effective leader. Upon arriving on campus in 2002, he immersed himself in student affairs, joining several organizations and assuming various leadership posts.

He became president of the Gay/Straight Alliance in 2003 and in 2004 served as vice president of the student body and co-president of the OU College Democrats. He also served as a Student Congress legislator and Student Activities Funding Board chair.

In April 2005, McGuinness was elected student body president and followed through on a series of student-focused initiatives, including numerous campus renovations, healthier meal options for campus residents, newspaper readership and technology advancement programs, increased funding for scholarships and the establishment of a Gender and Sexuality Center to provide support to GLBTQ students and their allies.

In addition, the McGuinness era saw a renewed commitment to making college more affordable throughout the state. The Student Congress strengthened its ties with the Association of Michigan Universities (AMU) and helped lead a grassroots campaign encouraging state legislators to allocate more funds for higher education.

Several Oakland students assumed leadership roles, including McGuinness, who was elected vice chair of the AMU. He and his colleagues also lobbied aggressively at OU to curb tuition rates, expand financial aid options and help ensure that a quality education remained within reach for current and prospective OU students.

Looking back, McGuinness views his years as an OU student leader as a time of tremendous personal growth and collective progress.

"I learned invaluable skills such as time management, listening to the viewpoints of others, organizing students around a cause and establishing relationships to strengthen an organization," McGuinness said.

"I was also very pleased with how actively engaged the students became in student government, taking on leadership positions and benefitting from our initiatives."

In August 2006, McGuinness left school to manage the State Senate campaign of Mark Slavens, who was recently appointed a Wayne County Circuit Court Judge.

Shortly thereafter, McGuinness began working in the Michigan House of Representatives as a legislative assistant to Wayne County Representative Kathleen Law. He later worked for the Democratic Communications Office, helping organize town hall forums, press conferences and other outreach activities in support of the party's legislative agenda.

During this time, McGuinness also served in the OCDP as an officer at large, and established relationships with several party leaders including Andy Meisner, who was then serving as a state representative for Oakland County. Last spring, when Meisner launched a bid to become Oakland County Treasurer, he chose McGuinness as his campaign manager.

After a hard-fought contest, Meisner claimed victory in the November 4 election to become the first Democratic Oakland County treasurer in nearly four decades – a victory he said would not have happened without McGuinness leading the way.

"During our winning campaign, Mike led with smarts, creativity and strong organizational skills," Meisner said. "Mike has already hit the ground running and will be a top-notch county party leader, similar to how he excelled with my campaign and at Oakland University."

McGuinness, who recently returned to OU to complete his bachelor's degree in political science, says he is optimistic about the future. When asked about his party's strategy going forward, the young leader responded simply with perhaps the two things he does best – "organize and mobilize."



Mike McGuinness, chair of the Oakland County Democratic Party (right), successfully managed Andy Meisner's campaign to become Oakland County treasurer last year.

SUMMARY

Just 25 years old, Mike McGuinness received a unanimous vote from the party's 174-member Executive Committee to serve as its chair.

Created by David Groves (groves@oakland.edu) on Thursday, February 12, 2009

Modified by David Groves (groves@oakland.edu) on Thursday, February 12, 2009

Article Start Date: Thursday, February 12, 2009