

## ZANDER PAYNE

**What are you doing these days?**

Well, so I actually decided that college wasn't my route right now. I decided that pretty recently. But I'm working full-time now as an assistant manager at LIDS.

**How has the Readiness Institute prepared you for where you are now and where you hope to be?**

Support was a huge, huge aspect of it.

**How do you feel the Readiness Institute influenced your decisions?**

I've always felt like they've had my back as they promised. ... Whenever I decided I didn't want to be in college anymore I talked to [alumni network coordinator Fred Quinn], and he was super helpful through it. So, there's just a support [that] was really nice to have.

**Where do you see yourself 10 years from now?**

I hope that I find myself able to get back to school. Also, having a house and a family, you know, stuff like that. Being able to have a nice career at that point.

**What was your favorite memory at the Readiness Institute?**

Going in for the podcasts. I got to do my own podcasts, where I was a co-host ... And we got to [bring] some of our friends and most of the people in the group. I remember being super stressed out about it, because I had to drive to pick someone up on the South Side. ... Just the memory of how irritated I was, [but] it was fantastic. Because that experience, it's like [being] on Spotify. That's super cool.

**What message would you give to other students in the Pittsburgh region about the Readiness Institute?**

Do it. It's a great program. You get to get paid for stuff that you're literally going to do on your own, and then on top of that, you get to make great connections with people in your cohort and the instructors. I'm going to have lifelong friends from this program. And they were my family for that six weeks, like I was with them more than I was with anybody else throughout that time.

You've got to end up just being yourself through that program, be a little bit vulnerable. Put yourself out there a little bit, and other people will do the same thing. And it'll end up being a great time.

# AT THE READY

**In its third year, the Readiness Institute at Penn State is steadily advancing its pledge to help prepare high school students for life as well as for college, careers and community service. By TyLisa C. Johnson**

**Z**ander Payne entered the Readiness Institute as one person, but left as another.

Six weeks during the summer may seem brief, but for him, there's no doubt in his mind that the 2021 Readiness Institute program changed him for the better, including rocketing his sense of self and giving birth to newfound skills and friendships. His peers noticed, his teachers noticed, and so did he.

"It gave me more confidence. It gave me a sense of being able to love myself more and the person I am and being able to accept who I am," said Mr. Payne, 18. "I've made lifelong friends with most of my cohort and just being able to share that once-in-a-lifetime experience with all of them being my family for that six weeks... was something that I could never forget."

He explained that he left the program ready for his next steps in life, which initially included attending Penn State New

Kensington. But he later determined that the time was not right for college, though completing a degree is still one of his life goals.

Investing in Readiness Institute participants so that they better understand themselves and know how to set goals is a dream realized for the program and for its leaders. But in early 2020, just as plans were ramping up to create a transformative experience for students at the newly created Institute, everything was upended by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the years since, schooling approaches changed massively while at the same time the pandemic revealed and exacerbated inequities and insufficiencies in education systems. The need for students to be better prepared for careers and adult responsibilities has grown in importance, and communities and organizations have stepped in to fill learning gaps.

The Readiness Institute at Penn State, as it is known today, is among the local and national programs working to boost high

school students' preparations for the future by exposing them to more resources, knowledge and networking connections — and alumni are already seeing the impacts.

Mr. Payne thrived among 44 other students from more than 20 schools across Allegheny County who participated in his 2021 group. At the Institute, students took trips, heard industry leaders speak, used 3D printing pens, created and tested autonomous mini vehicles, learned mental health first aid and more.

“There was so much more that was going on at the Readiness Institute... not just collaboration around projects but who we are as individuals,” said Stan Thompson, a founder of the program and former Heinz Endowments senior education program director who retired earlier this year. “We were really able to create something that typically wouldn't have happened in a traditional comprehensive high school.”

The COVID-19 pandemic was formative for the program, as it meant readjusting how to approach bringing students together for a common mission and figuring out how to move forward on a limited basis. Over time, students also helped to shape and further enrich future program iterations through surveys and feedback. As it evolves, the Institute has maintained its mission of preparing students for their future, no matter what it looks like, and having helped nearly 100 students with more coming this summer.

### OVERCOMING THE UNFORESEEN

**O**n Feb. 5, 2020, The Heinz Endowments announced an initial \$700,000 investment to launch what was then called the Pittsburgh Readiness Institute in collaboration with the Consortium for Public Education, a regional nonprofit with programs to support and engage students, school leadership and community residents. Funds were slated to cover costs such as student stipends, leased space, technology for student projects and transportation to site visits.

The plan was to host a six-week summer program for 45 students who would hear notable speakers, connect with their community, build skills and work together to develop solutions to real-world issues. Then a month later the COVID-19 pandemic hit, schools began to close, and the program vision needed a total overhaul. A pilot program eventually moved forward in the fall, but on a limited basis.

Working with Astrobotic, an aerospace company on Pittsburgh's North Side, the Hope Moonshot was the Institute's first project, in December 2020, and was designed to invigorate a sense of hope in young people during difficult times. Program participants asked thousands of students and educators from countries around the world: What is your hope for your community? They collected thousands of notes and stored them on an SD card that was placed on Astrobotic's Peregrine lander and sent to the moon.

Before Fred Quinn became the Institute's alumni network coordinator, he was an instructor who saw students learn about themselves and the world in real time during visits to places such as Astrobotic.

“It's just very enjoyable to watch that lightbulb go off for them when they see certain things that they're interested in,” Mr. Quinn said. “Watching them see that this is achievable for them, you can see their eyes light up.”

Early in 2021, Penn State Outreach, a division of Pennsylvania State University, assumed operation of the program, and it became the Readiness Institute at Penn State. By that summer, the Institute had a full contingent of students and a smooth-running session influenced by the advice and thoughts of student alumni.

Original plans for the Institute were coming to pass. Most importantly, program staff heard directly from students about their needs to prepare them for life.

The Institute is physically located in the Energy Innovation Center in Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood and is designed to host 10 instructors and 45 students from more than 20 school districts. Across two summer cohorts, the program organized 21

offsite tours, group field trips and numerous industry speakers, including representatives from Google Pittsburgh and the digital education firm EVERFI.

“We're different because our focus is not what you want to be when you grow up,” said Justin Aglio, associate vice president of Penn State outreach and executive director of the Institute.

“Our focus is who do you want to be when you grow up.”

While the summer program is its bread and butter, the Readiness Institute also offers programming for students and educators throughout the school year. Activities include an array of Regional Readiness workshops on topics such as artificial intelligence, community readiness and entrepreneurship, with the latter involving events having a “Shark Tank” television show theme, Dr. Aglio said.

In April, for example, the Institute co-hosted a STEM summit with more than 300 student and educator participants. Students learned about STEM-related careers and met with businesses, including Google and Microsoft.

The Institute boils down to two types of programming: impact and awareness, Dr. Aglio said. The summer program is the impact program designed to have direct impact on students who in turn impact their communities. Workshops and other programs are often larger-scale collaborative efforts to engage a larger audience in the Institute's programming.

### 'PUTTING PIECES TOGETHER'

**S**ince 2021, Susie Gurrera, a Highlands High School counselor, has sent students off to the Institute after they finished 11th grade, and when they returned to school in the fall, she said, they're “polished and ready to start their senior year.”

“They had a direction, they had support, they had resources to fall back on,” Dr. Gurrera said. “It's really like a dream come true for a

# FRED QUINN

## ALUMNI NETWORK COORDINATOR

### How is the Readiness Institute different from other educational programs and approaches?

I feel like it's different because the Readiness Institute, first and foremost, targets [high school] seniors throughout Allegheny County who are unsure of what they want to do.

I think a lot of [colleges] get these summer programs started to recruit students to come to their institution. We're not like that. We understand that every student is not going to want to go to Penn State, and we just want to encourage them to do the best things that they want to do.

Another way is where my position comes in. Most of those college summer programs, once they're done, they're just done. My job is to focus on keeping in contact with the students, making sure they're good, [addressing] anything they need as far as a job, whether they need internships, recommendation letters. We're sticking with them for life. I want to be there to help them succeed.

### Share a brief story about when you saw that a student "got it" in terms of benefiting from the program.

We took [the students on] a tour of Penn State Greater Allegheny in McKeesport. I was walking around with this particular student, [and] you see that lightbulb moment. She saw that the campus was not too big and not too small. This is a trans student, seeing how safe she was and seeing how that campus fitted her needs as far as education, as far as the support.

At the end, we had a professor come in, and we did a little round-table discussion with him about different topics. She asked a question about LGBTQ programs on campus. I was able to reassure her that I'm going to be fighting for her, and no matter what [she did] after high school, [she is] going to be secure, going to be safe and going to have people behind her.

And you just kind of saw that reassurance in her face. She was able to feel a little more comfortable, because not only

were we as staff supportive, but her cohort, the students, were as well.

### Where do you hope to see students who completed the program 10 years from now?

Prayerfully, I'll still be with the Readiness Institute in the next 10 years, so I want to see our students succeed and thriving. I want to see our students become entrepreneurs. We have students who are into culinary arts—I want to see [them] at the top restaurants in the city.

I want to see our students comfortable in the jobs they do, comfortable in serving the community on top of those jobs. I also just want to see them happy because I feel like in the midst of all this, especially with these students going through a pandemic in high school, the mental health toll that can take on them is absolutely insane. So, I just want to see them happy and thriving in whatever they're doing.

### Where do you hope to see the Readiness Institute 10 years from now?

In 10 years, the Readiness Institute is going to be pretty big. We have two alumni classes now. In 10 years, we'll have 12, so I just see a vast network building. I see the first couple alumni classes getting into their careers and coming back and serving. I would really love that.

I want the Readiness Institute to have an internship program where some of our college students who are alumni can come back, intern [with us] and get credit from Penn State. This year we're [going] to central Pennsylvania, so in 10 years, I can definitely see the program opening a Philadelphia [center] and becoming a big statewide program.

I want that big cycle: We give to them, we feed and pour into them. Years later, when they're successful in their careers, we can go visit them on a field trip and [they'll say], "Oh, I was a Readiness alumni, so I understand coming through the program and how important it is."



Joshua Franzos

# JUSTIN AGLIO

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### **How is the Readiness Institute different from other educational programs and approaches?**

The Readiness Institute is unlike any educational opportunity in the world, where we have a lifetime commitment to the students that we serve, to the learners that we serve, through programs like our summer program. We are exploring learning and career pathways that [students] identify through the understanding of themselves, and who they are and where they want to go. And [we're] doing that through enabling education, industry and community partners along the way.

Every day, no matter what we do at the [Institute], we tell the learners and anyone we serve that what we do today will be the best day of their life. And that's the expectation that we put amongst ourselves that their readiness and that what we do is not a job. But it's our duty and honor as an organization, and our mission to make sure they're successful.

### **How do you think the Readiness Institute is influencing the lives of participating students?**

You cannot be future-ready unless you're community-ready. And the Readiness Institute has a deep commitment to the community by preparing the learners that we serve to be impact leaders in their communities first. And by doing that, we're able to give them the skills they need to go out and live a life of excellence through public, private and personal service.

### **Where do you hope to see students who completed the program 10 years from now?**

We want them to be successful, not just in their own personal career pathways, but within their communities, in larger communities, and also giving back to the people around them. They are what we call ripples of hope through communities.

### **Share a story about when you saw that a student "got it" in terms of benefiting from the Institute.**

Recently, we had a learner from our 2021 cohort send me a message and he said:

"Two years ago, when I went through the Readiness Institute summer program, I scoffed at the idea that I could be an agent of change. Two years later as I am applying for internships and summer jobs while on break from college, I'm letting you know that the Readiness Institute is the sole item that stood out on my resume.

"And everything you said, came true in my life. The way we were prepared with the skills to not just get ready for something, but to be ready for anything. It [not only] prepared me to be a leader in my professional life, but also in my public and personal life. And only through the Readiness Institute, because of the RI Alumni Network, I have the resources and network to continue to learn and lead in my own community, inspiring others about everything I learned in the Readiness Institute."

### **Where do you hope to see the Readiness Institute 10 years from now?**

Ten years from now, my hope is that the Readiness Institute continues its original mission of [helping] learners to achieve community and future readiness—no matter what they want to do—because of who they are, and enabling industry and community partners to continue to work together in the best interest of our learners.

Every learner has the skills, attitudes and values they need to design and lead a purposeful life. By doing that, they're also leading within their own communities and helping other people find the purpose of their life. Because readiness isn't just discovering who you are, it's leading [in advancing] readiness for everybody else.



school counselor ... The Institute is oftentimes the missing link that students really need in their lives.”

Dr. Gurrera helps students complete applications for different programs and seeks out good candidates who may benefit from the various resources and information.

“When I heard about this program, I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m so happy someone is coming to help these students kind of put all the pieces together,’” she said. “[The Institute] really fills the gap for a lot of students who are in need of additional exposure, resources, assistance, and really a firm pathway for exploring their own interests, opportunities and themselves as human beings.”

The changes Dr. Gurrera sees in her students represent a goal achieved for the Institute, where the staff works, in part, to help students prepare for their next steps in life by answering five guiding questions: Who am I? Who do I want to become? How do I get there? How will I continue to learn? How will I give back to my community?

Students’ junior and senior years can be intimidating, or even daunting, Dr. Gurrera noted. But the Institute instills confidence by helping students explore a range of options they otherwise may not be exposed to and to see up close what different careers entail. A distinctive part of the Institute, she said, is “looking for students who really need this assistance and help.”

“And they are dedicated to those students,” she said. “As a school counselor, you see kids who are really excited about their future, they’re eager, they have a lot of questions, but they’re sometimes limited in what they have access to in terms of resources and professional networking, and the Readiness Institute really fills that gap for those students.

“It allows the students to build a network of resources so that they can confidently go down the pathway that they choose.”

As a former high school principal, Dr. Thompson recalled talking with students about the need to be college- and career-ready.

“But very seldom do we really ensure that all kids are going to be able to meet that challenge, because we’re not thinking about how to bring something much more holistic for them in terms of the learning experience,” he said. “That really was the focus behind the Readiness Institute.”

## THE NEXT CHAPTERS

**T**he Readiness Institute bloomed from a seed of an initiative into an established program, in part due to the connection with Penn State and eventually becoming part of its outreach programming.

Emma Hance, a Readiness Institute program manager, said the partnership with Penn State was a natural fit, directly aligning with the requirement that the land-grant university commit to outreach.

“We want to really work with the students to help make sure that they are finding the post-secondary pathway that best aligns with their goals and their interests,” Ms. Hance said, even if that pathway doesn’t include Penn State or higher education. “We have students who are training to become EMTs ... who are cooks at Federal Galley on the North Side. But we also have students who are at [universities].”

As plans for the Institute’s third summer program are underway, diversity is top of mind — diversity spanning across districts, backgrounds and experiences. Feedback and advice from past attendees will shape and inform the next round.

At the same time, Mr. Quinn spends his days tracking down and calling each Institute alumni one by one. He inquires about their life since leaving the Institute and their goals, helps with recommendation letters, and extends much-needed resources to the students.

With an alumni network nearing 100 members, he is tasked with keeping them connected and bringing them together after they leave.

“[Students are] with us for life,” he said, “and we want to make sure they feel that.” **h**