

Benjamin Light joins Laurel School as its new Director of Advancement

By RITA KUEBER

When Laurel School announced their new Director of Advancement in October, they were pleased to call Benjamin Light one of their own – not an alumna, of course, but a parent and big fan of the school and all things Cleveland.

Mr. Light comes to Laurel from The Gathering Place, where he worked since 2004, as the Chief Development Officer, and since 2008, as the Chief Operating Officer. “I’m a problem solver,” he says. “I worked on strategic aspects like fundraising. But then I would literally roll my sleeves up to see why a fountain in the garden wasn’t working. People asked me about a ‘typical day,’ but there was no typical day. When you’re a staff member at a small agency, you’re in charge of both light bulb acquisition, and installation.”

Before The Gathering Place, Mr. Light worked at The Jewish Federation for two years. Previously he worked for Anderson Consulting, then Levin Consulting, where he worked with out-of-state tech firms on their marketing and business strategies. A graduate of Washington University, he earned a Master’s in Non-Profit Administration from John Carroll in 2006. He and his wife, Jamie, an engagement officer for the Massachusetts-based Harold Grinspoon Foundation, are dad and mom to Hannah, an eighth-grader at Laurel.

“I was sad to leave the Gathering Place – I learned a lot – I made friends who are like family,” he adds. “But they have over 400 active volunteers and you will definitely see my name on that list.”

Mr. Light’s predecessor, Deborah Farquhar Jones, became the president of Our Lady of the Elms school in Akron in July. “Knowing the non-profit world here in Cleveland, there are a half dozen jobs in the community that I just kept my eye on, Mr. Light says. “The first time I opened a fundraising piece from Laurel, I said immedi-



ately ‘these are people who understand this process.’ And in mid-August my wife called me to say the position here opened up. I hadn’t looked for a job in eight years, so I had to work on my resume, but the interview process felt right the whole time. So after the first seven candidates

turned the school down,” he jokes,” they decided on me.

“This offers new challenges, in a new environment and I wanted to bring my professional energy to another organization. So now Hannah and I get to carpool. I think it takes us about three minutes – there are two lights be-

tween here and home.”

Mr. Light’s job includes a lot of listening. He cites his gift for relationship building and for discovering what gets a donor excited. “I told the [Laurel] Board I want to make them feel informed, and involved with the fundraising process, so that they are engaged and have a sense of ownership.”

He also wants to address an additional audience – the students themselves. “I think they have an understanding of philanthropy – but not endowment. I think they know we raise money, but not how. We want to help them understand – have this department educate them to become donors when the time comes.”

Currently there are 654 students at Laurel, in pre-school through high school. Tuition only covers about 75 percent of the overall operation costs, leaving a 25 percent gap. Mr. Light describes an interest in expanding the number of donors to the Annual Fund, as well as engaging alumni.

“We have such a rich asset in the women who spent time at Laurel – so many are still so dedicated to the school, we need to give them a sense of how they can play a role.”

In their spare time the Lights enjoy movies and travel to visit with friends and family, as well as exploring the food scene in NE Ohio. “Jamie is from Memphis – we met in college and I dragged her here. She worked for Baldwin Wallace for 10 years, and The Gathering Place opened up on the west side, so we like exploring what’s new on both sides of town.

“I’m a big Cleveland guy,” Mr. Light adds. “I was raised in Shaker Heights and Beachwood. I’ve traveled these same streets for years. I’m very comfortable here.”