



A Little Back Story

Getting to Know Danny O'Brien, Putney's New Head of School

When new Head of School Danny O'Brien and his busy, bustling family—wife, Ellie, and their two young kids, Vivie and Henry—landed in Vermont last summer, they did so into a fair bit of necessary chaos.

They came from Colorado (where Danny had served as head of High Mountain Institute), in a caravan of cars and planes filled with houseplants and bric-a-brac, straight into the season of family vacations and new camps and routines (or lack thereof) for the children. The head's home here at Putney, Rockwell House, was undergoing extensive renovation (the first in nearly fifty years on the building), and was not ready for them in time. Ellie worked in an empty office on campus. Danny was handed the metaphorical keys to the school. They stayed in several places here and there in Windham County, including in the apartment above the KDU. And they did it all with astonishing and unwavering good cheer.

When they arrived, the campus was in that brief moment between the end of one year and the beginning of the next—the summer arts program humming along during the pause, the comma, that the summer affords a busy little school. Danny and his family were a generous burst of energy, a vibrant curiosity, a new set of eyes and sense of how to run Putney to be the best possible version of itself—in other words, an exclamation point.

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DANNY WAS RAISED in the 1980s and 1990s in what he calls a “really working class area” of Providence, Rhode Island. He attended public schools through high school.

That said, his story isn’t cut and dry. There are nuances. Nuances that give it depth. Their family took a step outside of the box in many ways. There are whiffs of the counterculture and progressivism that seem to have him on a path to Putney as early as second grade.

The family bought food from an old-school food coop where members divided up 75-pound wheels of parmesan and 50-pound sacks of whole wheat flour. And they were strictly vegetarian. They bought live, potted Christmas trees that they then planted after the holidays.

The intersection of a dichotomy like this is where sparks fly. It’s the way we begin to see things anew. It’s how a working class kid from public school has come to lead a long-standing and venerable progressive institution like Putney.

“Kids need an environment where they can trust each other, push themselves intellectually, and create community.”

DANNY ATTENDED Classical High School in Providence, a public school, but one that required admission, and one that pointed its students toward elite colleges and universities.

“I did a lot of different things at Classical,” said Danny. “I was editor of the school newspaper. I was in student government for all four years. I was captain of the cross country team, I did a lot. I learned more from doing all of those extracurriculars, probably, than I did in almost any of my classes.”

At Middlebury College, Danny found himself at yet another stark crossroads of culture. One of the new activities presented to him was (perhaps no coincidence) a Long Fall-like backpacking trip to kick off the school year.

“I thought to myself, ‘I’m going to be walking all day. That’s going to be boring.’ So I brought a *Sports Illustrated* to read

as I was walking down the trail, thinking I would need to pass the time,” Danny remembered.

He smiled his joyful, open-hearted smile that Putney now sees all the time, “But I got a quarter mile up the Long Trail and I remember thinking this was the greatest thing I’d done in my life.”

“I really fell in love with the outdoors and I fell in love with backpacking. I think some of it was the actual process of walking and seeing trees, but a lot of it was the relationships that people build in the woods and how people were having authentic, thoughtful conversations, how people could be goofy and have fun and not judge each other for it. It was the first time, maybe ever in my life, where people weren’t trying to be cool. People were being themselves and you could be yourself. It was a distinct memory that I had right away, and it was the first time I had an experience like that.”

IT’S AFTER COLLEGE that his character really comes into its sharpest focus.

He moved to Seattle with seven friends from Middlebury. They lived like it was an extension of college, a big dorm-like cocoon, sharing the household chores, and getting a taste of working life.

He’d taken a job doing business and environmental consulting, which sounded like it had some potential for moral satisfaction. But the reality was an endless bureaucratic grind—work that was robbed of the joy he had previously found in the other parts of his life, including a summer spent as a camp counselor. So he became a teacher.

His first teaching job was at The Island School in the Bahamas. His second was in a special education class at an underfunded elementary school in Providence. “I showed up and the teacher had left out of the blue and had left nothing, no lesson plans, no nothing,” Danny recalled. “And I had a blast.”

He recalls asking himself “What do these kids need?” He came to believe that all kids need an environment where they can trust each other, push themselves intellectually, and create community.

HE MOVED TO COLORADO to work as a teacher. He spent 15 years at High Mountain Institute. Met and married Ellie Solomon, welcomed Vivie, now age 8, and Henry, now age 6.

“I became a better, more empathetic educator after I had kids, because I was able to put myself in the shoes of parents again and again. I also have made mistakes and failed so often as a parent, I’m very humble about it,” said Danny.

And there is another side to that coin, as well. He sees clearly now how much people love their kids, and how that can sometimes lead to problems of the rescuing-them-and-solving-problems-for-them variety (“Recognizing this has made me a better parent, too,” he says).

Danny brings this self awareness, and a desire to self-reflect, to the job, along with his drive to conquer the challenges ahead of him, and have fun while doing it all. All of this will come to bear on the Putney of the future.

And what is that future, in Danny’s vision? “My goals for Putney are both to identify where we’re knocking it out of the park (and to make sure the whole world knows that), and also to identify where we have to continue to make steps to get better,” he said.

Danny elaborated, “More than any school I have ever seen, Putney knows itself. Our mission and Fundamental Beliefs are clear. What we aspire to be is inspiring.”

He continued, “I am passionate about this school because the world needs Putney to be Putney. We rebuild human connection over difference and what we have in common. We create conditions where students come to trust themselves and each other again. We teach adolescents to see challenges and take responsibility for addressing them.”

Danny is convinced that these skills and habits are not only what Putney teaches, but what the world will need from the next generation of leaders to solve its incredibly vexing problems.

His job, he says, “is to help ensure our teachers and students have what they need to do these things well.”



- 1: Vivie, Ellie, Danny, and Henry on campus this fall
- 2: Danny, left, at the top of Mount Washington on his first Long Fall trip.
- 3: Ellie in her home office in Rockwell House.
- 4: Danny heading off to Long Fall.