

Beacon President Recognized by OBJ as Inclusion Champion

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By Stephen Ruiz

George Hagerty was completing his freshman year at Stonehill College in Massachusetts when he was declared legally blind because of a rare eye disease.

The news opened a world of possibility.

“One of the things I really hadn’t attempted was applying myself academically,” Hagerty said. “So this situation, this inconvenience I have with the eyesight, it became a motivating force, and I literally turned around in a year from a very raw and undisciplined student who was close to being liberated from college for lack of performance to somebody who really worked diligently at trying to master the learning process.”

Hagerty has brought that same passion as Beacon College’s president. Hagerty, 67, is among 12 individuals and businesses honored with the Orlando Business Journal’s 2020 Diversity in Business Awards. A virtual ceremony is planned for Oct. 8.

Hagerty, who only has peripheral vision in his right eye, has been a staunch advocate for the neurodiverse community for nearly a half-century.

“[Because] he has a disability like us, he makes us feel like we can do something great like he has,” said Beacon senior Izzy Chavez, who is studying technology. “If you ever have an issue, you can go up to him. He’ll try to make it work and try to make a change.”

Since Hagerty assumed his current position in June 2013, Beacon’s enrollment has more than doubled, from 187 students to 435 students. Hagerty helped increase the number and range of majors offered at America’s first accredited baccalaureate institution dedicated to educating students primarily with learning disabilities, ADHD, and other learning differences and developed a thriving study-abroad program that began with Beacon in Tuscany, a first for neurodiverse students. While inquiring about a student’s disability, he often asks a confidence-building question, “What’s your work-around?”

Hagerty finds a quote from Ernest Hemingway’s “A Farewell to Arms” especially empowering: “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

“If you can use what you think may be a detriment or may be a broken place to strengthen you, you can be much better off,” said Hagerty, who earned two advanced degrees from Harvard.

Hagerty refused to let others consider him broken.

He was 42 years old and the president of Franklin Pierce University in New Hampshire when he lost the central vision in his right eye. The board of trustees wondered whether Hagerty should be replaced.

“I told them, ‘Look, first, what you’re saying is illegal,’” Hagerty said. “‘I can tell you whether I can do it or not. If I can’t do it, I will let you know. And if I can do it, stay out of the way.’ That’s how I pursued life.”

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Hagerty, whose wife, Oksana, is director for student success at Beacon, wants Beacon students to attack their goals the same way.

"We all need a basic tool kit to allow us to navigate a society that might not understand us, that might not understand our strengths, might not understand our challenges, either" Hagerty said.

"I know no boundaries, and I expect the neurodiverse community to have no boundaries."

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About Beacon College

Beacon College

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