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Aim High executive director retiring after 35 years

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Alec Lee, the longtime executive director of San Francisco education nonprofit Aim High, has announced his plans to retire at the end of 2021 after 35 years at the helm of the organization he co-founded.

“Thirty-five years has a really nice ring to it. I’m also 63 years old and my wife is retired, and even though we’ve been sheltered in place for a year we still like each other,” Lee joked.

Aim High’s board has retained Koya Partners to lead a search for a new executive director. It hopes to make an appointment by this fall.

Lee started Aim High in 1986 with fellow educator Eleanor McBride to provide free summer learning and enrichment programs for low-income middle schoolers that utilizes team-teaching, project-based learning, culturally relevant curriculum and college and career readiness. The program makes a four-year commitment to participants, a majority of whom are students of color.

Launched with the help of a \$50,000 grant from the San Francisco Foundation, Aim High started by serving 50 kids with 12 teachers. In 2019, it served 2,300 students with 500 teachers.

According to Aim High’s financial records, the nonprofit had around \$7.4 million in revenue, including donations, in 2020 and



AIM HIGH

Alec Lee, the co-founder and longtime executive director of San Francisco nonprofit Aim High, is retiring.

received a \$446,000 Paycheck Protection Program loan.

Looking back on his career at Aim High, Lee recalled a few milestones. One was expanding the program from a single campus in San Francisco to another in the city and eventually to 18 across the Bay Area and rural parts of Napa and Nevada counties.

Another major step was the development of an aspiring teacher program, which gave college and high school students real-world experience in the field of education, along with professional development and training.

The challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic have been unlike any other for the nonprofit.

“Nothing compared to Covid because it’s really an intersection of three crises of education, health and poverty, and they’re intersecting in a really painful way,” Lee said.

“It seems like ancient history, but it was only a year ago. The first thing we did was a needs assessment and within 48 hours we heard from 800 families,” he said. “The big message was, ‘We need Aim High this summer. We need the community, the sense of belonging and the joy and fun.’”

The organization reimagined the program into Aim High at Home. Looking forward to the upcoming summer, the organization is combining its at home program with some optional in-person opportunities.

Ultimately what kept Lee at the nonprofit were the dreams of the roughly 15,000 Aim High graduates the organization has helped inspire with a love of learning over its 35 years, some of whom now work at the organization. He mentioned one student in particular who was taken on an Aim High field trip as a middle schooler to UC Santa Cruz and recently graduated from the college and won a Fulbright Scholarship.

“There are countless stories just like hers,” Lee said.

Lee said transition plans have been in the works for a while and he’s looking forward to seeing the organization turn the page to its next chapter.

“It’s time for me, but it’s also time for Aim High. It’s time for new leadership and a new set of eyes, and cheerleading from a distance and supporting with appreciation,” Lee said. “I’m really excited for my successor because she or he is stepping into a really outstanding organization that is doing very important work that is only going to get more important.”

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