

RYAN  
REYNOLDS

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# suburban life

**Friends' Central School** embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion to create a "community of belonging" where all students know their voices will be heard.

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Smile makeovers, diversity in education, and more



# A Better Place



by **BILL DONAHUE**

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the same color?” asks Snowden, director of equity and multicultural education for Friends' Central, a coeducational college-preparatory school for students from nursery to grade 12. “We all bring something different and valuable to the picture. We all matter, but we haven't been living in a society that has shown us that.”

Since joining the Friends' Central staff in July, Snowden has taken the lead in the school's efforts to create “a community of belonging.” Her goal: to further the essential idea that students should bring their whole selves to campus—including race and ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, class, religion, family structure, nationality, etc.

The delicate nature of her DEI work reaches far beyond the Friends' Central student body.

“How can schools create an environment where everyone feels like they belong and are welcome?” she adds. “How do we create windows and mirrors—windows into the

lives of others, and mirrors so we can see ourselves in a positive light, but also interrogate the aspects of our identities that enable us to unlearn the things we need to unlearn?”

“Younger people have less to unlearn, so they tend to move forward more quickly,” she continues. “With us adults, we've been socialized in so many ways, both explicit and implicit, and we don't realize what we don't know. That means most of us have to do a lot more personal work and self-development in this area.”

### Doing Better

The events of the past year have shone a blaring spotlight on social injustice, racial inequity, and other flashpoints in American society. As unsettling as 2020 has been for most Americans, Snowden can't think of a better time to have conversations that spur substantive change.

“I believe you should never waste a crisis,” she says. “If you went back in time

10 or 15 years, people would probably need more convincing. You now have an amazing group of young activists who are rising up and saying, 'No more!' This is a group of people who really want to do better."

Friends' Central has undertaken several key DEI initiatives to follow suit. For example, the school has begun a comprehensive equity audit to identify and address its DEI needs in meaningful ways. Once the audit is complete, the school intends to share the results with the entire community to continue its progress and improve accountability.

The school has also created an Equity Oversight Council, with the intent to hire and retain more faculty and staff of color, as well as recruit more students of color. The council will also ensure that the key groups have the resources they need to reach education and professional-development goals stemming from the equity audit.

Partnerships with notable organizations in the DEI space have enabled the school to lead from the top down. Through the National SEED Project, the school is offering two SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) cohorts—one for faculty, another for adult family members of students—devoted to addressing issues of equity and bias in education. Likewise, Friends' Central's board of trustees will receive training in racial literacy through a partnership with the organization known as Lion's Story.

Of course, the changes extend to the classroom, too. Anti-bias curricula for all students include workshops on social justice and peaceful protest. Students are also encouraged to participate in affinity groups based on particular aspects of their identity, such as gender, race, or religion. Led by a

faculty advisor and two student leaders, each affinity group meets once a month to discuss issues of identity as a way to deepen students' understanding of themselves and others.

"Friends' Central is a Quaker school, and the Quakers believe there is God in everyone, and that we can find goodness in everyone," she says. "As a teacher first, I love the idea of being able to meet students where they're at and create authentic relationships and moments of autonomy. I believe social justice and education can be best friends."

### Change Makers and Justice Seekers

Snowden has gained national recognition for her work in diversity and inclusion. Orig-



inally from Michigan, she previously worked at Friends School in Detroit, where she served as dean of students. She moved east in 2012 for an opportunity at Greene Street Friends School in Philadelphia. She served Greene Street Friends in several capacities, including dean of the lower school, learning specialist, and diversity clerk, before joining Friends' Central earlier this year.

"I am following in the footsteps of others who did this work at Friends' Central before me, and I want to build on their efforts," she recalls. "When I first got here, I said I wanted to be a drum major for justice. Similar to the words of Dr. [Martin Luther] King, I want our students to march further in seeking justice. ... I want them to fulfill their spiritual, intellectual, and ethical promise. I want them to be change makers, justice seekers, abolitionists. I want them to be liberated."

Snowden is grateful for the support and encouragement of Head of School Craig N. Sellers, her colleagues, and the families of current students, as well as Friends' Central alumni/ae/x. While some constituents have questions about the school's DEI work, she welcomes every opportunity to engage in conversations about such complex issues. She believes so deeply in the work she's doing that she had her daughter transferred to Friends' Central for her senior year.

"We're all trying to figure out how to reckon with those things about our identities that feel like dark places," she says. "I think that if we all remember that there is light in all of us, we can be open-minded to things that have caused that darkness. That darkness is not something we want students to carry on with. We want students to do better than we ever thought we could. We want them to make this world a better place.

"Small steps equate to small victories, and those small victories end up becoming large victories. I've been here a short time, but I already feel I've been able to make an impact." ■



Photography courtesy of Friends' Central School



[friendscentral.org](https://friendscentral.org)

**Lower School Campus**  
228 Old Gulph Road  
Wynnewood, Pa.  
(610) 642-7575

**Middle and Upper School Campus**  
1101 City Avenue  
Wynnewood, Pa.  
(610) 649-7440