



Dave Steward II '95 Forges Ahead With Diverse Media

It was a quiet day at Polarity when we stopped in to speak with, and photograph, **David Steward II '95**, CEO. Steward's office, brightly lit and chock full of wrestling belts, helmets from *Star Wars* and other science fiction franchises, LEGO cars, and books, was the only occupied space. This is not to say Polarity, which strives to reach the global entertainment landscape through the development,

production, and distribution of media content, is a sleepy company. Producers were off scouting locations in Atlanta. Writers worked from home crafting narratives designed to share experiences and pull readers of all ages into relatable stories. Illustrators continued designing worlds that feel both unique and familiar. Steward sits at the helm, carefully guiding the ship through the creative, and sometimes rough, waters of content creation.

It's a labor of love, one that he discovered back in his days at MICDS. "My passion for media started in high school," he said, citing the influence of Fred Nelson, his photography teacher. Steward took a photography class with Nelson sophomore year and loved it so much that he continued with independent study junior and senior years.

Many of the photographs in the 1994-1995 MICDS Phoenix yearbooks are Steward's. "I was always the guy carrying the camera. I'm not in many pictures, but I took most of them."

When he wasn't photographing, Steward could be found hanging out with his friends on the couches in Messing Gallery, right next to Orthwein Theatre. He claims he wasn't the best athlete, but he joined the swimming team after finding it so welcoming. "It was a cool experience because even though we were undefeated for a number of years, they were open and accepting to everyone. We all worked hard, and even the best swimmers were always encouraging."

He had transferred to Country Day School in eighth grade, coming from a public school after one of his father's friends—an alumnus, parent, and board trustee—convinced them to take a look. He found a world of difference, including a dress code he respected. "The biggest change I saw was in regard to expectations and access. For instance, look at facilities. What schools offer a lot of access to experiences and resources? I don't know if I could have explored photography at my public school. There was an annual trip to Germany, and how many schools teach Russian?" Expectations were higher, too. Steward said the expectation at his public school was to simply graduate, whereas the expectation at CDS was that everyone goes to college except for maybe a student here and there who takes a gap year. "They set the stage for expectation and then people step up to it. Seeing that makes you want to achieve and dream big and try different things, which is important."



David Steward's senior page in the 1995 MICDS Phoenix yearbook demonstrates his love of family and friends.



"If you're doing something you love, you'll never work another day in your life."



**SAGE ADVICE FROM
DAVE STEWARD I TO HIS SON.**

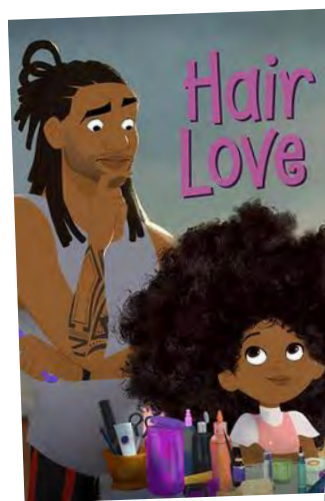
He started freshman year at the newly-combined school of MICDS, and while he was excited that girls were joining his classes, he worried about the loss of the rich traditions from CDS. He's relieved that many of those traditions—such as tossing the first senior accepted into college into Polk Pond—live on today.

As students of today do, Steward considered how he could turn his passion into his life's work. An uncle gave him a book on careers and he immediately checked out photography. "I saw what it paid and thought, 'Hmm, that's a little rough!'" The Steward family is entrepreneurial in nature—father Dave Steward I founded World Wide Technology in 1990—so he figured that having a business foundation would be core to whatever he ended up doing. He could earn his degree, maybe work for the family business, and still enjoy photography as a hobby. He chose American University in Washington, DC, looking for a diverse environment and knowing that many embassy children were students there. He found it, especially by choosing to stay in the international student dormitory. He credits his wide variety of experiences: a public school, a private school, and an international university, with shaping who he is today.

Two years after earning his degree in business with a focus on international marketing, Steward found himself sitting at a desk every day. It wasn't fulfilling. "When you're a creative person, you have to get up and move around and exercise that muscle," he said. He was still living in DC, and his father told him, "If you're doing something you love, you'll never work another day in your life." Steward left the security of a desk job and jumped full-time into photography. Which led to production. Which led to publication. "That's what started the whole bug and this journey."

The journey eventually led to an Academy Award for *Hair Love*, an animated short that Steward co-produced, but the path wasn't always easy. He spent time in Los Angeles, working for a media company and learning production. He gained valuable experience, and when the company he worked for ran out of money, he learned a lot about the world of business. Returning to St. Louis determined to do more, Steward started dealing in private equity, focusing on brand management. He studied large, successful corporations such as Target and Walmart, and applied those learnings to his own business.

The call of creating content wouldn't stay quiet, though. He was itching to get back into the



media space. He sold the private equity firm and started Lion Forge Comics. He leveraged his art connections and relationships around the city, working with people who had graphic novel and comic experience. His timing was impeccable: the iPad was just dropping and e-readers were exploding. Lion Forge could focus on pushing digital content, making a name for itself before having to invest in hard copy inventory. "All the signs were there," Steward said. "In the music industry, consumers don't buy CDs anymore. Streetside Records here in St. Louis and Tower Records in Los Angeles don't exist anymore. The movie and film space was the same way. It's all digital." He

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gambled that the book market would follow suit, and he was right.

About three years into Lion Forge, he and his partners assessed the market. Digital content was additive to the industry; it wasn't stopping traditional sales. Lion Forge pivoted and added a print publishing structure, partnering with another company for the first year before striking out on its own. Under Steward's guidance, Lion Forge has since acquired two other presses, Magnetic Press and ONI. Then, of course, it was time to expand again.

“We always had the ability to do animation, using some pipelines to handle book creation that were traditionally for animation,” he said. Lion Forge cofounder Carl Reed had worked in animation before and had built relationships, plus the company had done some animation for promotion purposes. “People were interested in our content and things would get optioned, but it wouldn't go anywhere,” Steward lamented. “That's when we figured out, ‘We can do this ourselves.’”

They worked in stealth mode for a year, building content relationships and the content itself, constructing the pipeline, and working on the process. A business development team member brought a new project to the table and Steward was immediately taken. “This animated short spoke to who we are as a company and what we strive to do,” he said. There were very few African Americans in the industry, and almost no African American leads in the content. *Hair Love* helped to change all that. “This was a great opportunity to showcase African

American content and have little black girls see themselves on the screen, which socializes an element of African American culture to everybody,” he said. He's extremely proud of the project, Lion Forge's first foray into animation. “We showed that you can do both in a meaningful way, and produce diverse content that speaks to everyone.”

Since *Hair Love*, Steward's team has worked on projects for Nickelodeon, including *Rhymes Through the Times* that features Nick Jr. characters and music by one of the creators of *Hamilton*. They worked on a project with Sesame Workshop called *Coming Together* that won an Emmy last year. A partnership with The Roots resulted in *Rise Up, Sing Out* on Disney+, and there's a new project with HBO Max called *Iyanu* that is currently in production. *Iyanu* is an action-adventure show based on Nigerian folklore.

Steward remains active in book production, too. One of his favorites is a series of comics called *Superb*, which has one of the first representations of a superhero character with Down Syndrome. Steward explains what makes Jonah, the main character, so special. “Before Jonah, the trope was that the addition or discovery of a superpower eliminated the disability. The character still has Down Syndrome, and he also has superpowers. We're showing that all kinds of people can be heroes. Don't discount people based on their abilities; everybody has value, everyone has worth and can do great things in our communities.” Steward wants to be sure they get it right. “Authentic representation is a big thing for us. The writer had worked with kids who have Down Syndrome, and we worked with the Down Syndrome



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Foundation in New York to ensure authenticity before we put that character out there.” He receives letters and notes from readers, expressing how much Jonah’s character means to them.

He worries about the backlash he sees with equity, where people of privilege feel as though raising others means something is being taken away from them. It’s additive, he says, not a zero-sum game. “All of our work, I’m proud of. Some projects you get awards for and some things you move the needle forward,” Steward said. He notes that there are deficits in media with regard to Asian males never being cast as the love interest lead. “Each group has a particular issue with how they’re being portrayed in media, how they are typified and skewed. As we put out content, I’m always trying to be cognizant of how can we portray every group in a fuller sense.”

Steward’s sense of giving back and making a difference in the world extends beyond the boundaries of his business. He serves on multiple boards, including the Nine Network in St. Louis and an organization called America’s Public Television Stations. He held one of the first board positions for the St. Louis chapter of Habitat for Humanity. And he’s proud to now serve on

the board of trustees at MICDS, where he brings his experience as an alumnus and a current parent to the table. “It’s a multifaceted role as board member,” he said. “You’re an ambassador for the community and there’s a fiduciary responsibility. It’s like being a caretaker of the institution, a caretaker of the core values, making sure that change and growth happens but we are still able to maintain our core values and identity in all of that.” He also enjoys serving as a voice for other African Americans at MICDS.

When he’s not running a business and serving on boards, Steward loves spending time with his two sons, Trey, eight, and **Julian ’34**, six. Trey has autism and began a horseback riding program, which Steward quickly identified as being beneficial for both boys. “They have to work at this, prep and clean and saddle their horses, then do all the reverse after.” It breaks a few boundaries as well; Steward notes that not many people of color enjoy equestrian sports. He delights in exposing his children to new experiences he never had while also allowing them to explore their own interests, some of which are shared. Julian is beginning a foray into entry-level racecar driving, which is right up his father’s alley. Steward’s other passion is high-performance sports cars, and his

collection contains everything from Porsche to Ferrari. He was close to earning his final certification in racecar driving when the pandemic hit, and loves hitting the track when he can.

It seems that Steward is never content to sit back and watch what happens. He routinely puts himself in situations to experience more, to learn from others, and to find ways to create content that does the same for all audiences. He challenges today’s MICDS students to take advantage of access and facilities offered by their school, to take classes they might not ordinarily register for. “It’s a great environment to explore your interests to the fullest. You’re not going to get this opportunity again. Every teacher goes the extra mile in terms of students, so if you want to explore, use them. Explore all the paradigms and anything you might have an inkling of interest in, and figure out where you want to go in life from there.” He also encourages students to get out of their home environment for college. “Go somewhere new. That gained perspective is very important and you can always try it and come back. I’m here!”

Dave Steward II '95 is here all right, and making waves through media content that are being felt around the world.

