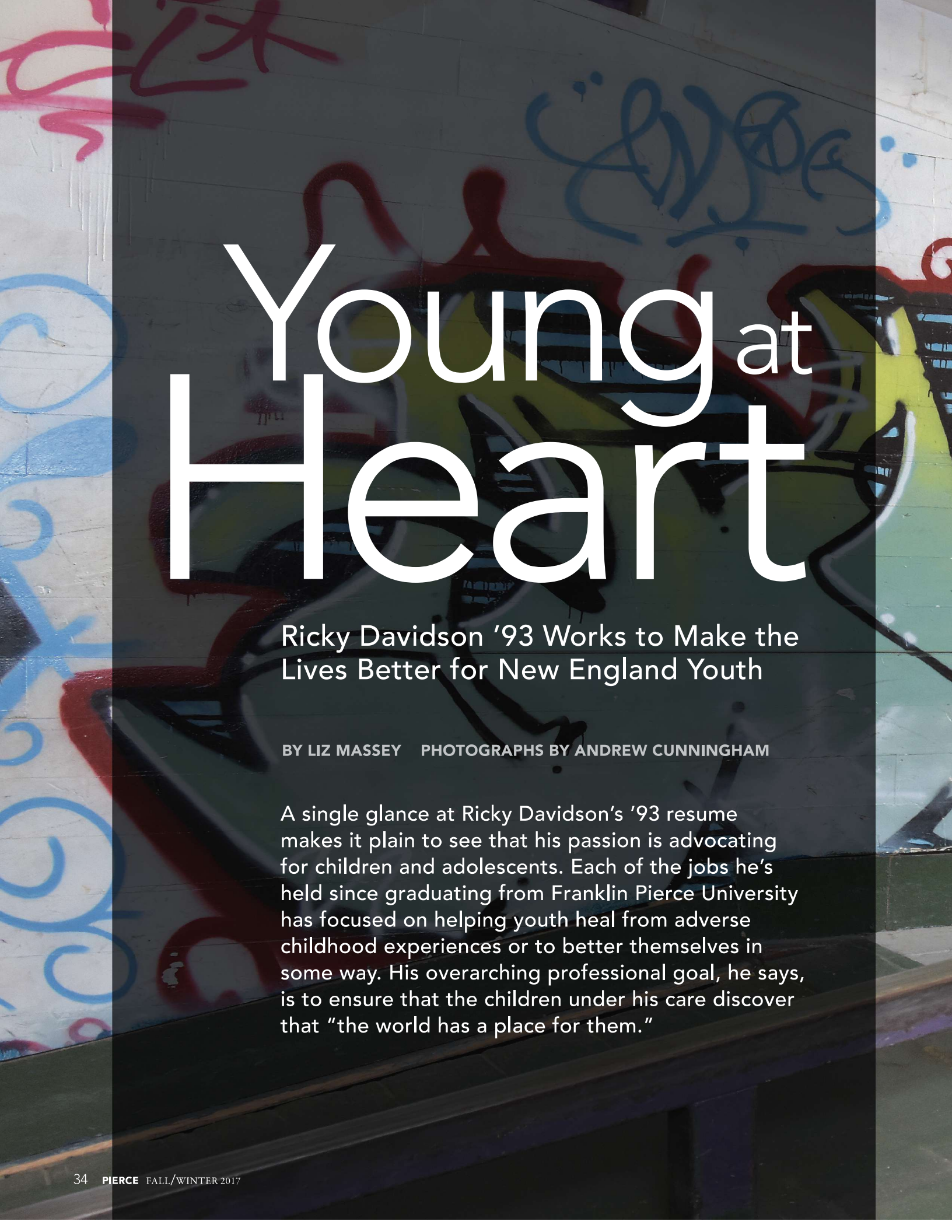




Young at Heart

Ricky Davidson '93 Works to Make the Lives Better for New England Youth

BY LIZ MASSEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW CUNNINGHAM

A single glance at Ricky Davidson's '93 resume makes it plain to see that his passion is advocating for children and adolescents. Each of the jobs he's held since graduating from Franklin Pierce University has focused on helping youth heal from adverse childhood experiences or to better themselves in some way. His overarching professional goal, he says, is to ensure that the children under his care discover that "the world has a place for them."

Ricky Davidson '93 with young members of the Boys and Girls Club of Brattleboro.



Davidson became the executive director of the Boys and Girls Club of Brattleboro, Vt., in October 2016, but his connection to the city dates back to 1995, when he came to work at the Brattleboro Retreat, a residential treatment center and alternative school for children, adolescents, and adults. He joined the Boys and Girls Club in 2004, initially to manage career and other youth programming for the organization.

“It was never my intent to stay in Brattleboro, but here I am 22 years later,” he chuckles. “It’s a tight-knit community, yet one that’s very creative and open to seeing the world in a new way — it’s very similar to Pierce in that regard.”

Becoming ‘the Adult I Had Wanted to Have in My Life’

Davidson’s path to becoming a Raven was rocky, as he tells it. After a childhood growing up in “rough” neighborhoods and a struggle with substance abuse as an adolescent, he became the first person in his family to pursue a college education. He was accepted at several art schools, where he had applied to study interior design; but after taking some time off to raise funds for his schooling, he realized he wanted to help kids with backgrounds similar to his own.

“I decided I wanted to do more than decorate people’s houses,” he says. “I wanted to be the adult that I had wanted to have in my life as a kid.”

At Franklin Pierce, Davidson majored in psychology with concentrations in special education psychology and clinical counseling. He says that faculty members like Craig Platt helped him model the approach with youth that he now utilizes.

“I was Craig’s first advisee, so we figured out our process as we went,” he remembers. “He wasn’t afraid to tell me when he didn’t know the answer to a question.”

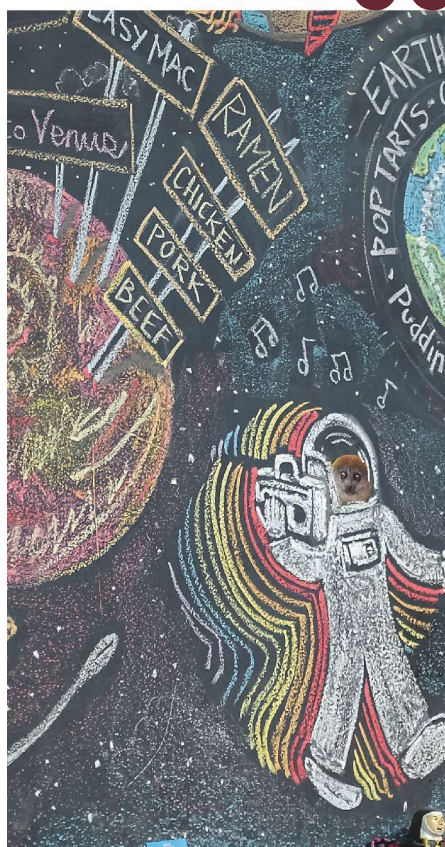
Davidson describes his alma mater as always open to new ideas and welcoming students with multiple talents.

“[Pierce] let me do things I wouldn’t have been able to do at a larger school,” he said. “I was a radio DJ, worked as an RA, and did the newspaper and yearbook. Whatever I wanted to try, they let me.”

All Together Now

Although Davidson originally came to Brattleboro to get experience providing inpatient treatment to youth at the retreat, his vocational focus has shifted to serving youngsters in a more proactive way at the Boys and Girls Club. The programs that he’s

overseen at the club have offered members recreational opportunities, the chance to learn leadership skills, assistance with college preparation and career development, and even a hot supper six nights a week. The members of the Boys and Girls Club have responded positively to



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Previous page top: Davidson with Holly Beretto '93 at Academic Convocation, May 1993; and listening to concerns. This page: Brattleboro youth enjoying the amenities of the Boys and Girls Club of Brattleboro.

that. He is always willing to share personal stories with anyone to help them through struggles that they may be enduring in their lives.”

Giving Kids What They Need

Davidson says he has just a few rules that he’s followed as he’s worked with youth, the most important of which is not to lie to them.

“So many young people expect grown-ups to lie to them,” Davidson asserts. “Grown-ups will tell the youth what they think they need to hear instead of saying what they really want to say.”

Another guideline he follows is admitting to young people when he doesn’t know the answer to something. When he taught a health class as part of a part-time position with Planned Parenthood, he said, he intentionally created it as the “health class you wished you had in high school,” striving to help students discover the answer to any relevant question, no matter how controversial or sensitive the topic.

Finally, Davidson says, it is important to give youth a sense of what’s possible for them to achieve.

“One hundred percent of our [Boys and Girls Club] kids graduate high school on time with a plan for what’s next,” he says. “We help them articulate what their dream is and work forward from there.”

Tending to the Next Generation

Looking ahead to his future as a professional youth advocate, Davidson says his role is changing as he journeys through middle age.

“As I get older, I’m losing some of my ‘cool’ factor with the kids,” he admits. “It’s better for me to hire people who can be ‘cool’ and handle the day-to-day, and I can take care of the bigger picture.”

Davidson’s commitment to youth doesn’t end when the work day does, either. He was a long-term foster parent for many years, and recently moved into a Brattleboro homeless shelter for youth as its resident manager.

“I’m old enough to be the father or grandfather of the kids in the shelter, so they see me as a parental figure,” he says.

And this intensive lifestyle helping youth achieve their full potential is something he couldn’t have achieved without experiencing Pierce, he says.

“I was challenged a lot at Pierce — it made me a better person and a better problem solver,” he says. “Without those challenges, I wouldn’t have been able to do half of the things I’ve done.” ¹²

the services that Davidson has managed and led, with significant drops in teen pregnancy rates and increases in high school graduation rates during his tenure with the organization.

Kella Stone, who met Davidson as a teenager at the club and went on to work alongside him there for nearly 10 years, says he has been able to be an effective leader because he shares his past experiences in a way that helps youth in their present-day struggles.

“I am who I am today because of the relationship I have with Ricky,” says Stone, who began her career as a junior staff member, going on to be the club’s assistant program director and later recreation coordinator. “Because of [the] hardships [he experienced] in his childhood, it makes it easy for him to relate to the hardships of the youth he is surrounded by. He has been there and done