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New DSNI leader brings grassroots zeal to job

By [Gintautas Dumcius](#)

Dec. 12, 2013



Chris Jones, right, has succeeded John Barros as executive director of DSNI. Photo by Travis Watson

Christopher Jones grew up in Pine Bluff, a humid city 45 miles southeast of Little Rock and on the Arkansas River.

He rode dirt bikes and fought grasshoppers. Both of his parents were ministers.

"I was surrounded by a wonderful community of people who cared about each other, for the most part," he said. "Half of the adults I knew I called uncle." It's what made the neighborhood special to him, and when Jones moved into Dorchester in 2005, he found a similar vibe in his new neighborhood. Jones had come to Boston for graduate school, and he and his wife, Jerrilyn Jones, an emergency medical physician at Boston Medical Center, ended up staying. They found a home on Burrell Street and bought it. The couple has two daughters.

"It connected me back to what I grew up in," he said. Jones, 37, became involved the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, a nonprofit focused on improving an area considered one of Boston's poorest, through its Dudley Children Thrive initiative. According to the organization, Dudley Children Thrive "links families with young children to neighborhood resources as well as other families." He volunteered at the nonprofit and was eventually elected a member of DSNI's board.

His home is a short distance from DSNI's offices, and in April 2013, his commute to work became even shorter: An alumnus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Department of Nuclear Engineering, he left his job as assistant dean for graduate education at MIT to take over DSNI as its executive director, after John Barros left his job to run for mayor. Jones's office is 300 feet away from his home.

With the nonprofit's 30th anniversary coming up next year, "we want to build on the momentum," Jones said in a recent interview. "We've done a lot of work around housing stability and we want to continue that."

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Education also remains a focus for the nonprofit. On Dec. 3, Gov. Deval Patrick and Mayor-elect Marty Walsh visited the charter school that the nonprofit co-founded in 2012, as part of an unveiling of the Boston Promise Corps program. DSNI is teaming up with other nonprofits, including Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE), to launch the program, which will seek to up reading proficiency in local schools with the help of members from AmeriCorps, a federal community service initiative.

Jones's mother was an educator, he said, "which is why education was always important to me." He received degrees in physics and mathematics from Morehouse College, as well as nuclear engineering and technology and policy from MIT. He briefly taught ninth grade at the MATCH charter school in Boston.

"I was always interested in physics," Jones said, and his grades earned him a full scholarship. "We were okay, but there was no way my parents could afford school," he said. "I was blessed to have full scholarship to undergrad."

One of the scholarship's requirements had him working for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) each summer. While working for NASA in Houston, Jones met Franklin Chang-Diaz, a native of Costa Rica and the first Latino-American to make it into space. Chang-Diaz is also the father of Jamaica Plain state Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz. "The summer he took his last flight, I was there," Jones recalled of the 2002 trip.

Chang-Diaz, who received a doctorate from MIT in 1977, urged him to go to MIT for his graduate studies. Jones agreed, and set out onto a path that would bring him to Dorchester.

"He brings a great deal of energy to the job," said state Rep. Carlos Henriquez, the former head of the board of directors at DSNI. He has known Jones since he moved to the neighborhood.

Jones is up early, and "he's there until 7 or 8 at night," Henriquez said.

The man Jones is replacing called him "the right executive director" for DSNI, given his relationship with the organization and its current focus on putting together the Boston Promise Initiative, which will prepare youth for both careers and college. "He is a student of the work," said Barros, who still attends DSNI meetings. "He has been in leadership at the organization for quite some time. He's a dynamic leader and I'm excited that he's there."



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