2026 Alumni Award Celebration, Ryan J. Woods (Wheelock'05,'06), Stephan Ellenwood

Stephan Ellenwood: It's a pleasure to be here and to be available for the award to Ryan Woods, not John McCarthy. He only gets one today. When I was asked to do this, I contacted our longtime departmental coordinator, Janet, and said, "Do you have a good Ryan Woods anecdote?" And she wrote back and said, "He's very gentlemanly and very handsome and has nice eyes." And I wrote back and said, "Do you have to be so superficial?" And she wrote back and said, "Can you tell me something more important?" So that's my task this morning: to tell you something more important, which is Ryan's career.

He completed his student teaching with us at North Quincy High School and went on to begin his career after that at the JFK Library in Dorchester and worked with the National Archives there. And he – teaching jobs were not so plentiful in 2005, and Ryan carved a different career. He went in a different direction, and he made our history come alive by learning ancestor stories.

And you've already heard this morning, for a few people, the power of individual stories. And if we all close our eyes for a second and look deep into our high school history textbooks, you'll see, in boldface print, big abstract stuff like nationalism and urbanization and industrialization. And those are hard to grasp, and they're hard to remember, and they're hard to keep in your spirit.

But individual stories we — what Ryan's work has helped us understand is that individuals make individual choices that contribute to those forces. And by focusing on that, it changes us. It makes us more alert to the foils and the achievements of our predecessors, which is a way different way of looking at history. And when we do that, it changes our own inside.

And he has done that through his work at American Ancestry, which is a historic Boston institution founded in 1845, and still is at Newbury Street, and Ryan began as the director of educational programs, and he worked his way up through the last few years, has been named president and chief executive, with many accomplishments enroute, one of which I hesitate to mention but I got his permission, because there are people who work for BU fundraising in the vicinity. I'm looking at you, Penny.

But over that, he has helped raise over $100 million for americanancestry.com, and they have expanded their tradition of working with historic New England families. And through

Ryan's work, he has respected the cultural diversity of this great land by opening up the ancestry records of minority communities of many different kinds as they came to our shores and changed the course of this country's history, including the ancestry records that will help 44 million descendants of formerly enslaved people. Those records are now available thanks to Ryan's good work.

So, when we look at our own stories, and I think of my own siblings, when we gather, we talk about those people who influenced us. A ludicrously wild bon vivant uncle; an uncle who was a bemedalled World War II hero and went on to become a CEO; an aunt who said, "I'm not going to be an executive secretary. I'm going to be an executive." And she did. An uncle who was also a World War II veteran and then got into some religious activities we only call it puzzling, and we don't know how that story unfolds, but we're keeping our eye on it. And all sorts of different people that influenced us. And when we learn that, we learn some of our most important Aristotelian virtues: humility and gratitude.

And that's Ryan's contribution. That's the gift of his work through his important agency, AmericanAncestors.com. So, we're grateful for that gift. And thank you. And I'm proud to be able to present a man who taught history in a starkly different way than what we had in mind when he was student teaching at North Quincy High School.

Ryan Woods:

Thank you, Professor Ellenwood.

You chaired the department that trained me and served on the advisory board of the center that published the first thing I ever wrote about education. And so, to be introduced by you this morning is indeed an honor. I want to thank BU Wheelock and the committee, and I want to congratulate the alumni honorees, Roberto, Amanda, and John. Surely, I was added to this good company by mistake, but certainly happy to be counted among them.

My high school English teacher once told me that life is a series of ellipses with a few exclamation points along the way. I've been testing that claim for a long time, and this morning is indeed an exclamation point. I grew up in Vermont along Lake Champlain, and knew early and with certainty that I was coming to Boston. I came to this school to become a teacher, and I was trained and licensed to teach social studies but never had a classroom of my own beyond my pre-practicum days in North Quincy.

Yet I've used the training that I received from Wheelock every working day since. I pulled my transcript recently. Twenty-five years ago, I took a course called "The Internet, the World Wide Web, and Education" — then seemingly a forward-looking curiosity that is now most

of my working day. I also took “Perspectives on Inquiry,” and I’ve spent the last two decades in the business of inquiry. I took “Community Education” and “Curriculum Development in Multicultural Settings.” I didn’t quite understand then what it was preparing me for, but surely the faculty here did.

What I learned here was a distinction that I’ve never let go. Instruction imparts information that can lead to proficiency in a subject. Education transfers values, shapes character and makes citizens. Those are not the same undertaking, of course. And the second is much harder.

I now lead American Ancestors, the nation’s oldest and largest center for the study of family history, heritage, and culture. We serve audiences in all 50 states and 139 countries around the world. Our work is assumed to be about names and dates. Instead, it is about identity, connection, and insight. The power and promise of family history is that it enriches lives. It’s a source of joy, education, inspiration, empowerment, and it can be a means of healing and repair. That’s not just a sentiment. It’s measurable. And, as educators, we’re the ones that can measure that.

Colleagues at Emory University built a scale called “Do You Know?”. Adolescents who score higher on this “Do You Know” scale about knowledge of their family, family history, and community, show higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, and greater resiliency in the face of trauma, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or even nuclear family function. Every teacher here has met a student that that research is about.

I think about myself as that type of student. I’m the son of an interracial marriage in the first generation after Loving v. Virginia. My father was born in Asia to a Black U.S. serviceman and a Korean woman. My mother’s family has been in New England since the 17th century. For years, I had questions about “What am I? Who am I?” and couldn’t really answer that with confidence until I leaned into the study of my own family history. So that notion of healing and repair are not just abstractions to me.

And the charge of our work, I think of as a large one: that every person has a story worth telling and worth hearing, including the millions of Americans whose records were never kept or were kept in someone else’s name. That’s the work of the 10 Million Names Project — our effort to recover the names and family histories of the estimated 10 million men, women, and children of African descent who were enslaved in what is now the United States, for the benefit of their more than 40 million descendants, of which I am one.

Because this is a room of educators, I’d like to tell you just a bit about what we’re doing for young people. Three years ago, we launched a family history curriculum for grades four through eight and aligned it to national and state standards, and we give it away. Educators

in all 50 states have implemented the curriculum, and we have trained thousands of teachers, from Maine to Texas to the Virgin Islands. And we train teachers because one teacher, across a career, touches thousands of lives. It's a multiplier that I learned here at Wheelock. A student tracing a family learns to read a document, weigh conflicting evidence, and build an argument using the most compelling subject matter available: themselves.

And so, this is where it comes back to teaching. Digitizing a record is instruction. Helping a person find themselves in the larger story of their country, in their community, and in their family is education. A library can do the first. A teacher is required for the latter. As a commencement speaker here at my first graduation from BU, I stood at this school and said that we bear the fingerprints of our classmates and the faculty. Quoting Tennyson, I said, "I am a part of all that I have met," and I've spent my career in a field that exists because that line is literally true.

And the proof is in front of me. From Professor Ellenwood to friends I made here 25 years ago, people I lived with as undergraduates and in graduate school. Wheelock is where I met my wife, Karen, who was an educator. Probably the most consequential thing the school ever did for me and certainly doesn't appear in my transcript. And my children, Abigail and Nathaniel.

Everything I've described this morning exists so that a young person can understand where they are from, to help identify who they are. Something I want for everyone, and of course, for them, most of all.

At American Ancestors, we ask our visitors to think of themselves as a link between the past and the future. And that, I think, is a fair description of what teachers do every day in every school. So, I thank you for the opportunity to be before you this morning. And this is indeed an exclamation point.