



Nate Rouse

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teacher telling him that people who looked like him, meaning Black kids, were either dead or in jail by the time they're 25. "I'm sure some people looked at me and just saw a kid from the West Side of Chicago, being raised by a single mom," Rouse said.

He credits his fifth and sixth grade teacher for helping to turn things around. "She really pushed me in a lot of ways and helped me understand the importance of education," Rouse said. "She made me understand that I was a good kid and that I could be somebody." He ended up being named 6th Grade Student of the Year.

## FIRST IN A GENERATION


After high school graduation, Rouse became the first person in his family to attend college. He enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard to help pay for college. He earned the enlisted rank of Sergeant by the time he was 21. "The Army National Guard experience was a foundation for leadership. When you go through United States Infantry training at Fort Benning in Georgia you feel like you can conquer anything," Rouse said.

But no military training could prepare him for an encounter he had with a farmer in Quincy, Illinois, in the summer of 1993. Rouse was called to active duty to help save farms along the Mississippi River that were impacted by the Great Flood of 1993. His unit was working 12- to 16-hour shifts. There were very few men or women of color. He recalls sandbagging near a farm one day when the property owner rode up on horseback and said to him, "Hey boy, you see that tree right there? This is the tree where the last one of your kind was hung in this area." Rouse will never forget those words.

When he thinks about racism and how he has experienced it throughout his life, these are just a few of the defining moments. They have shaped the way he eventually approached education as an English teacher at West Leyden High School, a dean of students in District U-46, an assistant principal at Highland Park High School, and the first African American principal at Oak Park and River Forest High School. Now he brings these experiences and many others to Barrington, as the school district's first ever Director of Equity, Race, and Cultural Diversity Initiatives.

In his new role, Rouse will promote an inclusive school climate and provide leadership regarding the development and delivery of diversity-related programs and services for Barrington 220 students and staff, a goal that was established by the Board of Education for the 2020-21 school year. "We need to do more to teach our kids about our differences and celebrate them, so we can better understand one another," Rouse said.

To this day, he is still following through on the commitment he made to himself as he built squeegees in the basement. On top of his role in Barrington 220, he is currently pursuing a doctorate in Urban Education Leadership at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His own education and experiences have taught him that progress isn't easy—and it often doesn't come quickly.

"But I have an 11-year-old son," Rouse said. "I hope the world his children grow up in is far more inclusive and equitable for all. It's time for change." 

*Samantha Ptashkin is the director of communications for Barrington 220.*

## "It's Time for Change"

BARRINGTON 220'S FIRST-EVER DIRECTOR OF EQUITY, RACE, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY INITIATIVES OPENS UP ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCES AS A BLACK MAN AND SHARES HIS HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

**A**FTER GRADUATING from Northern Illinois University as an English major, Nate Rouse's first job was building squeegees for \$4.25 an hour.

"I was living in my parent's basement at the time, had applied for various jobs in the City of Chicago and I wasn't getting any offers," Rouse said.

It was a bump in the road that would end up shaping his career. "Every day I was doing that job, I knew I did not want to do that for the rest of my life," Rouse said. "So, I committed myself to going back to school."

Rouse was born in Chicago at Cook County Hospital. When he was five years old, he moved with his mother and three siblings to Elgin, where his K-12 education got off to a rocky start. He remembers his second-grade