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Executive Homecoming

Wingspan's new leader credits the LGBT organization for giving him direction

By **CLAIRE ENGELKEN** ✉

Jason Cianciotto, the executive director of Wingspan-Southern Arizona's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community center--has spent the better part of his life helping LGBT members across the country.

Cianciotto credits Wingspan for helping him find himself after a rocky childhood that included being raised as an evangelical and being kicked out by his mother and stepfather. His past also includes being "tormented" at school for "being perceived as gay" long before he ever came out.

"If not for finding Wingspan, where would I be?" Cianciotto said. "Wingspan lifted me up and gave me a safe space to figure out who I was."

In 1995, Cianciotto joined the center's youth group and soon became part of *Tolerance in Tucson*, a Sunday-morning news program aimed at giving voices to youth minorities. He was only 19.

Soon after, Wingspan awarded him a youth scholarship to Creating Change, a national LGBT rights movement in 1998. Upon returning to Tucson, Cianciotto earned a bachelor's degree in political science at the UA and an Master's in Public Administration from the Eller College of Management. During this time, he also became Wingspan's first-ever paid employee, working as an office manager from 1999 to 2001.

After graduation, Cianciotto moved to New York City, where he worked as the research director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. During his four years at the institute, Cianciotto worked on publications that helped increase federal funding to fight the epidemic of homelessness among



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LGBT youth, as well as a publication about the experiences of LGBT youth in public schools, he said.

Cianciotto's husband is a touring member of the award-winning musical *Jersey Boys*. Cianciotto accompanied his husband on the national tour before deciding to take the job at Wingspan.

"It was a chance to see the country and enjoy his accomplishment," he said. "It also gave me time to think about where to go next."

Cianciotto considers it fate that when *Jersey Boys* stopped in Tempe, Wingspan was having its annual benefit dinner here in Tucson, which gave Cianciotto a chance to reconnect with old friends and learn about the job opening.

"My husband and I had a conversation about our lives," he said. "(The job) was a no-brainer for us."

On April 15, Cianciotto officially became the executive director of Wingspan, and he called the last three months "wonderfully overwhelming." His transition into the new position has been aided by the "love and support" of the community, he said.

He took over after a chaotic year for Wingspan. Kent Burbank, who was Wingspan's first executive director, stepped down in June 2007 after six years on the job. Joseph Bodenmiller took the job in August 2007, but left a month later. Cathy Busha, Wingspan's director of programs and one of its most prominent public faces, then announced in September 2007 that she was leaving the organization to become the first director of the Office of LGBTQ Affairs at the UA. Elizabeth Burden served as the interim executive director until Cianciotto came on board.

Instead of jumping in and making all sorts of changes, Cianciotto has opted to "sit back and learn" about the Tucson LGBT community and about the center that "has grown so much" since he worked there last: Wingspan currently has 20 paid employees, more than 200 volunteers and a fiscal-year budget of \$1.2 to \$1.3 million, Cianciotto said.

The last few months have not been without challenges.

"The most important part of my job is spending time and listening to the community," he said. "There are a lot of voices, and it takes a lot of time; it's a part of my job that will never come to completion."

Cianciotto said he is trying to create a "solid foundation for the future" by looking at the staff and trying to give them the same professional opportunities that Cianciotto himself was given by the center.

"(The staff) doesn't get the attention they deserve," he said. "(My job) is to make their jobs as easy and rewarding as possible."

Wingspan is also celebrating its 20th anniversary with a theme of "Looking Back, Moving Forward." Cianciotto wants to use this milestone year as a chance to reconnect with the community and help explain what Wingspan does.



"I'm just one person; I mean, how many people has Wingspan touched in the last 20 years?" he said.

The community center operates a youth drop-in center and has community groups and sessions focused on anti-violence efforts and health and wellness. The center also has a 24-hour crisis line and offers community and social activities throughout the year.

"We provide people with an opportunity to be whole again," Cianciotto said. "Every LGBT person's experience is different and fragmented, but we give them all a chance to engage. We are accepting and welcoming."

Cianciotto also hopes the center will inspire others to "go out and change the world" in the same way Wingspan inspired him by letting him know he could make a career out of activism.

During this 20th year, Cianciotto also hopes Wingspan will be more visible in the community through education and advocacy campaigns. One campaign includes fighting another anti-gay-marriage ballot initiative. That initiative was placed on the November ballot by the state Senate in a controversial move as the 2008 legislative session came to a close.

"The measure is divisive. It's hurtful, isolating and discriminatory," Cianciotto said. "The people voted no (to a similar ballot measure) in 2006; why should they get a do-over?"

Despite his frustration with the state Legislature, Cianciotto said he has a "tremendous amount of hope and confidence" that the measure will not pass, despite the fact that some areas of Arizona aren't nearly as LGBT-friendly as Tucson. (Despite Cianciotto's optimism, many observers expect the November initiative to pass, since it only focuses on gay marriage, and not domestic partnerships, as the failed 2006 effort did.)

"The Tucson community is incredibly welcoming and supportive," he said. "In some areas (around the state), people can't be as safe, and they can't lead open, honest lives."

Cianciotto said he hopes to see Wingspan own its own building. He also wants to continue to connect with the community and create a culture of philanthropy.

Cianciotto sees a future for himself and his family in Tucson. He and his husband, who remains on tour, just bought their first home here. He also has a father, stepmother, brother and a "very supportive group of friends" here.

"Tucson is home," he said.

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