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Get to know EMU alum Sean Gray, one of EMU's new regents

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Moments of self-awareness can be difficult to predict. Sean Gray was a parent himself before he realized he had dyslexia.

That realization took raising his own child, who struggles with the same learning challenges, to take root. Those moments come whenever, whether someone is ready or not. Those moments can define who someone is, and depending on *where* they are in your life, be it a child or even growing into adulthood at college, they can completely change who someone is.

It was when he was working on his Bachelor's degree in Business Management at Eastern Michigan University that Gray realized that he needed to be moving with purpose in his life.

"Before then, I was kind of just going to class as best as I could, and then 9/11 happened while I was in undergrad," Gray said. "I woke up and realized I needed to get myself in gear and do things."

From there, he did exactly that. He joined student leadership groups and filled a vacant seat in the Student Senate. He worked on the Student Government's Business and Finance Committee. That committee taught Gray much about his fellow students.

"You learn so much about student needs and their funds when working in student government," Gray said.

Gray would make many connections with student organizations and their members while working on the committee. He still has some of the T-shirts some of

the organization members gave him at the end of each year when they were turning in their receipts.

“There was one pair, I won’t name names, but they were always really consistent and on time,” Gray said.

Eventually, Gray would become Student Body President, joining the Board of Regents’ Student Committee. The Student Government would serve as his proving ground for many skills, such as lobbying, that he would use later in life while working as a small business consultant and for the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Now, Gray rejoins the Board of Regents, as an alumnus instead of as a student this year, after his appointment by Governor Gretchen Whitmer. He will serve on the Faculty Affairs, and the Personnel and Compensation Committee in addition to working an auditor alongside University President James Smith.

After graduation, Gray worked as a small business consultant with EMU and the Michigan Small Business Development Center in Detroit. While working there, he met Wendy Thomas, who he credits as one of his strongest mentors as a young professional.

Gray also met his wife, Michigan state Senator Stephanie Chang, who worked in the same building at the time. The couple married in 2011. After eight years, Goldman Sachs’ 10,000 Small Businesses initiative hired him in 2014 to become their associate director of the Michigan chapter. Working out of and in partnership with Wayne State University, the investment fund provides a program as part of a larger philanthropic effort from the bank that offers an educational course for small business owners.

Small businesses are near and dear to Gray’s heart, and he has spent his career working with young entrepreneurs to fulfill their dreams of opening and sustaining a business. As a small business consultant, he worked to educate and mentor business owners as they navigated the difficulties involved.

"I always say that when you're going into small business, you're getting into a fight with a bear," Gray said. "And there's not always someone who is going to be there to hear you when that bear starts growling and scratching at you."

After five years working with Goldman Sachs, Gray moved on to the U.S. Small Business Administration. Gray started as a lender relations expert before becoming an Economic Development Specialist for the rest of his three-year tenure there. As an Economic Development Specialist, Gray worked to improve conditions and availability of funds to Michigan small businesses. Gray became Vice President of Small Business Services for the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation after leaving the U.S. Small Business Administration in 2022.

In his current position, Gray has worked for the past years to support the delivery and development of the District Business Liaison program, Motor City Match, BuyDetroit, and the Green Grocer project. Gray has also been working with the city of Detroit on the Detroit Legacy Small Business Project, which provides economic support for businesses that have been operating for 30 years or more in the city.

Gray's first order of business now that he's rejoined the Board is to relearn how it operates. From there, he hopes to learn more about the students on campus and their financial needs as he hopes to serve them. Gray wants to speak with students about how to best serve and deliver value for students' education at Eastern in the evolving educational landscape.

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