

Leadership Transition in a Time of Turmoil: Ali Knight Leads FLY into a New Era

By Dave Moore

On July 1, 2020, Ali Knight succeeded Christa Gannon as president and CEO of the San Francisco Bay Area-based [Fresh Lifelines for Youth \(FLY\)](#). FLY's leadership transition marked an important pivot in the Bay Area nonprofit's 20-year history, coming on the heels of a new strategic plan rollout, called Imagine 2030, which Knight helped to develop as FLY's COO.

The plan calls for expanding the nonprofit's services in their existing communities and to other communities, moving deeper into local and statewide systems-change work, and sharing their expertise with others to elevate the field of juvenile justice.

As he leads FLY in its mission of continuing to work with young people to change the course of their lives and in its implementation of its strategic plan, Knight will do so against the formidable challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, economic downturn, and heightened focus on racial equity and justice.

In part two of Bridgespan's series with Ali Knight on managing a leadership transition during a crisis, we learn about his growth as a leader, his leadership style, and his plans to use his lifelong passion for justice to help FLY thrive through a tumultuous period of unpredictable change.

“FLY has made me more optimistic”

Knight says the reason he came to FLY in October of 2014 was different than the reason he has stayed there. “I came to FLY because of its incredible commitment to our young people,” Knight says. “I was also attracted to the strength of the culture; the fact that FLY had so many smart, capable people who were all about the mission and the values of the organization.” At FLY, Knight admired a leadership and a culture that clearly valued its

people as the secret sauce to the “FLY magic”— enough to invest in them by identifying, developing, and working hard to retain talent. “One hundred percent of our executive team and about 80 percent of our senior leadership team are people with tenure at FLY and who rose through the ranks of leadership,” Knight shares. “It is a culture to which I am entirely committed.

What *kept* Knight at FLY was his growing sense that he might get the opportunity to help the organization become a change agent for young people in new and broader ways. “FLY has made me more optimistic about the opportunity to do reform work than I have ever been,” Knight says.

Knight grew up poor in New York, and experienced directly and tangentially the systems that can have disproportionately negative impacts on young people of color. “I was a foster kid for most of my childhood. And throughout my teen years, I was always on the precipice of the justice system,” he adds. “In New York City in the 1990s, the prevailing narrative about Black and Brown teens in this country was that we were ‘super predators,’ and although I had run-ins with law enforcement, I narrowly avoided being locked up, unlike many friends who are now locked up, or wear the ‘scarlet letter’ of a criminal record,” Knight says. “Growing up how I did, when I did, gives me particular insights on how the system works, or doesn’t, to meet the needs of those in it.”



Ali Knight, President and CEO, FLY

Luckily, Knight found support in advocates and mentors at key points of his youth, and is acutely aware of the power of them, especially within the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. These experiences have allowed Knight to authentically lean into his leadership of FLY and to see his work as an opportunity to be part of a larger continuum in the pursuit of justice.

A leadership style burnished in the Big Apple

If Knight came of age personally in New York City, he also did so professionally. It was here that Knight had the opportunity to see the power of systems change through collaboration between systems and nonprofit innovation. Martin Horn, whom he says “found ways to take a huge department, the NYC Department of Correction, and do everything he could to meet the needs of those who came through the door so they wouldn’t come back.” At the time, Knight was working at the [Vera Institute of Justice](#), and he “got to be a part of innovative thinking and human-centered program design in service of people’s needs, rather than system’s goals.”

Witnessing firsthand the power of direct service to promote systems change, Knight went on to develop his own core belief system based on three principles: leading through an equity lens, bold risk-taking grounded in an unshakable belief in what is right, and striking a balance between the urgency of solving pressing problems and the need to stay in the fight for the long haul, which is a principle that has already benefited his work at FLY.

“Some leaders are comfortable at a boots-on-the-ground level and some are comfortable at 50,000 feet,” says FLY’s former CEO and founder, Christa Gannon, who has remained at FLY as a fundraiser, advocate, and ambassador. “Ali can move fluidly between both mindsets. He knows when to kind of step back and get the lay of the land and be super strategic, and when to dive down and get tactical.” As FLY advances its 2030 goal of helping dismantle California’s pipeline to prison and supporting 30,000 youth to transform their lives, amidst continuing uncertainty, Knight’s ability to switch gears is critical, she adds.

Yet, despite this strength, Knight still considers himself a “leader in the making,” and thanks Gannon for helping him to develop another key leadership skill: putting relationships first. “Whether I’m working with my team or with my board or our partners,” says Knight, “I know we can’t accomplish the things we need to without each other. This isn’t necessarily intuitive to somebody like me who had to fight for everything I’ve accomplished in life. But it’s at the core of who I have become.”

A new voice for FLY emerges

Knight says the current climate around racial equity has created opportunities for him to quickly establish his own public voice as FLY’s leader. In only his first few months at the helm of an organization that is still grappling with the disruption thrown at it by the pandemic, he has already begun writing articles and sending emails to donors, outlining his thoughts on topics ranging from police brutality to the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable communities. He and Gannon also are planning to host a series of intimate gathering with donors and other stakeholders to continue this dialogue.

Knight says he is particularly excited to engage FLY’s board and major donors further in what promises to be an exciting journey for FLY, to not only continue its work to provide services that change young people’s lives, but also to address the conditions and systems that make these services necessary in the first place. “I’m very inspired by the board’s courageousness to have conversations about the racial climate in our country and how it impacts the public school system as well as the juvenile justice system,” Knight says. “By seeing our work as a continuum of efforts to bend the arc towards justice, we’re going to be part of a larger movement to tackle the whole school to prison pipeline. It represents a big challenge in terms of handling our partnerships, our funding, and our operations, but it can be done.”

With the future hard to predict, one thing appears certain: Knight has been working up to such a challenge his whole life. “One of my favorite quotes is from Cornel West,” Knight says. “West said, ‘It’s a great time to be on fire for justice!’ Well, I’m on fire for justice, for FLY, and for all the kids and community members we are going to help.”

When we reconnect with Ali Knight for part three of this series, we’ll explore how FLY’s board supported Knight’s transition, including onboarding advice and the tools they used to help guide the transition process. To read [part one of this series](#), please go to Bridgespan.org.

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