**Alan D. Solomont, of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, Tufts University**

by Jim McKeag

Alan Solomont, the Pierre and Pamela Omidyar Dean of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, served as the U.S. Ambassador to Spain and Andorra from 2009-2013. He has also served on the Board of Directors for the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), where he oversaw the expansion of national service initiatives such as AmeriCorps and SeniorCorps, and the implementation of the Serve America Act under President Obama.

Dean Solomont has been a successful community organizer and activist, which led, in part, to his involvement in political campaigning and fundraising. He has played important roles in six presidential campaigns. He is a successful entrepreneur and leader in the area of elder care, where he has helped expand elder services into communities throughout New England and founded HouseWorks in 1998, an innovative approach to at-home elder services which gives seniors and their families control of their own care and treatment. Dean Solomont is active in the Jewish community and has served on many local boards and philanthropic initiatives.

Dean Solomont was born and raised in the Boston suburb of Brookline, Massachusetts, and when he entered Tufts as a freshman in 1966 he was plunged in to a new awareness of social and political issues. “I learned to be a citizen at Tufts,” Solomont said. “I was quite taken by the politics of the time. The antiwar and civil rights movements were a huge influence on me.” In 1968 he was a page on the floor of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, when the Democratic Party fractured and the deep social divisions in U.S. politics were put in the global spotlight. The following year at Tufts, Dean Solomont helped organize student actions protesting the racially biased hiring practices of a large local construction firm that were building a new dormitory at the University. “My first visit to the President’s office was uninvited,” he said, referring to a sit in he helped organized that launched the issue into the regional spotlight.

After graduating and studying abroad as a Thomas J. Watson Fellow, Dean Solomont became a community organizer in Lowell, working hand in hand with neighborhood residents and employees, some of who were putting their livelihoods at stake to fight for changes in their communities and places of employment. “It’s difficult to change things from the outside,” he said. “It’s really important for citizens to be engaged in their community and the life of the nation, to stand up for what they believe is right and work with others in common cause, but you also have to deal with politics and government too; you have to change things from the inside.”

For Dean Solomont, higher education has a critical role to play in transforming students into good citizens and effective leaders. He points to research showing the eagerness of college-aged students to get engaged in pressing social problems and make a difference in the world, but notes the well-documented erosion of confidence and interest that young people have in our political institutions as a disquieting counter trend. “We need to figure out how we can restore confidence in our democracy, otherwise the problems that our nation and the world faces will not be solved,” he said. “This is why I believe so strongly in higher education’s role as a platform for civic engagement, for educating students to be active citizens and to be involved in both civic and democratic institutions.”

As someone who has been involved in direct political and civic action, who has shaped change from inside the political arena, and used his success in business as a platform to become more involved in community issues, Dean Solomont returned to Tufts with an appreciation for how student’s lives can be transformed through education. “I was a young person impatient for change. I see in students today a similar impatience – a belief that things that are wrong can be righted at the snap of a finger – and they’re frustrated when change doesn’t happen.”

For Dean Solomont, higher education can help develop students’ appreciation for hard work, dedication to social justice and the importance of small steps. Service leaning opportunities can immerse students in local communities, and colleges and universities have a duty to help students develop the skills and knowledge necessary to become leaders in a democratic society; to value civic institutions, develop an ability for discourse and a respect for differences. Referring to his own campus activism and early impatience, he said, “we got people’s attention, but it was really the clarity of our arguments and the moral persuasion that made the difference. You don’t get anywhere just throwing stones.”

When asked how Tufts has been able to sustain its commitment to civic engagement Dean Solomont is quick to point to university leadership. “President Monaco is fond of saying that civic engagement is part of Tufts’ DNA, and I like to say that Tisch College is the repository of the genetic code,” he said. He considers the institutionalization of Tufts’ commitment to civic engagement by founding a college a “stroke of genius” by its founders, Rob Hollister and President John DiBiaggio. “The smartest, most important thing they did was to make this a college to be led by a dean. Even though Tisch is small compared to other schools, we are not a “program,” we are not a “center,” we do not report to [another dean]. That is a source of enormous strength, because from that platform we are able to have a much greater influence on the culture of the university.”

Dean Solomont is also quick to acknowledge the strong foundation he has inherited and the important work that came before him, but as the new dean of Tisch College he wants to fully imbed the values and skills of civic engagement deep into the institutional culture of the University. For students, he wants “to engage them more intensely, more broadly, more deeply,” and make civic engagement a vital component of their Tufts experience. This is especially true in technical disciplines, such as math, engineering and the sciences, that may not appear to be as naturally connected to Tufts’ civic engagement efforts. As a model, he cites a joint effort between Tisch College and Tufts Medical School, where all students are required to do at least 50 hours of community service relevant to their studies in order to receive a degree, and are given the support to find opportunities and reflect on their experiences. He would like to see such requirements across the entire university.

He would also like to make civic engagement a core component of faculty teaching and research, tying experiential learning to rigorous academic discipline. Miriam Nelson, the new Associate Dean at Tisch, exemplifies this approach with the community health research she has done in the Boston area as a faculty researcher at the Friedman School of Nutrition. “We would like to find ways to reach more students and faculty around education for active citizenship and apply civic engagement to teaching and research so that students who go through Tufts will leave with a sense of wanting to part of something for the rest of their lives, wanting to engage in their communities and government.”

He also cites the 1+4 Bridge-Year Service Learning Program, which will be rolled out in 2015, as a promising strategy to prepare students for a commitment to civic responsibility during their stay at Tufts. The program will give 50 incoming freshmen the opportunity to immerse themselves in community service projects either in U.S. or around the world prior to beginning their academic studies. The idea is to turn the “gap year” into a “bridge year,” and prepare students to come to campus with maturity and a real sense of purpose. “We imagine a day when maybe a couple hundred freshmen will be coming to Tufts with this experience and it will become a core part of the Tufts experience,” he said.

Dean Solomont also believes that Tufts is well positioned to be a leader in the study and scholarship of civic engagement. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), part of Tisch College’s research enterprise, has contributed important scholarship on the civic and political life of youth. It “is one our real aspirational roles,” he said, to expand this area of focus and bring an academic track to Tufts, attracting scholars to study the nature of civil society and community engagement.

Dean Solomont stresses the importance of civic engagement to personal success as well. “There’s a real relationship between civic engagement and economic success,” he said. “When citizens are actively involved in their civic and democratic institutions their community and their nation are stronger, more just, and more prosperous.” However, he acknowledges the role of chance and serendipity in determining one’s chances in life. He makes a point to mention the importance of one’s upbringing, the role of mentors, and values they help instill in preparing a person to seize opportunity when it comes. Speaking about his passion for politics and civic engagement, he said, “I didn’t just come at this because it was exciting; I was moved by the moral imperative, and that’s a product of my father’s faith tradition and the values I learned from him.” He also mentions the importance of good teachers, such as Antonia Chayes, now at Tufts Fletcher School, whose influence on his intellectual blossoming he describes as “profound.” It is this ability to inspire civic responsibility he would like to see ingrained in the Tufts culture, hoping that Tufts’ efforts will be part of a much larger trend in higher education; in the words of Robert Kennedy, one “ripple of hope” joining with other ripples to “become a giant wave.”

*Alan D. Solomont is the former Ambassador to Spain and Andorra. He also served on the Tufts Board of Trustees and was appointed by President Clinton to the Board of Directors of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Dean Solomont serves on the boards of numerous organizations including Angel Healthcare Investors, LLC, Boston Medical Center, The Jewish Fund for Justice, The New Israel Fund, Israel Policy Forum, Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly and the WGBH Educational Foundation. He earned a B.A. from Tufts University in Political Science and Urban Studies and a B.S. in Nursing at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.*