

## ROWAN SOISET INTERVIEW

By David Armstrong

At age 22, Rowan Soiset was the Edmonds Climate Advisory Board's youngest and first transgender member. A person of many talents, Rowan is, moreover, a key player in Edmonds's month-long Pride celebration, held every June in concert with Pride events around the country and the world.

Known locally as an ace fundraiser and adept user of social media messaging, Rowan is also a hard-working social-justice activist who focuses on climate equity for marginalized and frontline communities" in Edmonds. He knows whereof he speaks, having grown up in Edmonds just two blocks off Highway 99, where he still lives with several family members.

I met Rowan for coffee and conversation at his 'local,' Il Vitali, the popular café-cum-bar on Fifth Avenue, to take a closer look at climate equity as it plays out in Edmonds. Especially in this time of shrinking City staff, bare-bones City, county and state budgets and federal indifference - if not outright hostility - to climate initiatives designed to strengthen adaptation and mitigation of climate change, the issue has taken on a heightened sense of urgency.

I sat down with a double espresso. Rowan settled in, clad in a black top with a "Wild Feminist" logo. "What is climate equity?" I asked. "Climate change is worldwide. Doesn't it affect everyone?"

"Yes," Rowan replied, "but not in the same way."

People in marginalized communities, he said, are often affected more directly and adversely than more-advantaged people. An affluent family with more than one house has more options than low-income families with a single residence in case of, say, climate-related flooding or wildfire when the order comes down to evacuate. Marginalized communities are also more likely to be located next to polluting industrial sites, or in low-lying areas prone to flooding.

Marginalized communities, Soiset continued, may be broadly characterized as having large numbers of low-income households, people who speak a language other than English at home, clusters of immigrants or refugees, residents with disabilities, indigenous people and people of color.

When Rowan leaves his Highway 99-adjacent neighborhood, with its strip malls, roadside vape and cannabis joints and fast-food eateries for downtown Edmonds, with its lively restaurants, busy shops and well-kept homes and condos with views of Puget Sound, “I definitely see the contrast,” he said.

He sees other differences, too. “The weather is very different from when I was growing up in Edmonds, especially with summer heat waves and wildfires” that now mark the weather in Western Washington.

A life-long environmentalist, Rowan credits his parents for immersing him in the natural environment. “My parents were hippies,” he said, and their love of the natural world naturally rubbed off on him. “I learned about native plants, edible plants, the forests. I played in tide pools,” he remembers.

What brought him to the CAB? Referencing CAB President Georgina Armstrong, he said simply, “Georgina asked me.” Even before joining the board in 2024, though, Rowan worked closely with other socially conscious non-profits and engaged with the City of Edmonds on a number of issues.

Among other things, Rowan offered input on the City’s Comprehensive Plan. He participated in the Community Champions pilot program, part of Edmonds’ Equitable Engagement Framework. the Community Champions group itself said would “bring underrepresented and historically marginalized voices into the process. Their involvement will help ensure Edmonds’ planning efforts reflect their needs and priorities.”

Rowan was one of six liaisons between the Community Champions and the City, serving as the liaison with the Edmonds Queer Youth Alliance.

Other community organizations included the Edmonds Waterfront Center and CARE, the Coalition for Accessible and Resilient Edmonds.

Rowan was educated in local public schools, among them Scriber Lake High School and Shoreline Community College. “At one point, I thought I might become a marine biologist.” Since, then, other possible career paths have opened up. Like many young people, he is still thinking things over. “I’ve considered going back to college,” he says.

One intriguing possibility is “going back East to enroll at Gallaudet University,” a storied school for deaf and hearing-impaired people. Located in the ‘other Washington’ – Washington, D.C. – Gallaudet, founded in 1864, when Abraham Lincoln signed the school’s federal charter, has a history of advocacy and activism that Rowan – a hearing person - finds inspiring.

In 1988, students in demanding “representation, equity and self-determination” per the university’s website, convinced school administrators to hire a deaf person as GW’s president for the first time. Gallaudet has had deaf presidents ever since. Most students are deaf or hearing-impaired, though there is a sprinkling of hearing students.

“I’d like to become an interpreter of American Sign Language, which was created at Gallaudet,” he told us. Given Rowan’s sensibility and skill set, it could be a perfect fit. Whether it be in Washington, D.C. or state of Washington, Rowan Soiset is just getting started.

David Armstrong is a former writer and editor at the San Francisco Chronicle. He is editor of the Edmonds Climate Advisory Board website.