



**J'Anthony Smith**  
**'The 617'**

For some a trip to Boston is nothing new, nothing worth noting – something already been done. For others, like myself, the City of Boston is something yet to fully register with our minds. Last week was my first time to ever lay eyes on this colossal city. Leaving Holyoke is something I rarely do. Boston was truly breathtaking -- the size, the fast pace, the noise, and the order found within the chaos. The Boston Hostel introduced me to the world of young travelers. They inspired me to see the sunrise reflected on our State Capitol. In just one week I had many new experiences.



On the bus back to Boston, for my second week of entrepreneur training, I reflected on all this. Holyoke seems so microscopic compared to my state capital of Boston. Everything is so different – especially the lifestyle I've shaped living in

Holyoke. Boston is something I've never really encountered. I needed to find a way to process all of this. I needed to digest this new environment quickly so I could walk its streets. I needed to learn to be a part of my surroundings to get by in a city that is bigger than life itself. I needed to integrate into the strange fast paced lifestyle that was now facing me, and I needed to do it as quickly as possible. It was either I learn to keep up with the city or be swept away by it.



**Commissioner Will Morales,**  
**Boston Youth & Family Services**

Within one city there are two worlds. One is of the well to do; while the other struggle. From working with corporate folks in an entrepreneurship program to learning about issues facing Boston's inner city neighborhoods. While the wealthy drive foreign sports cars and sip champagne, the poor beg on street corners and the nearby neighborhood of Roxbury lacks basic resources. Spending time with Will Morales, Commissioner of Boston's Center for Children and Families I saw how both sides lived.



I toured two of the finest universities in the country, Suffolk and Harvard, and saw the vast amount of resources on the Ivy League campus. They both had buildings the sizes of castles. While they had immense resources: networks,



assets, and influence, accessible only for a very few. They price out some of the greatest minds -- brilliant people who aren't able to attend due to access. It seems to me these Ivy League colleges aren't trying to disrupt but rather enable. While they try to equal the playing field, there is more work to be done. This issue needs to be solved, not only in Boston but also throughout the entire country. A higher education should be available for everyone not just the privileged few.



I also saw there are people who want to help increase equality, and others who could care less. In my second week I got to know both sides of the playing field. At the entrepreneurship program I was tasked with bringing in customers for youth to sell their wares. My role was to invite strangers on Boston's streets from different backgrounds. Some encounters went very well. However many people denied me a second of their time. They were very cold, even rude. They had no time for the children, no time for a contribution, and no time to think about the future. They treated me as if I was invisible. However the children thanked me for bringing them customers. I was shocked that I made a difference for them.



On the bus back to Boston for my second week I saw the city's beautiful skyline, the giant buildings, the fast paced downtown area, the taxis, the city smell and the rich cultural diversity. Then the bus went into a dark underpass. The shadow of the dark swallowed everything. Within that darkness is a part of Boston that receives little light. Deep within the underpass I saw the poor, dispossessed, and homeless. They had set up a site to live in. They slept on the cold concrete; some were lucky to have blankets. Most had nothing but the clothes they wore. There was no light for them, no place to go, no food to eat, and no one to care. They were the outcast of the city, shunned from the business world of Boston. Yes, some may have been alcoholics and/or those who suffer from drug addiction. Even so they didn't deserve this life. They didn't deserve to be sleeping in a dark underpass, to be hungry, to be cold, or to feel alone. They deserved help. Once I landed in South Station, I saw the epidemic -- the homelessness that plagued the city. Male. Female. White. Asian. Black. Latino. What you were didn't matter, the economic plague reached across every border. On every corner there was someone who was homeless asking for help. In our modern society, we've been taught that if you give them money they'll spend it on drugs or alcohol. This isn't always the case. What if the tables were turned? And you were on the other side of the economic spectrum. Wouldn't you want someone to lend a helping hand? This is the problem not only in Boston but a great deal of our society. We chose to put on our blinders to the rest of the world. We ignore issues that don't directly involve us. Over time we care less. In just one week I learned to adapt to the City's fast pace. I was blending in, becoming one of

the many faces in a sea of people. I felt part of the city -- part of its towering buildings, its sidewalks, its alleys, and busy streets. At times I no longer felt human. I lost my individuality - In order to adapt, I ignored my environment -- focusing only on myself and my needs for this moment.



But deep within the cold world of society, I found something that is life changing. In this entrepreneurship training there are kids who come from very different backgrounds, different parts of Boston. Yet they all have a mindset for business. They all have innovative ideas, optimistic attitudes, and respect for each other's ideas. They all viewed themselves as winners, and all carried themselves with confidence. When they fall, they just got back up and pushed on. They showed me that the solutions to our societies issues are just residing deep our young people. They all showed me how caring people can be, how intelligent we can be, and how empathetic we can be. They turned my experience upside down. They are the ones who will carry the city on their shoulders – from business owners to doctors, lawyers and politicians. They naturally displayed the good in humanity just by being who they are. Now all these kids really needed was recognition from the rest of society. They inspired me to give kids back home the same amount of energy to persevere.

I met community leaders whose primary goal is to make the future of the children a brighter one. Commissioner Morales exposed me to the City's issues and solutions he has implemented. Anna Myer in the dance and music field seeks to give a voice to those who have none. They are some of the best people I've ever met who inspire me to keep working for change within our society. They showed me that in every single inch of the world there are people who want to help. They make my line of duty worthwhile. They are my allies against a continuing struggle for reform within our society that will benefit everyone.



Then on Friday I traveled back to Holyoke for a day of meetings -- Receiver of Holyoke Public Schools (Superintendent), Holyoke's State Representative, our City's Economic Development Director, and the Chamber of Commerce representative. At the Stone Soup Leadership Institute's 12<sup>th</sup> Leadership Summit, I was encouraged to meet with my city's leaders to request their support for the Sustainable Holyoke Youth Leadership Initiative we envisioned.



Up until then, I'd had a firm belief that public officials had no real interest in our city, especially its children. Last Friday I saw how I was completely wrong. Each one of these officials wanted to help the children. They were looking for ways to help. They were especially searching for young people's voices. What an amazing surprise to learn that they wanted my help! They understood the future of our city lies in the hands of the youth. They recognized Holyoke's youth as a force with unlimited potential. This inspired me to return to Boston with a dream – to find ways to bring this productive energy to Holyoke to spread among our youth. These officials cleared my vision and allowed me to see Holyoke youth as a force that needed to be united and pointed in a direction. This is now my mission: to bring the youth of Holyoke together and give them a voice in our community.

**Sustainable Holyoke Youth Leadership Initiative**

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