



A Vineyard Experience

12th Leadership Summit for Sustainable Development on Martha's Vineyard

The Stone Soup Leadership Institute's Summit was a life changing experience. I experienced many things and went through many changes in my short time on the island of Martha's Vineyard. I learned about diverse cultural aspects, sharpened my skills as an emerging leader, and connected with people from very different backgrounds. I experienced a world on another spectrum than mine.

My first few days on the island were tough. I felt disconnected from my surroundings, both physically and mentally. I refused to interact with other delegates, open my mind to situations around me, or even have a truly genuine smile. I was far too displeased with everything I was witnessing around me to be completely present. The yachts, the lack of cultural diversity and a lack of financial diversity, and some fake smiles wore me down.

All my life I was only exposed to public housing, poverty, and disadvantaged communities. I had never believed that a place where the wealthy vacation had truly existed. While I had seen the privileged middle class, the high-class privilege was a completely different thing. The opportunities they had

access to was an immense difference from the opportunities in Holyoke. The main difference was in the island's economy. At first glance it appeared healthy and untouched by the poverty that plagues inner city America. According to the Town Report of Chilmark schools are funded exceedingly well, the housing market is soaring, money seems to be in abundance, and life on the island seems almost perfect.

This was the image I saw when I landed on the island. I immediately began to hate the income inequality that existed. I wondered why my community was forced to live off of crumbs while the rich never starved. We lived in tight quartered public housing while they owned acres of land. We lived off of welfare, social security checks, tight budgets, and local food pantries. They on the other hand lived off of land rovers, private jets, expensive champagne, and seven figure salaries. The world that I came from was completely different from the fantasy they encased themselves in. I was caught in a position of social and economic disadvantage. They had all the odds in their favor and I found myself in a profound state of envy. I was trapped in this stage for a few days; I was disconnected from everything around me. I just wanted to go home to the poverty stricken neighborhoods I was accustomed to.





Then I started taking off my blinds. I realized that the image the rich presented was nothing more than a facade. The entire island was not as prosperous as some of its summer guests. I found the island had two well-used food banks; the island had a heroin and opioid epidemic, and many of the native islanders were being outpriced of their homes by the wealthy. I also discovered the island is diverse with African Americans, Brazilians, Cape Verde, Caribbean Islands of Jamaica and St. Vincent & Grenadines, and the tribe of Wampanoags. I discovered that during the winter the unemployment rates soar to 40% as tourism dies down, much of the beautiful land was becoming increasingly privatized, and the rich saw the island of Martha's Vineyard as a giant playground built for their enjoyment.

I had suddenly awakened from the unconsciousness I had fallen into and had begun to search for the real knowledge on the island. This search had led me to an

abundance of intellectual wealth. I was surrounded by a goldmine of knowledge that was coming from multiple sources. From islanders, international delegates, the Institute's staff, and even the wealthy seasonal residents.

I came across various words of wisdom, and a diverse collection of perspectives. This transformation helped change my life and allowed me to begin viewing the world on an international scale. I began to hear the stories of those from the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Thailand, and some of the islanders. The world I was so accustomed to had started to expand on an international level. The good was beginning to outweigh the bad. The wealth inequality and the feelings of not being worthy enough began to fade away. Learning new languages, meeting new people, enjoying being in a new environment, starting a new experience was now the focus of my trip.

Don't get me wrong, the wealth inequality was still weighing upon my mind but it was more like a research project now. Research to figure out how the other side of the table was living. To understand the minds of those at the top of the financial ladder had become a new goal. Understanding their way of thinking, and way of life was now something I needed to take note of. Not so I could attempt to be one of them but so I could learn what was going to challenge me in my work of trying to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.





Besides that the change I went through was my views on the environment. Before the Summit the environment was not my top priority. After the Summit my views on environmental issues completely changed. Now I view the Earth as my top priority and it will always be. The Summit showed me that we only have one planet, one chance at life, and one chance to do things right. It showed me that across the globe there are people who are working day and night to ensure the health of our planet. The Summit showed me that you can have an economy and take care of the planet. It showed me how clean the world could be if we all play a part in maintaining the health of our planet.

Most importantly the Leadership Summit showed me that every single human on earth has one thing in common: The Earth. The Summit also developed my skills as a leader. It showed me that everyone on the team has their skills that they excel in. From finance, to media, to writing, to cracking a good joke that puts smiles on everyone's faces. In every team there are those who have certain strengths and certain weaknesses, and learning to align your team with this is key to true team efficiency. Having everyone in sync with each other's skills is vital to having the most coordination. Once this is achieved, your team can accomplish anything you find yourself tasked with.

At the Summit I also got to experience different

cultural aspects and perspectives. I learned so many different things about a wide range of cultures. I learned how to speak some Hawaiian, some Thai, and some Tagalog (Philippines). I learned of different events going on globally: the conflicts in Thailand due to religious beliefs, the strong military presence in Hawaii, the lack of exportation of Philippine products, the dispute between the Wampanoag tribe and Martha's Vineyard islanders over building a casino on native American land, and so much other diverse cultural education.



At the Summit I also found myself learning skills that I had no access to in my community. I learned about project management, which will help me structure any project that I work on. I learned many tools of a process called Design Thinking -- a process of creating things that could benefit society through use of innovative methods. I learned about life planning, which will help me map out the road of my life much better. These skills, and many more, helped craft me into a leader.

Of course I will need more improvement but the Summit truly helped me take another step forward toward being a genuine leader. It helped me learn that in order to be a true leader you must let others take charge when the situation calls for it. You can't always be in charge as there are going to be scenarios in

which your skills aren't adequate enough. In these scenarios others are going to have to take lead and you'll have to sit back and follow for a bit. This is key to being leader and was a valuable asset that the Summit taught me. The Summit also taught me that you have to coordinate with everyone on your team. You have to connect with them and level with them. You must learn the strengths and weaknesses of everyone you're working with in order to have a fully functioning team. If you utilize the strengths and weaknesses of your team according to the situation then your team can accomplish any task placed in front of them. I learned that you have to communicate how you feel with your peers, and allow them to communicate how they feel as well. If this is not done then a tension will begin to brew among the team, which can eventually lead to a dysfunctional team that won't be able to accomplish simple tasks as a whole team.



Lastly the Summit taught me that you must appeal to the needs of your people. You have to relate to them and figure out what they need in order to complete the task that is required of the team. In order to truly lead, you need a team to lead. To do this you have to meet their personal needs in order to gain their full attention. Once you have their attention, learn their strengths and weaknesses, and learn to

follow sometimes. You can lead your team through any obstacles placed in front of you.

Overall the Summit was an experience I'll never forget, as it will always carry a mark on me. One of the marks that it left upon me was the scar of seeing how the wealthy live. The Summit created a little bubble of caring people who were 100% committed to me and the world we live in. When I returned to the poverty stricken neighborhoods I reside in, it caused me to never look at the world the same. A more positive mark left on me was that I now see how big the world is. I see how diverse it is and how I now want embrace it to the fullest.

The Summit on Martha's Vineyard was something like I've never experienced before. It was an adventure into darkness that leads me into the light. It is something in life that I wish that I could rewind not to do anything differently but to re-live every moment of it. It was an experience that is going to stick with me for the rest of my days. It was something that I wish the world could've experienced. It was something that shall always lie within my heart.

J'Anthony Smith
July 4th, 2016

