



**Holyoke Community Leaders
Kick-Off Event with Commissioner Will Morales
October 27, 2016**

It was great to have Will come to Holyoke to share his story, a story that is unfortunately too familiar to the youth in our community. But it was Will's ability to connect to the students and to share his success that provided hope and path to a better outcome for the young people listening to him. I am grateful for Will's time and for young people like J'Anthony Smith who are committed to improving Holyoke for all its residents.

Representative Aaron Vega

Leadership: The visit from Will Morales to Dean Tech had such a profound effect on every student, staff and family member that you could hear a pin drop while he shared his experience, strength and hope. In the days following students explained how motivated they were and how powerful the message was. On behalf of our staff, family and students I cannot tell you how grateful we are to have joined the Will Morales "Gang" and the Stone Soup Leadership Institute! Thanks again and God bless.

Alan Gates, Wm. J. Dean Technical High School

The Holyoke Youth Task Force was excited to be a co-host for the event with Commissioner Will Morales to Holyoke. When we partner with community organizations it strengthens the work we are doing here every day. The perspective Will brought helped us better understand the best ways we can be there for young people in the world today. Listening to Will speak really touched home for me. His goal is to be the person today who wasn't there for him when he was young. That really resonated with me and the person I want to be for the youth I work with. We look forward to the opportunity to bring the Holyoke Youth Commissioners and Boston Youth commissioners together to learn from each other and grow together.

Christine Alger, Holyoke Youth Task Force

We are so often bombarded with negative news. Hearing Will Morales' inspiring story provides a shining example of someone who has himself turned his life around and is now giving back to the community to inspire others to reach their full potential. And working in youth development, it was important to be reminded that to be effective in fostering youth leadership we need to stop telling youth what they need and, simply ask them what they need.

Suzanne Parker, Girls Inc. of Holyoke

Throughout the event I could only think of the dozens of youth and youth development professionals with whom I work who missed out. I wished I could beam them all into that room. The opportunity to step out of the daily grind and renew my commitment and passion for this work was a precious treasure. It will be great to share the link with our networks.

Alice Buckner

Business & Community Liaison, Westover Job Corps Center

Will's message really tugged at the hearts of everyone listening. The story of his life is a great example and encouragement to youth that are growing up in challenging situations. Will sent a strong message to the youth that they don't have to experience the consequences he did for the choices he made as young man. He let them know their time is now to work towards success. He delivered a very powerful message.

Ed Caisse, So. Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative

Thank you for your efforts to inspire our youngsters and educators in Holyoke. After attending the luncheon, and having the opportunity to listen to Will and Josh's stories, I felt honored to have attended. My initial reaction to the stories, went between sadness and joy. Joy for being reminded of the beauty and strength our kids carry with them in the midst of some adverse circumstances. And sadness, because it was also a reminder of the stories we have seen, an continue to happen in our schools in Holyoke. And no, these were not just 'one more story'. These are just two unique stories of people 'doing' what it takes to facilitate success. I took home with me the reminders to, 'be the adult you would've liked to have by your side when you were younger', and be the person who 'believe' in our kids.

I think this presentation should be offered in most schools in Holyoke, and as professional development courses.

Teresita Castaño, Promoter of Latin Culture

Thank you Marianne for the great opportunity yesterday to meet J'Anthony as well as Will Morales. I was blown away by the heartfelt sharing of stories by them both. I could not contain my tears as I heard the traumatic experiences that Will had to endure. This hit very close to home as I work with young men in Holyoke that represent younger Will Morales. I hope to give our youth a role model that will represent the person that was there for me as I was growing up. I look forward to hearing more from you and your work.

Jaqueline Lozada, Holyoke Safe and Successful Youth Initiative - HSSYI

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