Armanis Fuentes: History in the Making

HOLYOKE, MA | HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE | May 16, 2019 - Google “Armanis Fuentes” and “Holyoke” and up pop stories that celebrate an engaged city youth with a bright future.

In May 2011, for instance, as an 8th grade student at the Morgan School, Fuentes received an achievement award from Holyoke Medical Center.

In April 2013, as a 15-year-old sophomore at Holyoke High, he was named a “Rising Star” for his “academic achievement, leadership and service to the community and school.” That service included work as a peer leader for the Holyoke Equal Rights Association, an LGBT youth empowerment group.

A page one story in the June 14, 2013, edition of the Holyoke Sun included a picture of Fuentes and other teens at City Hall, as Mayor Alex Morse honored members of the Holyoke Youth Commission, which Fuentes served for a time as president.

“I was a high potential kid,” Fuentes says. “I was in AP classes. I thought I was going to go straight to either an Ivy League college or to some sort of fancy, selective school. And then life didn’t really work out that way.”

Despite the early accolades, Fuentes slowly stagnated, his promising journey derailed by problems at home and problems at school, where he says he felt unfairly treated by some administrators and teachers who disproportionately punished students of color and dowsed their ambitions.

“No one should have to feel like an underdog all the time,” he says.

That rough experience culminated in the middle of his senior year in what he describes as an unprovoked altercation with a school resource officer that left him with a scar above his eye and a lot of bad feelings. That same day, he dropped out.

“I can say wholeheartedly that the student I was going into Holyoke High isn’t the student I ended up becoming while I was there,” Fuentes says. “It was a total departure from who I was – and who I am now.”

Fuentes is now a 21-year-old Springfield resident, a history major, honors student, award winner, scholarship recipient, and soon-to-be graduate of Holyoke Community College. On Sat., June 1, at the MassMutual Center, he will receive his associate degree in liberal arts with high honors and deliver a keynote speech at HCC’s 72nd annual Commencement.

Come September, he will attend Williams College, one of the most selective schools in the country, on what is essentially a full scholarship.

“Being from Holyoke, I didn’t want to come to HCC,” he says. “I definitely stigmatized it. I had no idea HCC could be such a catapult. One thing HCC has given me is redemption. It’s allowed me to realign my academic trajectory with the one I have always wanted.”

That realignment took some time. Fuentes finished high school in Chicopee, then took a few business classes at HCC. He wanted to be a paralegal. He left, though, after one semester and moved to Boston. Living in Dorchester, he commuted nearly three hours a day back and forth to Bunker Hill Community College in Charlestown while juggling jobs at a hair salon and a law office. It was all too much.

He returned to Holyoke in 2016 and decided to give HCC another go. Financial aid complications forced him to go to work instead, at a gas station and a warehouse, where he got a glimpse of a life he didn’t want “making pallets and being a slave to a company,” he says.

A job as a file clerk in a Northampton law office gave him a window into another life. Soon, with a little money in his pocket and a lot of support from colleagues, he re-enrolled.

Fuentes quickly regained his academic footing, inspired by a Learning Community course called “Cops, Crime and Class,” which explored the economic underpinnings of criminal behavior and spoke to his own experiences growing up poor in South Holyoke, raised by a single mother...