

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 doused 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



Credit HCC - Armanis Fuentes

and seeing many people he knew go to jail.

“I’ve seen the relationships that police have with their communities, the good and the bad, since I was a kid,” he says. “It was nice to have a place where I could speak about my own life. It was the first time in a long time that I felt really engaged in a classroom setting.”

Other courses reinforced that feeling: “Caribbean Identities in History and Literature,” “Aliens, Anti-Citizens and Identity,” and “The Immigrant City,” a political and historical study of Holyoke held jointly with Amherst College.

Through the latter, Fuentes discovered the Holyoke History Room at the public library. Discouraged by the “thin scholarship” on Puerto Rican history in the archives, he interviewed his Holyoke friends for an oral history project. That led to a deeper, independent study that earned him first place this year in the HCC Library’s annual BUILD research competition, titled “Networks of Puerto Rican Power: Building Bilingual Education in Holyoke Schools, 1960-1990.” He presented his report earlier this month at the annual University of Massachusetts Undergraduate Research Conference.

“I’m interested in history,” he says. “I’m interested in Puerto Rican history. I’m interested in the Puerto Rican diaspora in the U.S. I’m also interested in education equity, because my whole life has been fighting for education equity, in a way.”

He plans to study history at Williams with a concentration in Latinx Studies and after that perhaps pursue a PhD, followed by a career as a writer and researcher, or maybe a professor and academic scholar.

“I’m a lot less enchanted by the idea of a high salary career as I was in my youth,” he says. “For a long time, I thought money was it because I was always poor.”

Given that Williams is offering him such a generous scholarship, Fuentes should graduate with little if any debt.

“It’s an amazing luxury,” he says. “If I wanted to come back to Holyoke to do community work or be a teacher for a while just to meet some kids, I could do that. Through the opportunity I’ve been given I want to make sure other students of color know what they can do at HCC and where they can go from HCC.”