

Joseph Black awarded national Newman Civic Fellowship

HOLYOKE – Presented with the opportunity to nominate a student for a Newman Civic Fellowship, a national award that recognizes leadership potential and a commitment to positive change in the community, Holyoke Community College Anthropology Professor Vanessa Martinez immediately thought of Joseph Black.

Last fall, Black, an environmental science major and HCC STEM scholar, approached her about enrolling in her honors colloquium for the spring 2024 semester, Be the Change. At first, she wasn't sure the six-credit class would fit into his otherwise rigorous academic schedule.

"With STEM majors, there often isn't a lot of wiggle room to take courses that aren't prescribed in their discipline," Martinez said.

Black said "I'll take it as an extra class if I have to."

The course, which explores the concept of change in all its forms: societal, cultural, political, personal, mathematical, and religious, among others, fit right into Black's worldview. It also incorporated an environmentally focused, community-based learning project that meshed with his major.

"I really want to do good in the world," Black told her.

This spring, as his professor, Martinez witnessed first-hand his passion for the class, especially the group project, an Earth Day community cleanup

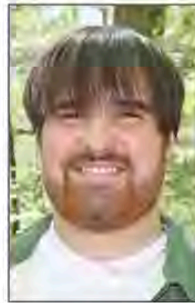
students organized in partnership with One Holyoke Community Development Corporation and the Mass. Dept. of Environmental Protection.

"The fact that he had come to me and advocated to take my class - he was the first person who popped into my head," Martinez said, recalling her decision to nominate him for the fellowship. "He's sweet. He's Latino. He's kind. You know, human. With the fellowship, he'll get support to build his leadership skills."

Earlier this month, Black, who lives in Palmer, found out he was chosen as a Newman Civic Fellow for 2024-2025 by Campus Compact, a national coalition of colleges and universities working to advance the public purposes of higher education. As such, he will join a cohort of 142 college students selected from 38 states for the year-long program. He is one of three community college students in Massachusetts named Newman Civic Fellows this year and the only one from western Massachusetts.

"I'm surprised and excited," said Black. "In high school, I wasn't the worst student, but I certainly wasn't the best student or anything like that. So, being able to take up a fellowship like this feels really good."

The program is named for the late



Joseph Black

Frank Newman, one of Campus Compact's founders, a tireless advocate for civic engagement in higher education. In the spirit of Newman's leadership, U.S. colleges and universities are invited to nominate one exemplary community-committed student each year.

Black, 21, a first-generation college student, was born in southern California, one of seven siblings (and himself a triplet), son of a Colombian mother and Italian-American father who moved to Massachusetts when he was young.

In his personal statement for the fellowship, Black writes about how, growing up in a large family without a lot of money, he found adventure in the woods around his new hometown of Palmer.

"My love of nature has always been paramount in my life," Black wrote. "Spending afternoons surrounded by forests led to a deep adoration of the natural world and how it affects society. From raising money for endangered local species to river cleanups, I participated in as much advocacy for the environment as a kid could. But now, I am old enough to contribute a loud and active voice in the community. I want to use the skills and resources that schooling gives me to advocate for better environmental protections, raise awareness about issues that are impacting us, and ensure that higher-risk populations have

their rights preserved."

The cornerstone of the fellowship is the annual convening of Newman Civic Fellows, which offers intensive, in-person, skill-building, and networking over three days. The fellowship also provides fellows with pathways to apply for exclusive opportunities, including mini grants to help fund community projects, scholarships, and post-graduate opportunities.

As a Newman fellow, Black will be responsible for developing his own community-based project in consultation with his mentor, Martinez.

"This is a really good networking opportunity, and having access to scholarships and grants is great," Black said, "but the thing that I'm really excited about is this community-based project that I'm hoping will be very high impact."

Black is not the first HCC student to be awarded a Newman Civic Fellowship, but he is the first who will serve his fellowship year before graduating.

"That's the most exciting part," said Martinez. "I get to keep him for another year. This is really the first time the HCC campus will benefit from the fellowship, rather than the students' transfer institution."

Black is looking forward to it as well.

"I'm trying to do something really big with this opportunity," Black said. "I have a lot of ideas. I'm shooting for the stars, trying to hit the moon."