

Local goes from at-risk youth to successful college grad

HOLYOKE – There's a lot of inspiration in Nicholas Parenteau's spoken word piece, "153 Years of At-Risk Youth."

It begins like this: By the age of 13 I was arrested, fingerprinted, and convicted for breaking a window while playing at the park with my friends. Circumstanced without privilege No path laid out before me. Blind eyed and ignorant

The 29-year-old Holyoke native of a combined Canadian and Honduran heritage, talks a lot about race or "our pigment" and realizing at an early age that skin color did not define intelligence – or character – despite what others told him.

There isn't a tone of integrity, or a hue of dignity and tolerance. Future determined Bleached faced "You will never make it."

The rest of his story is about how he rebelled against presumptions of inevitable failure and uses that message to teach and inspire others, at-risk youth in particular.

"I'm really attached to this piece because I put so much of myself, my trials and tribulations, into it and just the experience, altogether, of growing up," says Parenteau. "I just want to make a difference. I want to be a better mentor than I had. I want to be a better instructor. I want education to be fun. It wasn't fun for me."

Parenteau will perform his piece at the MassMutual Center on Sat., June 2, during the 71st Commencement of Holyoke Community College, when he will graduate with high honors and his associate degree in liberal arts and science.

Earning that degree represents more than a symbolic triumph for Parenteau, who had had been diagnosed with ADHD and hyperactivity as a child and placed in special education classes. He now lives in California and completed his last semester of classes at HCC online, determined to graduate from his hometown college.

"Finishing up in Holyoke was important because of the road that I traveled," says Parenteau. "I wanted to do the best I could in my hometown before I decided to fully leave and separate myself. I wanted to finish what I started."

Parenteau hit some roadblocks the first time he tried HCC after graduating from Dean Technical High School. Working three jobs to support himself and his two young daughters, he failed a couple of classes and dropped out, deciding the only way he could ever afford college was through military service.

He joined the U.S. Army, spent a year at Fort Benning, Ga., and then transferred to the Massachusetts National Guard, earning his sergeant stripes as a member of the 126th Brigade Support Battalion in Springfield. Eventually, he settled into a job with an electrical engineering company, but he grew unhappy working 12-hour days.

"I feel like there's better out there for me," Parenteau complained to his partner, Billy, who replied, "Well, I guess it's time to go to college then."

Meanwhile, Parenteau met some administrators from Peck Middle School, where he was a student years ago, and where his partner was working as a special education teacher. He started volunteering there, cleaning, painting – and talking.

"I just started chit-chatting with them about my education and how I grew up and how it was tough for me, he says. "They were like, you need to tell your story to these kids."

As the guest speaker at a school assembly, he made the kids laugh by telling fart jokes. "I told them, I went to these schools," he says. "I sat in these seats. I wanted

them to see that I am a person, just like them."

After that, he accepted an offer to run an after-school enrichment program at Peck a couple of days a week and started a junior drill team modeled partly on the ROTC program he'd gone through himself at Dean Tech.

It wasn't long before Parenteau went back to HCC, courtesy of the GI Bill. He immersed himself in college life, joining the Military Club and the Student Senate, and taking classes to improve his communication skills, analytical reasoning and understanding of child development and psychology.

In March, he was inducted into the Phi Theta Kappa national honor society. In the audience to share the honor were his mother, Yolany Parenteau, who still lives in Holyoke, and his daughters Crystalee, 14, and Jade Kiannie, 9.

He planned to relocate to California after Commencement to join his partner and other relatives who were already living there. He found a job as a physical education teacher at Acorn Woodland Elementary School in Oakland and signed a contract to work as a mentor and coach at new Bay Area chapter of Up2Us Sports, a national nonprofit that provides sports training to underprivileged kids. And Parenteau is still a soldier, now with the California National Guard.

His decision to leave HCC early was bittersweet, he says. "I was walking away from a lot, but I have a lot to learn, and I needed this experience."

At his new school, he sometimes feels like an ambassador from the East, he says. He wears his HCC shirts proudly, eliciting the inevitable question from his students.

What's that?

"That's the college I go to in Holyoke, Massachusetts," he tells them, "an amazing place, 3,700 miles from here."



COURTESY PHOTO

Nicholas Parenteau with his mother and his daughters at his induction into the Phi Theta Kappa national honor society.

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