

From Isolation to Integration: A Hope for Community

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENT HENRY

By EGC's Applied Research and Consulting Team

Brent Henry is the Founder and Director of Vibrant Boston, a youth leadership program based in the South End & Lower Roxbury area of Boston, MA. We sat down with Brent to learn more of his role in the 2017-2018 [Making Youth Voices Heard](#) initiative.

Tell me a little bit about the journey that led you to work with this particular group of youth? How did you end up here?

I've been working with youth since 2011 and started my organization, Vibrant Boston, in 2012. Before that, I was a typical city kid who worked at summer programs.

What was your role in the Making Youth Voices Heard initiative? What made you want to partner with Making Youth Voices Heard?

My role was to help with coordination, recruitment, and help support the group along the way. I wanted to partner with other youth programs in Boston, like St. Stephen's, just to see what they did and how they operate behind their doors. It was kind of a way for me to inquire and observe.

What has been the biggest challenge for you?

In the future, if we were to do this program again, I think the participation age should be cut off at 11th grade, because when kids are seniors, they have their minds towards graduation, prom, where they're going to college next year, what they're going to do, and whether their credits are all together to graduate.

When a kid in a city is eighteen and they're about to graduate, their parents are looking at them like, "When are you leaving? If you're not leaving, where are you working and how are you going to help out the family?" For the student, it

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becomes a lot of all-of-a-sudden anxieties and pressures on adulthood. So that was my biggest challenge -- just keeping those 17-, 18-, 19-year-olds committed to what we were doing.

What would you say is your greatest joy in the work you've been doing with Making Youth Voice Heard? What are some positive thing that came out of the partnership?

My greatest joy is that a couple of my quiet and introverted kids opened up and started to show their inner personalities. One kid who used to be disconnected from everything has reconnected. MYVH was a great opportunity for them to work outside their comfort zones.

It might have been the first time my teens and those residents actually had conversation.

What was it like for you to see the youth engage with the neighborhoods?

For me, it was kind of odd. What I really took away from it was that even though they live in a neighborhood, they don't interact in a neighborhood. It might have been the first time my teens and those residents actually had conversation, and they might have been around each other for five or ten years. It was odd to see people look at the kids like, "Who are these kids?" and, vice versa, the kids to look at the adults, their neighbors, and ask, "Who are they?"

What were some main takeaways for you from this project?

Again, recruitment -- to be conscious of a larger group next time, because kids have stuff nowadays that they're more responsible for. Just keep trying to do youth programs and stabilize the neighborhood.

What is your hope for the Lower Roxbury area of Boston and the teens you're working with and their communities?

The whole city -- the whole world -- is shifting and gentrifying. I try to let people know that . Between fluent and non-fluent people, seniors, elders, and working families. My hope is to create community. I believe it's attainable; it's just going to be a little slow-going.

Rather than gentrification, there should be integration.

-Brent Henry