

## **Op-Ed: “What Running Against the Mayor Taught Me About Growth and Grace”**

By Johnnie McKnight

I entered the world of politics straight out of graduate school, running for mayor of Springfield with nothing but a vision and the fire to make change. I was young, determined, and ready to take on big issues: crime, poverty, education. I became the youngest person to challenge a sitting mayor in the third-largest city in Massachusetts.

I believed someone had to disrupt the status quo, and I chose to be that someone.

But as the campaign unfolded, I learned how easy it is to let the issues fade into the background while the race becomes personal. I lost sight of the bigger picture. My focus turned from community solutions to defeating the man in office, Mayor Domenic Sarno. At the time, his popularity was widespread, and I stood nearly alone in my criticisms. I didn't oppose all of his policies, but nuance doesn't always survive the campaign trail.

Politics can distort people. It can convince you that disagreement equals enmity. For a long time, I wore that armor.

Years later, I began encountering people who knew the mayor beyond the press conferences and public appearances. Friends from his youth who spoke about his character. His daughters, whom I'd see at the gym—polite, grounded, kind. Their presence told me a story about him that politics never could.

And somewhere along the way, I began to grow, not just as a former candidate, but as a man.

I came to understand the weight of leadership. I recognized that public service demands hard choices, and not every decision will please every person. I saw that leadership, at its core, is about persistence, integrity, and resilience. The very qualities that have kept Domenic Sarno in office for so long.

One day, a letter arrived at my house. Inside was a newspaper clipping of an article I wrote and a handwritten note from the mayor. It was a gesture of quiet class, and one I won't forget.

In a time when division dominates headlines, I've chosen a different path: unity. I believe in surrounding myself with people who want to build, not break. We won't always agree, but we can still come together for the greater good.

Running for mayor changed me. But what's changed me even more is learning to respect those I once opposed, and to focus not on the fight, but on the future.