Rising Star in Massachusetts Politics
State Rep. Andy Vargas (CAS’15) is the first Latino elected from his district

By Joel Brown
Andy Vargas got his first taste of State House life at 16, as a Haverhill High School student working with a Massachusetts coalition called Teens Leading the Way.

He went with the group to Beacon Hill to lobby for a bill that would make civics education a requirement for high school graduation. And while the bill died in committee, Vargas’ interest in politics took hold.

Eight years later, in November 2017, he was sworn in at the State House, the first Latino elected to the House of Representatives from the Third Essex District, which includes much of Vargas’ hometown of Haverhill.

“Democracy is a promise,” Andres X. Vargas (CAS’15) told the packed chamber that day. And to watch the 24-year-old keep that promise on one of his regular Friday district days, a reporter risks sore feet and a caffeine overdose. State reps aren’t given a budget to rent a local office, so Vargas meets constituents and local pols in the hip coffee shops that are popping up in this mill city.

On this January day, he also grabs a quick working lunch with a state development official at a new Dominican restaurant, then heads off to a downtown parking lot to hand out bag lunches to the homeless.

“Young guy, very energetic, very passionate about public service,” says Joe D’Amore, founder of the Merrimack Valley Hope Mission, organizer of the food distribution.

He is also pragmatic, says Michael McGonagle, a Haverhill city councilor who served on the council with Vargas before the BU alum was elected to the House. “He didn’t come in to the council trying to know everything and be everything,” McGonagle says. “For his first six months, he listened.”

Last year, Vargas joined McGonagle and three other councilors in voting down the longtime mayor’s budget, before making a deal that put more cops on the street. “The level of maturity this kid showed really impressed me,” says McGonagle. “We didn’t get everything we wanted. A lot of people want
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Vargas, whose parents immigrated from the

Dominican Republic, grew up in Haverhill, and was accustomed to lively political
discussions before the rice and beans hit the table. His mother liked to chal-
lenge the debaters by saying, “That’s an important issue, but what are you going to
do about it?”

Andy, one of three chil-
dren, got the message. When he learned that many local kids couldn’t afford to join a youth league baseball team, the fervent pitcher orga-

ized Haverhill Baseball for All, a free league that used donated equipment. He also helped his father pack school supplies and sports
equipment to take to the

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Organización Dominicana de Recursos Internacionales.

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running a positive campaign.”

He was 11 the first time he went along.

At BU, Vargas had a double major: political science and international relations. He landed an internship at the Obama White House for his

final semester, researching issues pertaining to immi-
gration, the economy, and US–Latin American rela-
tions, and working on Hispanic media engagement.

Near the end of the intern-

ship, President Obama ad-
dressed the interns. “Don’t

think about who you want to

be,” he said. “Think about

what you want to do.”

Scrolling Facebook that

night, Vargas saw that

Haverhill teachers were

organizing a demonstration
to call attention to their low

pay, and that a friend had lost a loved one to opioids.

A few weeks after Commencement, back home and sharing a bedroom with his 14-year-old brother, he
took out papers to run for
city council. In a race for 9
at-large seats with 8 incum-
bents and 5 former council-
orers among 18 candidates, few observers gave the 21-year-

old much of a chance.

Campaign headquarters was his mother’s dining

room table, and his signs were hand-stenciled. But he

knocked on every door he could and on November 3, 2015, he came in third overall, becoming the first Latino elected official ever in a city that is 20 percent Latino.

Vargas tackled council business at night and on

weekends, while working
days at Lowell-based non-
profit Entrepreneurship for All, which aims to

revitalize mid-size US cities that have fallen into
decline by supporting lo-
cal entrepreneurs with a

small-business accelerator program and mentoring.

He was planning his run for reelection when the long-
time state representative

for the Third Essex District stepped down to take a job in the private sector. In

November 2017, Vargas won the House seat over his Re-

donald opponent with 53 percent of the vote.

“You can still win elec-
tions by running a positive campaign, as long as you have a sound message and

stick to the issues,” he says. “But you have to have some red lines that tell you

that you can’t go there, you can’t compromise on that.”

Because his predeces-
sor left in the middle of his term, Vargas has already started campaigning for

election in November.

In March, he and a
group of legislative leaders unveiled S.2355, An Act

to Promote and Enhance Civic Engagement, which outlines civic education

principles for the common-

wealth, very much like

the bill that stalled eight years earlier. Versions have passed the House and Senate, and Vargas is optimistic that a

reconciled bill will be en-
acted this summer.