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Hopeworks 'N Camden

Tom Roberts | Oct. 29, 2009

Jesuit Fr. Jeff Putthoff confers with Josh Heath, 16, during training in Web site development. Find more information about the program at www.hopeworks.org. (Photo courtesy of Hopeworks)

18th in the "In Search of the Emerging Church[1]" Series.

CAMDEN, N.J. -- When Jeff Putthoff comes into a room, the equilibrium shifts, things move toward him. He is a huge presence with a booming voice and a big laugh.

If the Jesuits had a heavyweight division, he?d be in it. He has a personality to match his size, enormous energy, ambitious dreams and ideas that spill out so rapidly and with such enthusiasm that even when he?s sitting still he seems to be in constant motion.

You?ve seen it before -- it?s the same gene pool, perhaps, as that of the hard-driving CEO who commands corporate legions or the kid-entrepreneur who?s yanking down seven figures. They possess that combination of self-assurance and willingness to disassemble old presumptions that leads to new insights and bold new ways of doing things.

But perhaps it?s Putthoff?s questions -- they, too, are outsized -- that really set him apart. They run to such very un-CEO-like queries as ?How do we best know God?? They fuel an entrepreneurial spirit, which appears considerable, that is at the service of youth who are trying to manufacture different endings than expected to lives that begin in some of the most wretched and despair-riddled circumstances in the country.

Welcome to Putthoff?s world in Camden, N.J. It?s a three-story row home transformed into a technology training center with the unlikely name Hopeworks ?N Camden, an almost naively buoyant bubble floating amid the burned-out squalor of surrounding blocks.

Read more about Hopeworks 'N Camden:

- **A place that breaks the poverty cycle** [2]

Bringing passion to what the world most needs [3]

For the 44-year-old Putthoff, this ministry is, in a way, his declaration about the future of the church as well as his answer, for the moment, to unsettling questions he poses to himself about what it means to be a priest and to be a Jesuit. They become particularly pressing questions in this era of dwindling numbers and resources, a time he refers to as a period of ?diminishment.?

Resting easy in paradox

Putthoff sat for an interview in mid-August in the ground-level front office of Hopeworks on a day when the school was conducting a technological scavenger hunt that tested trainees? skills. Putthoff was stamping participants? ?passports? as tasks were completed.

He rests easily in paradox, this child of the Midwest and product of Rockhurst High School, an elite Jesuit institution in Kansas City, Mo. In his pre-Jesuit days he also had a private pilot?s license. He carts to Camden master?s degrees in English, theology, divinity and one course shy of a master?s he?s still working on in organizational dynamics.

This is a city where, according to 2007 U.S. Census data, 35.6 percent of the population lived in poverty, the third highest rate in the nation at the time, and where median household income was $25,961, third lowest of U.S. cities with populations of more than 65,000. The school dropout rate in Camden is consistently one of the highest in the country.

Putthoff thinks placing all of this talent and education in North Camden is ?one of the greatest things the Society of Jesus does ... and we should be very proud of that -- and not in an arrogant way. I don?t think we say that enough. So all of this resource has been spent on me and I?m here to do this, and I?m here because we have a common mind. We share our monies and our resources. That I could come here and start a nonprofit not at a regular executive director?s salary but at a priest?s salary, that?s a great gift.?

Such gifts, however, are increasingly rare. Until little more than a year ago, he said, there were several Jesuits in Camden, and they ran a parish that had medical, legal and social work clinics, as well as a school. Putthoff was an associate pastor. He?s the only Jesuit remaining in Camden, the parish abandoned, he said, because the Jesuits determined they didn?t have the personnel to keep it open. It has since merged with two other parishes in a diocesan realignment that Putthoff said has nearly halved the number of parishes, from 120 to 65.

?Jesuits are shrinking,? he said, and that reality leads the Society of Jesus to ask such questions as, ?How do we take the three people who can teach in high school and make them present in our institutions? And so we can?t even look at a possibility like Camden.?

He believes the order may be asking the wrong question. ?There?s this sense that we don?t have enough in our tank to do this. I don?t agree with that premise. I don?t believe we were founded to staff institutions. We were founded to follow God and all that that means. The Jesuits were all about that, and the first companions were only a handful of guys. So that?s what I?m talking about. There?s a disconnect from that spirit and that mission and the reality we live today.?

It?s not that he dislikes institutions or thinks them unimportant. But he thinks that Jesuit institutions such as St. Joseph?s Preparatory School in Philadelphia have enjoyed what he describes as ?150 years of a treasure, which

is Jesuits in the society, and now at the end of 150 years they want to say: ?What do we do?? And what?s worse is it?s not the institution saying this, it?s the Jesuits.?

His point is that after 150 years of Jesuits tending to the institution, it ought to be able to move into the future on its own.

Asking the right question

The society taps into strategy instead of purpose, he says, and the strategy answers the question: ? ?How do we keep St. Joe?s Prep or any other Jesuit institution alive?? But that?s not the question. The question is our purpose, which is the kingdom of God, which is to connect to a God of hope, to be people who witness to this incredible ? living Bread, this incredible sense of a God who is alive.?

In the end, he asks: ?Is diminishment an opportunity or a scourge? ? What is the wonderful change that is presented to us in our diminishment? I think sometimes we have a reaction to change that?s just pull back, retrench.?

He mentions that in Kansas City, for instance, and Philadelphia, where he lives with a community of Jesuits, ?everything is being pulled back into large communities.?

What?s the alternative to consolidating and preserving the Jesuit role in their institutions? He points to the example of Camden where ?we came, we did parish. When we said we didn?t have someone who could speak Spanish, we left. I mean that?s incredibly limited. ? So I would just say that what?s exciting for me about diminishment is that it opens up some possibilities for new ministry or new connections with people we traditionally wouldn?t serve because there are not enough guys to hold the whole the way we used to.?

He ticks off the list: teaching at community college or the local branch of Rutgers University, prison work, the work he?s doing with marginalized youth. ?The need is huge here,? he said.

But he believes the old institutional models, both those of the order and of the larger church, don?t allow that kind of flexibility. Jesuits, he said, ?have been taught to believe that the provincial can discern the will of God and then tells you. That doesn?t work in today?s world. Nobody does that. No one believes that one person can hold all of the truth. The truth is way too big. Business today is understanding that -- that?s why you need all this consultation. That?s why I think we?re really struggling with an authority structure that is trying to wrestle with a postmodern world, a world where there are lots of truths and differences, which is great because we have a spirituality that can embrace that.?

All the questions about authority and leadership need not get caught up in analysis of roles, he said. The question boils down instead to how one orients oneself to God. ?Can I hold all of God? In some mysterious way we say, ?You can and you can?t. It?s like revelation, it?s all known and yet we can?t understand it.? ?

A wonderful paradox? he?s asked. ?It is. It totally is.?

The questions about truth and versions of the truth lead him to a hi-tech analogy. He said that in a recent homily, he talked about ?how cool a GPS [global positioning system] is -- you just plug it in and you go. It?s almost as if you can?t get lost anymore. But here?s the wild thing: I had three Masses yesterday and I needed to put a check in the bank between Masses. My GPS tells me the bank is seven miles away. I go tootling off to the bank and on the way back on the very corner where I turn in to go to the church, is a bank, my bank. It wasn?t in the GPS. But I found that so wonderfully refreshing. It isn?t all locked in, and I drove right by that. I had to see that but my mind didn?t take it in because I knew, by God, that the truth was seven miles away.?

?I?m serious about the GPS -- I love it because of the certainty of it, but we can get lost in our certainty. If you get so certain, you really get too rigid.?

One suspects that working with youth in the circumstances of Hopeworks would keep anyone from getting too rigid. The job goes way beyond technology training. ?What we really do here is coach,? said Putthoff, whose principal task has become fundraising, nearly a million dollars a year to keep the operation running.

?What we?re doing is coaching urban youth in life skills and what we really do is use technology training to create a scaffold, I call it a scaffold that people can grow in and around.?

He turned toward the front window.

?We have a big tree planted outside,? he said. It was a cutting from a centerpiece at a banquet he attended somewhere. He brought it home ?stuck it in the ground and didn?t think anything of it. Now the damn thing is huge. It?s a sugar maple, it?s going to get huge, it?s going to tear up the sidewalk. I never should have planted it there, and I love it.? The tree that was a twig with three leaves that he thought had no chance of survival symbolizes what happens here. ?People can recover if they have good soil and a good structure.?

Part of the good soil will soon include a nearby residential structure, The Crib, a renovated former convent. The residence is intended to buttress the success the program has had in helping trainees re-imagine their lives. The intent is to help them move from a history of a lack of success and low expectations while living in precarious and dangerous environments to a whole new set of presumptions. In essence, the vision of the residence -- one of shared meals, cooperative learning and accountability -- is a place of security that will, of itself, teach new expectations of security and predictability.

Putthoff doesn?t know what he?ll be doing in 10 years, but if his own ideas about institutions hold, he?ll have moved on. There are lots of things he could see himself doing with enthusiasm and passion. ?I think there?s this incredible new imagining that can go on.?

For now, though, the imagining is occurring in this small piece of Camden. In the one bit of dualism he allows himself, he sees two sides of an argument on how to proceed: either with expansive thinking that doesn?t limit possibilities regardless of numbers, or conceding that because the number of priests is shrinking, ?we?re going to have to retract.?

His work with Camden youth won?t allow him to say ?there?s less.? They already know less. Black and Latino males, especially those with a seventh-grade reading level, already know ?the game is pretty much over? if they don?t take advantage of an opportunity like Hopeworks. ?We have to talk that way around here. You?ve got to say that that?s the reality of the world you live in. But it?s not the fullness of the world that?s possible.?

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