

Bringing passion to what the world most needs

Tom Roberts | Nov. 20, 2009



Patrick Keenan

20th in the "[In Search of the Emerging Church\[1\]](#)" Series.

Patrick Keenan, 26, Formation Director at Hopeworks 'N Camden, was born and raised in Western New York, just south of Buffalo and went to St. Bonaventure University, an institution run by the Franciscans.

It was through St. Bonaventure's that he connected with the St. Francis Inn in Philadelphia, one of the older soup kitchens in Philadelphia. The kitchen is open 365 days a year and on average serves about 400 meals a day to homeless, elderly, those who have lost jobs or families having difficulty making ends meet.

NCR editor at large Tom Roberts interviewed Keenan on his work in Camden, academics and on being a young Catholic. Following is an edited version of that conversation.

NCR: How did you come to work at this spot in Camden?

Keenan: I spent a year working with the operations of the soup kitchen and then another year working with children and families who were guests of the inn, who came to the inn for meals. We were doing different things like working with utilities or housing issues or other such things.

One of the things I remember is I loved all the youth I was working with. I can remember all their names and I have pictures and all those kinds of things. I remember going to this one street, it's called Hope Street. It's very ironic because on Hope Street, this grandmother was raising seven of her grandchildren and a lot of their parents were in jail.

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[A place that breaks the poverty cycle](#) [2]

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The children in that house -- one was six, one was nine and another one was eleven. She was raising seven grandchildren in this very tiny house that had all kinds of different problems I was trying to fix up and work with her on, but the children would have so much fun when we would be out in the community doing things.

Then we'd come back to Hope Street, they'd get out of the car and they'd run right down to the corner where their older cousins were. Of course what they were doing on the corner wasn't good. They were selling drugs. They were participating in the local economy, so to speak.

I knew that if we didn't do something about it, those children were going to end up exactly like their parents, by no fault of their own, other than the fact that they wanted to do what every other six- and seven-year-old did and that was hang out with their older family members, be part of the crowd, have fun.

I knew when I saw Hopeworks, that this was a place that could break that cycle, that could create a different world, a different space in which youth could really discover who they are without the pressures and demands of that outside world that's very hard and unyielding. So that was my journey.

NCR:How did you find out about it?

Keenan: Hopeworks has a great network. They designed the website for the St. Francis Inn so I was responsible for the website and I just clicked on the Hopeworks website. That's the cool part about how Hopeworks uses technology; it reaches a tremendous audience.

NCR:Anyone can come here, but to stay here, you've got some very clear requirements, don't you?

Keenan: Once we get youth in the door, we're very intentional about creating a trellis, a structure that they can latch onto and grow, so we don't look at structure as a way of controlling people, but really as a way of creating new opportunities and for them to recognize their strengths.

They're used to structures that are oppressive. They go to schools that are mini, armed detention centers. The Camden High School has almost a small police unit there. Things are locked down; it's very oppressive.

So we want to use structure to open up new ways of living and show them that if you follow a structure, it can help you achieve your dreams, open up jobs and help you deal with education, and family and things like that in a more productive way.

NCR:Give me the profile of a typical kid who comes in here.

Keenan: If we look at our historical profile, we are almost split evenly between male and female. We are split almost evenly between Latino and Black, and about 69 to 70 percent of the youth who come here are economically disadvantaged, meaning that their families would meet the requirements for free or reduced lunch. That's the standard we use. It's a pretty common standard.

Our average age in the after-school program is about 15 and in our day program it's about 19 or 20. I'd have to look up the exact number.

NCR:How many of the 1,100 had high school diplomas?

Keenan: In our day program (and this is just off the top of my head), I would say roughly about 40 percent have a high school diploma and that's high for Camden. [The city has] a 70% dropout rate.

So they're graduating people who normally would not get it, but they haven't made any structural change. God

bless the Camden school district because they don't have much resources of anything to do with that.

NCR: You're getting post high school kids without degrees and who have been out for a number of years?

Keenan: Most of them have been out of school three years; some of them have been out six or seven years. Some of them left in eighth grade.

NCR: Of those 1,100, what happens to them?

Keenan: The number that we're probably proudest of is 96 have gone to college because of their involvement in Hopeworks. That was one of our original things, to bridge the gap for those who left high school and to get them into college so they could do their high school diploma and associate's degree simultaneously.

GED programs are another trap. People will go and get stuck in them and never get their GED, never go on to a post secondary education. We use what's called the Ability to Benefit program. It's a way of getting federal aid to those who don't have a high school diploma and that allows them, if they score high enough, to get into school.

NCR: You're talking about junior college most of the time?

Keenan: Yes. We had our first youth graduate with their master's degree this year.

NCR: How many of the rest have gotten GED or something else?

Keenan: Tracking once they leave to give you an idea of the water we're in, we've created 287 jobs here. That means out of those 1,000 youth, at least that number has completed our curriculum, earned a job with us, been able to participate, make money, things like that.

What we often will see, because of economic circumstances, we'll get them set up with their Free Application for Federal Student Aid, their college application. We'll get them started and then they may begin college at a later date because they're either working to provide for their families or things like that. We're not as good at tracking those because so many of them come and go. We're working with a lot of youth.

Yesterday I was talking to you about the Dreams plan. That's the most important thing for us. Technology is a trick for us. It's to get youth connected in to what they want to be in the future and to get them learning. Those are the two main objectives. We really want to connect them to their dream.

NCR: Tell mw how that works.

Keenan: Formation is an interesting thing. It comes from a religious sense, from the Jesuit communities, but formation is like Play-Doh. You take the can, turn it upside down and you've got this lump. It's some color and you've got to make something out of it, so what everyone does is roll it around in their hand, play with it, come up with some ideas, mush it back together, shape something new.

That's what dreams are about. Youth, especially the youth that we work with, may have never been asked the question what they want to be or how they're going to get there, if they have been asked what they want to be. They have no idea how to get there, so it's about coming up with a plan and mashing those ideas around and forming them and making them their own, having them claim ownership for not just the dream, but the actions and the steps they need to do to achieve that dream.

We also talk very concretely about their strengths. In Camden, we love to talk about negative things. We talk about at-risk youth, dropouts, delinquency, recidivism -- we love the negative. But here at Hopeworks, we really

celebrate and recognize the positive. We talk about their strengths, we talk about how they're a leader and then we ask them, "Why do you want that dream?"

So we connect into that inner part and purpose; we call it "mission." We talk about that inner part of why they want that particular dream. The dream may change, but for some of them, there's something about overcoming a challenge. For others, it's about giving back to those who have helped them. For some, it's just being joyful. Their dream may change. They may go from being a social worker to being a nurse, or a teacher to a doctor. That's fine, but as long as we get that inner purpose?

NCR: How do you understand what they want?

Keenan: We ask them. We use a very relational approach. Formation is about connecting with someone in a one-on-one setting and really listening and appreciating them. We ask them to tell stories. I might ask them what "be big" means to them. What are three things they've done in their life that are big?

I might ask them what four of their strengths are and they might put down "football." Then we'll have a conversation about what it takes to play football. You've got to practice, you've got to have endurance. We'll talk about what it means to be a good friend. You have to be patient and listen.

We try to get to those things. We let them have natural conversations and out of that, my job is to help them identify and recognize those pieces that will be helpful to them in achieving their dream.

NCR: They have to become competent in technology.

Keenan: That's one of the biggest things. We have to give them a moment of success. If you've dropped out of school, come from an abusive family; if you look at parents, some of them have a high school diploma, many of them don't. A lot of times they're people that came from Puerto Rico when they were young, might have left school at eighth grade and just been working in the country ever since.

So they don't see success, it's not visible. We don't live in a place where we hold up success, or the success we do is unrealistic. It's the rap stars, the basketball players and so on. Technology is incremental, they start out small, they start building.

There are milestones where they can hang their picture on the wall or present their website to other people so that they get into this notion that you can take this very big thing, like learning how to build websites, and break it down into smaller pieces and be successful at one of those small pieces, even if it's just getting three exercises done a day.

We talk about goals in our morning huddle. We want a community of those who have dreams and those who are setting goals, and for them to share that -- that's where the community part comes in. It's really cool. It's a fun thing to watch.

NCR: How well do they get to know each other?

Keenan: They become a family, without a doubt. I remember three weeks ago and I was sitting here with one of our youth that now has gotten his associate's degree and he's taking the next step. He just signed a lease at his apartment up in New Brunswick to go to Rutgers New Brunswick to complete his four-year degree, his bachelor's.

Both he and his friend came in at separate times, but what both of them said is that they couldn't have done it without the other. They needed a peer in their life who was positive and who was focused on something bigger

and who wanted to do good things, because too many of their peers were going in the opposite direction.

NCR: You're asking them almost to remake their stories; not change their past, but alter their perceptions of what the past might dictate?

Keenan: If we lived in the past, in a place like Camden, you'd never have success. It's been on a gradual, downward spiral, so what we want to do is we say very distinctly we're different here. That goes back to the structure. We say that when youth believe that they can't, when they have all these doubts, we try to find that piece of them where they've experienced some kind of success--everyone's had something in their life but it may have just been buried under lots of layers.

When we use technology, it's about getting people to read for a purpose. In school, they may have read a book and had a history class and forgotten, or they might not have had a book to read. They may never have had to use that skill of reading something on a screen and then doing something and then asking a question about it. It's reshaping the way that they think about education. We have people in our training room at all different levels because we want them to rely on each other.

Sometimes it even works better down here because youth are hungry for it -- those youth that want it -- that's why we respect the dream. Some youth just are all talk. They have this dream but they really don't want to do it because when it gets down to it, they don't want to do the work.

But for those who want to -- and there's a significant number of them -- to have a place like this where you start taking ownership for your learning, ownership of your actions, ownership of your choices, where you're held accountable and responsible to things and people are depending on you and you're setting a goal publicly and stating it before other people, they like that.

NCR: So you're changing their expectations of themselves.

Keenan: Absolutely. I love the fact that you used that word -- our whole summer program was based on expectations. I called it "Clearly Expected." We sent youth out with these little Flip cameras and it was kind of a little ethnography experiment.

We had them interview all different kinds of people -- parents, older adults, their peers who are older than them -- and ultimately we had them interview themselves, all around what they expected for and from themselves. Two youth edited the whole thing.

They were the ones who took all these voices and all these hours of footage and put them together into one piece. They're the really cool ones because then they're the youth, and they're filtering out all of this to get to the most specific things that strike them.

Our youth are strong and they do accomplish great things. What we hope that they take away is this attitude, this new way of looking at things, this new way of viewing life. We were talking about the statistics, 1,000 youth, how many have gotten jobs and how many have taken college and things like that.

What we don't know is the number of youth that have gone out and just taken this idea that if you've got a goal, if you've got a dream, you can recognize it, you can state it and then begin working towards it.

They may not remember the HTML coding. They may not remember the finite parts of the technology, but if they can take that idea away with them and also know while they were here, that there were other supportive individuals out there -- youth, older, younger -- that were positive, I think that's where we talk about transforming Camden.

One of our biggest things is building supportive community. We can't count the number of youth that have just taken that sense away, but I know that they're strong. I know that even the youth who leave (and I have a whole filing cabinet full of those youth) still carry something with them because I've been in the streets, I've been in Camden County College and seen youth I never thought I'd see again, and there they are signing up for classes four years after they were at Hopeworks.

There's something they can take away from here that's very important and that has a transformative effect on that, and that's that there is something positive in life, that dreams are a possibility, but I've got to make choices that are in line with them, I've got to act according to that, I've got to let that end shape me now.

NCR: What about yourself? How many years have you been here now?

Keenan: This is my third year.

NCR: Where do you see yourself in ten years?

Keenan: First of all, I love Hopeworks and I want to stay here. I love academics, but I also love praxis so I'm eager to remain here and continue to learn because it's a great place to learn.

NCR: What's your academic background?

Keenan: Political science and economics. I say bullshit and bullshit with numbers. What I learn from the youth here is far more important than what I could ever learn in a classroom. Ultimately I would love to take my experiences here and go back to school and find out ways of building youth leaders. I spend all day talking with youth about their own leadership and their own strength. What's important is that one successful youth does our program a million hours of good because their story infects other people.

NCR: Is Hopeworks an initiation of sorts into a new way of thinking?

Keenan: Absolutely. I'm going to murder this quote, and I have it on the tip of my tongue. One of the theologians said that "success is when you bring your passion to what the world most needs," or something like that. Youth need to discover that. They need to recognize it. They might have known it once, but things all around them told them that that wasn't worth it or that wasn't important. "We are a third-world country within the United States. Right across from the birthplace of our nation and a place that has tremendous wealth. We have our own stock exchange in Philadelphia. We're very privileged. Surrounding us are some of the most affluent suburbs in the country, the main line of Philadelphia. There's no reason why Camden should be here, but for some reason we find it acceptable."

NCR: What's your dream?

Keenan: Leadership does not have to be extraordinary. It doesn't have to be someone becoming Barak Obama. I love what he's done by elevating the spirit of showing what's possible, but it doesn't have to be extraordinary. So many of our best leaders in the community are the grandmoms, grandfathers, uncles and aunts who go unrecognized every day, but they have such a strong way of bringing people together and keeping them together in difficult situations and through tremendous adversity.

What I want to do, what my hope is, is to find ways that youth can lead other youth. We need another generation of those leaders and we need to find the ones that don't necessarily need to be the doctors and lawyers because too often, those people, once they gain security, they leave a place like Camden.

We need the ones who are going to inspire other youth, to be living symbols of what's possible, the opportunity

that's out there, what brings hope. Camden has something like 700 non-profit organizations. We don't need another non-profit, but we need someone to build another generation of youth.

I benefited from having a dad that was in the military, growing up where there was lots of leadership development. I could be part of the model U.N., I could be part of the debate team, student government -- all those things are ingrained in the culture I grew up in.

What youth here need to experience is that ability to really become leaders and experience their own kind of leadership, to experience something positive and affirming that shows them that if they lift up their voice and put some weight behind it, find their strengths and are self-confident and self-aware, that they can have an amazing ability to impact the world and impact their peers.

It just takes one of those youth to stand up and have a voice and to be self-confident and that's contagious -- that infects other people. That's what's transformative, when you know that even in a place like this, another youth can lead. My hope is that they lead the change. Their leadership is far more powerful?

NCR: Where are you ten years from now?

Keenan: I'd like to do capacity building. I'd like to work behind them. I'd like to encourage them and continue to do the work that I'm doing here. Jeff [Jesuit Fr. Jeff Putthoff] is really innovative at building successful youth because he realized it wasn't just about pushing them through the program; it was about connecting them to purpose.

Any good community organizer knows that you have to find someone's self-interest. Formation is about finding your self-interest on a one-on-one level and implementing that within a community of like-minded people. That's what I want to do for other youth. This model works.

That's why we hire executive coaches at \$10,000 a week for consulting. We do that because we know that if you can tap into an executive's self-interest and their purpose and their passion, it has a huge effect on the company that they lead. If you do that to a youth at a very earlier age and can someone support that and continue to help them build one another, that can rebuild Camden.

NCR: Does injecting Catholic imagination into the wider culture mean something to you?

Keenan: Francis had that beautiful experience where he, in his dream, hears "rebuild my church" and he starts very literally. He's a pragmatist: "Let's go out there and literally take this stone and put it up and build the little chapel"

In the end, this movement that's been sustained for 700 years now, 800 years, is really about rebuilding the church through people and through a radical commitment to social justice, to really calling attention to the brokenness of the world and saying it's all right to be part of the lowly, it's all right to be part of the minority. It's all right to experience God in the places that are most repulsive to us. Francis kisses the leper; none of us can really imagine what that must have been like.

I can only liken it to my experience with some of our youth that have been in jail and you can see that even when they talk about their dreams, they're giving you the right answer. Not their answer, but it's the "I've got to get by the judge, I've got to get by my PO, I've got to get by my social worker, so I'm going to tell you something you want to hear," and they're really tough.

NCR: How do you wear that down?

Keenan: Time and patience and showing them that you are different, that you're willing to listen, to value the dignity of the individual human being, that seed that God planted within you. I would say it's great that there is a Catholic spirit here, but Catholic also means universal, so our call is really to be Catholic, but then to find ways to make that identity heal these broke places, rebuild the church.

Our church is not always about the sanctuary and Eucharist and things like that -- those are the things that give us spiritual nourishment -- but then we need to go out and find ways of nourishing the world through our presence.

NCR: When I used the term "imagination," I wasn't thinking about concrete Catholic stuff necessarily, but rather an almost indefinable element.

Keenan: That's what's going to keep people in my generation in the church. We're very disillusioned with the structure. I should say, speaking for myself and my friends and the communities of believers that I'm in, we're very Catholic. We have a very difficult time with the institutional church.

I'm really likening this to Francis' experience. We could spend time rebuilding brick by brick, institution by institution, that sense of church. What Francis soon found out was that his calling was really to work with individuals and people and to do works that are challenging and difficult but?

NCR: What is your problem with the institutional church?

Keenan: Our biggest thing is that we work in some of the poorest areas in the country.

NCR: Your friends also?

Keenan: Yes.

NCR: Where are they?

Keenan: They're in North Philadelphia and Camden and Wilmington, Delaware. Some of them are now in Boston or in D.C.

NCR: In poor settings?

Keenan: Yes, and we're living out our faith.

NCR: You're all from St. Bonaventure?

Keenan: Yes, but we come from many different schools -- Jesuit, Franciscan.

NCR: There's that influence in the background?

Keenan: Sure. All of us are living out our faith in a very personal way. The problem is that then we go into the institutional church and there's a disconnect between what's being said in the pulpit and what's being done in the streets. Also you look at some of the debates we're obsessed with -- my whole thing is, no matter where you stand on abortion, which is pivotal in the Catholic Church, I think we should be pro-life.

But for me, that means pro-life for all the years, not just natural death and natural birth. Those are the two opposite ends of life. We have to be pro-life from the moment of conception to the moment of death, meaning that when someone's a third-grader and doesn't have health care and is getting a substandard education, that's

shameful, that's sinful.

We're committing a grave social injustice and we're allowing that to happen. We're being like the scribes and the Pharisees of the Old Testament; we're worried about these heady things and when life begins and what to do and how to argue, and a theological position on it, and here's the five points and here's what this council says and what our history says.

But what we're talking about is we have to strengthen life at all of its points and we have to be there for the people that are in all their different forms of brokenness. We have to be there for the people in their addiction, we have to be there for gays and sexual minorities, we have to be there for women in oppressed situations and we have to do that by our example, our faithfulness.

NCR: Where do you live now?

Keenan: I live less than four blocks from the St. Francis Inn in the Kensington section. You could say it's North Philadelphia.

NCR: Are you married?

Keenan: No.

NCR: Do you ever see yourself being married?

Keenan: Sure.

NCR: And you see this as your life.

Keenan: Undoubtedly. There's no way I could have ended up here. I came from a privileged, upper-middle-class background, had an excellent education, was able to travel abroad, could have done grad school immediately after without any financial worries and led a very sheltered, comfortable life.

And somehow, by the working of the holy spirit, I sit here today in Camden, making far less than many of my cousins and counterparts are, talking about social justice issues that I didn't even know existed growing up. This is the work of the holy spirit. It had to take a lot of different twists and turns.

I could have even gotten done with my volunteer year, as so many people do, and said, "That was very nice but now it's my time to join the real world." This is a way of living. This is when you find what God is calling you to do and has taught you through experiences.

God wants to be near to us; that's why we have the Eucharist. We talk about a God that desires to be so near to us, to visit us daily, to humble himself in the form of bread that can be dropped, that can be desecrated, that lives very simply in a simple place, in a church.

God wants to be very close to us. That's our Catholic identity. That's what we've been for two millennia. When you come to a place like Camden, you realize how close God wants to also be to these very broken places, and that through knowing that love, you can be the Eucharist. We can be the nourishment for a broken place.

That's why I say it's a life vocation. It couldn't come from any other faith. The Catholic Church has a very beautiful way of institutionalizing this and that's what we need to get back to. We need to get back into people finding that sense of what it means to be a Eucharistic community and stop worrying about all the stuff that doesn't touch the everyday person. That's what's going to repair the church, as Francis learned.



Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, is traveling the country reporting on church life. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org. Read the full series here: [In Search of the Emerging Church](#) [1].

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