

# Hopeworks

*New Jersey youth achieve their dreams with the help of a Jesuit*

Sabrina Gomez, once a Hopeworks trainee, is now the lead trainer there. Hopeworks teaches youth in Camden, New Jersey, to create not only web pages but more—a future full of hope.

*by Deborah Hirsch*

**J**onathan Lugo works intently at the computer screen in front of him. For the past hour, the twenty-year-old has been designing a web page for Hopeworks, a nonprofit founded by Jeff Putthoff, SJ, that trained and then hired him to use this technology.

Four months ago, Lugo didn't even know what "HTML" meant. The high school dropout was working at a hospital laundry and living with his mom in Camden, one of the most dangerous cities in New Jersey.

He heard about Hopeworks from a friend. There, in a nondescript row house on a busy North Camden street, he met other young adults like him—unsure of their futures, jaded by the crime and poverty surrounding them.

He met staff members who showed him how to make computer graphics and volunteers who challenged him to improve his reading ability. Hopeworks staffers encouraged him to enroll in a nearby GED program and to think about trying out some classes at a community college.

In the past, Lugo says, "I felt as if I wouldn't be able to do it. I wouldn't have any support; I would just have me. Now, I really want to go so I can start my own business."

Those ambitions are exactly what Hopeworks staffers hope to hear from those who go through their program. The premise is technology training, but helping them discover their potential is really the point.

"Our program is not designed

to produce a perfect web designer," explains Patrick Keenan, one of the agency's eight full-time staffers. "It's designed to give people opportunities to grow personally and professionally and apply that to any career."

It all started about ten years ago when Putthoff was asked to work with youth in Camden. What began as web-design training gradually expanded to include digital mapping, video production, computer networking, literacy coaching, and career counseling.

Today, more than 1,200 young adults ages 14 to 23 have participated in Hopeworks programs. Soon, the agency will expand further with supportive housing for trainees hoping to get out on their own.

Putthoff, Hopeworks' executive



Gerell Vandergift and Shawn Mack, Hopeworks' literacy director, are creating a digital story. Hopeworks trainees script and then collect images and music to tell their own stories. It's a multimedia approach to literacy training.

Hopeworks trainees Rebecca Solemia and Joshua Rivera collect data on property usage in Camden, marking exact locations of schools, businesses, and vacant lots and even individual street lights, trees, and mailboxes. Hopeworks creates maps, interactive and printed, for government agencies and businesses, with the data.

director, was inspired by Jesuits at his alma mater, Rockhurst High in Kansas City. He joined the Jesuits while at Boston College and later earned an MA in English from Loyola University Chicago. During theology studies at Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., he took some courses in Camden. The city, ravaged by abandonment and decay, captivated him.

"I just remember this incredible sense of hope in this place that was so messed up," he recalls. "I wanted to be part of that."

After he was ordained in '98, Putthoff returned to Camden as an associate pastor at Holy Name Parish. Inspired by Homeboyz Interactive, a successful web development company founded by Br. Jim Holub, SJ, in Milwaukee for that city's at-risk youth, Putthoff began plotting his own technology training program. With support from pastors at two other churches, he launched Hopeworks in 2000.

For Putthoff, leading the start-up was an opportunity to fulfill a guiding principle of his religious order: serving those who would otherwise not be served. There was certainly no shortage of Camden youths who needed help. According to a recent census survey, over 40 percent of the city's 15- to 24-year-olds live below the poverty line. The two local high schools have atrocious drop-out rates and a reputation for violence.

"We live out Jesus' message of caring

for those in great need," Putthoff says. "We're living our faith here."

## Getting off the ground

When he started Hopeworks, Putthoff remembers that he had two tiny problems: "I knew nothing about business and nothing about computers." He figured, however, that he could learn along with the youth. Learning to learn, he says, was at the heart of the program he envisioned.

Technology seemed to be a perfect medium because it didn't cost a whole lot and offered immediate feedback, Putthoff says.

"You can make the page red and then blue and you can do it and redo it," he says. "The problem with technology is that it keeps changing, but that keeps us learning."

Although the concept and the tools seemed right, Putthoff says it didn't take off right away.

“We were just incredibly naïve,” he says. “We thought if we just do this, people will be able to come and be successful.”

Not so. Over the years, he says, the staff learned that Camden youth needed more structure. In 2003, they added a “formation” office to help trainees shape plans for their futures. Two years later, they added academic training.

Today, up to 250 youth come through Hopeworks’ doors annually, and about 50 of them land part-time jobs there. Nearly 400 small businesses, churches, government agencies, nonprofits, and other companies have hired the agency’s services.



Renovation is underway at a donated building that will be housing for former Hopeworks participants who are working or going to college and need a stable living environment.

## The office

Putthoff huddles with two other directors, trying to determine how to digitize a points system that the trainees use to track their progress. The office walls are almost completely covered with framed newspaper clippings, photographs, awards, and certificates.

Jpeg, an orange tabby also known as the “head cat” of the house, lounges on top of a computer box, while two other “house” cats—Mac and PC—skulk through the hall.

In the adjacent computer labs, trainees in the day program practice typing. Some of them dropped out of high school. Others finished but never figured out what they wanted to do next.

They go through computer and literacy training at their own pace, earning a weekly stipend. In addition to technical work, they’re expected to answer doors and phones and give tours of the building.

Professional directors then teach them how to produce videos, create web pages, and make electronic maps using geographic information system (GIS). Then the students must pass a test before they can begin working on projects for paying clients. They can earn up to \$12 an hour, depending on experience.

## It’s academic

Another group of trainees comes in for an afternoon program. Even though these students are all in high school, they’re required to take assessment tests and academic training. That’s because Hopeworks trainees enter the program, on average, with middle-school reading and math levels, says literacy director Shawn Mack. After twelve weeks of targeted instruction, the trainees in the

day program often increase their reading by two grade levels, Mack says.

“For me, the biggest moments are when the youth are doing something they never expected and they’re proud about it,” says Mack, a former public-school English teacher.

The challenge is getting them to stay in the program so they can experience those moments, he says. Hopeworks is completely voluntary. Sometimes, Mack relates, circumstances at home or other personal issues keep the trainees from staying dedicated.

Formation director Keenan tries to help them see beyond those problems by focusing on their dreams. At Hopeworks, “DREAMS” stands for “Dynamic, Realizable Efforts to Attain and Maintain Success.”

“This is purpose,” Keenan says. “We get up in the morning because there’s something we want to do. We’re about discovering that here. The dream is what guides it, otherwise you’re just going through the motions.”

Sil Rodriguez, 23, credits Hopeworks for motivating him to get out of the rut he had fallen into. Rodriguez had completed a GED and worked at a string of jobs by the time he heard about the organization last year. The atmosphere was different, he says, more laid-



Hopeworks staffer Tarren Anderson and executive director Jeff Putthoff, SJ, huddle over a plan to track their students’ weekly progress.

back. And staff members didn't just promise to help him get a job and go to college—they delivered.

"Not a lot of places can do that," Rodriguez says.

Most important, he says, being there inspired him to enroll in community college. He plans to finish there in 2011 and then attend a four-year college to study business administration.

"I'm not the same person I was," Rodriguez says. "I think more before acting or reacting."

### Clients

Unlike many other nonprofits, Hopeworks is partly self-sustaining. Of its \$800,000 annual budget, up to \$200,000 comes from client revenues; the rest comes from grants and donations, Putthoff says. Corporate sponsors include Campbell's Soup, Symantec, and Bank of America.

Clients pay between \$1,500 and \$5,000 for web-site development, and \$50 an hour for updates or add-ons. Most of them, such as United Way and Food Bank of New Jersey, are based in the area, but ads on Google and word of mouth have also landed projects from companies in London, Beijing, and Toronto.

Daniel Roccato hired the organization last year to build a site for his investment company, Quaker Wealth Management ([www.quakerwm.com](http://www.quakerwm.com)). Roccato says there were many responsive, creative, high-quality web developers from which he could choose, but with Hopeworks he had the added bonus of knowing that he was helping Camden youth.

"There's a clear line of sight between our being a client and the success we've had there and the success in their core mission," Roccato says. "I like that."

### Expanding the product line

Hopeworks has also built a reputation for coming up with valuable products for the city. The youth created an online Camden Resource Guide complete with geographic, demographic, property, and census data. Early last year, they launched an interactive map

## Hopeworks 'n Camden

- Worked with more than 1,200 young adults in Camden, N.J.; up to 250 a year lately
- Created 245 part-time technology jobs, about 50 of those in the past year
- Helped 91 trainees attend college; of those, 44 are currently enrolled
- Awarded 511 college credits
- Served more than 270 web clients and 120 GIS clients
- Enlisted up to 70 volunteers at any given time
- Raised an \$800,000 annual budget from grants, donations, and paying clients

that residents could use to notify officials about abandoned houses, broken street lights, suspicious activity, graffiti, trash, overgrown lots, and other urban problems. The map tracks the number and type of complaints as well as whether they get resolved.

The trainees also designed a city street map. They did the geographic research and formed a sales team that pitched the product to potential buyers. Local advertisers such as Rowan University, Susquehanna Bank, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters were also marked on the map as part of their sponsorship.

"What you're learning is something you can put on your belt because not a lot of people know how to do this stuff," says trainee Vanessa Rivera, age seventeen. She started working at Hopeworks almost three years ago to help pay her tuition at a Catholic high school.

### Housing

Next year, Hopeworks will finish converting a nearby former convent into a housing co-op for up to eight young adults who need a stable place to live. Putthoff says the CRIB, short for "Community Responding in Belief," links perfectly into what the agency already does to help youth achieve success.

Holy Name Church donated the 5,000-square-foot building to Hopeworks, which secured a \$600,000 forgivable state loan to rehab it.


The home will be open to anyone eighteen or older who has participated in Hopeworks and who is employed and either in or applying for college.

In addition to each other, the housemates will have CRIB manager Paul Richards to help them stay focused on their dreams.

Lugo is already contemplating moving in. His mom is planning to return to her native Puerto Rico soon, but Lugo says he's not sure about uprooting now that he's found a niche.

"I have friends here now, so I have more community support than I did when I first started the program," he explains. "I'm making a lot better choices. Just the thought of being in the same environment with seven other people who are working toward the same thing you're working toward . . . from what I hear, you're going to need that support."

Like the youth, Putthoff is working on dreams of his own. He envisions a steady stream of trainees going from Hopeworks' headquarters to the CRIB, then to college, and on to stable jobs. He'd like to form an institute that would pass the agency's best practices for youth development to other organizations interested in making a difference in their communities. After accomplishing all that, he says, who knows? Ten years ago he never imagined that he would be managing a nonprofit specializing in technology training.

"I think the only thing I for sure know is that my life will keep going this way," he says, laughing. 



Deborah Hirsch writes about the City of Camden for the *Courier-Post* in South Jersey. She's covered local news, features, and entertainment for newspapers in Florida, North Carolina, New York, Wisconsin, Montana, and Mexico.