

Hope at Work

Computer training in inner-city Camden provides a scaffolding for youth development.

BY GEORGE M. ANDERSON

I AM THE ONLY MALE MEMBER of my family on either side who hasn't been in jail," Mark Ford tells me. "During high school I sold and used drugs, I dropped out, and got kicked out twice." We were speaking in a row house in Camden, N.J., that serves as office space for Hopeworks 'N Camden (www.hopeworks.org). The relatively new organization focuses on at-risk youth in one of the nation's poorest and most violence-prone American cities. Anyone hearing only this much about Mark, a young African-American, might assume that he was on his way to being yet another lost inner city resident. He is indeed on his way, but in the opposite direction. He is now Hopeworks's lead trainer in computer technology.

Although the training focuses primarily on computer technology, its executive director, Jeff Putthoff, S.J., told me during the course of my daylong visit that this form of technology is a means rather than an end—"a scaffolding for youth development," as he phrased it. When he first came to Camden as an associate pastor at Holy Name, a nearby Jesuit church, he soon saw the need for working with the black and Hispanic youth of the neighborhood. "The issue was how to reach the kids on the corner, and at first I did all the usual things, like

helping with a baseball league and creating an after-school program." But then, following a visit to the computer-focused Homeboyz program in Milwaukee, Father Jeff, as those in Hopeworks call him, began to think of starting

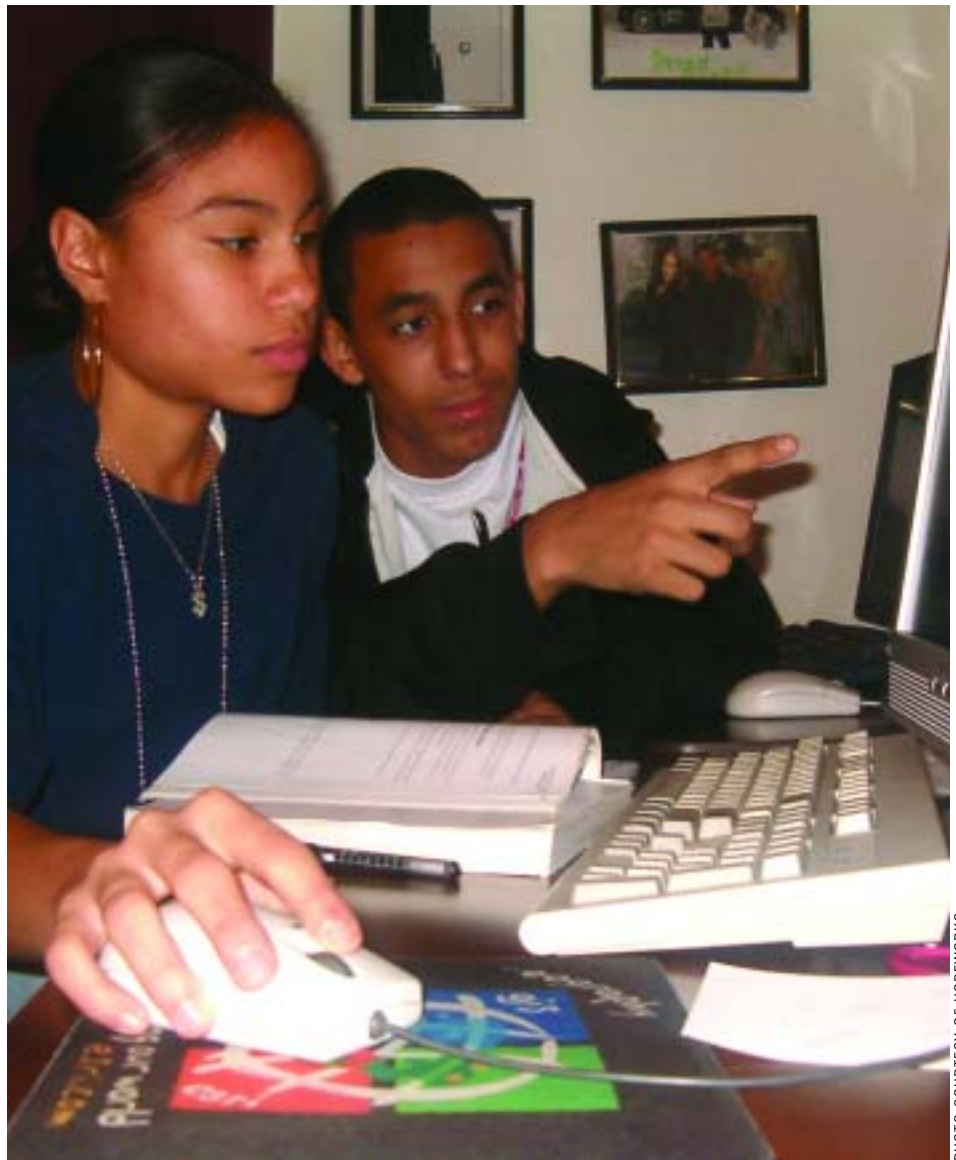


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GEORGE M. ANDERSON, S.J., is an associate editor of *America*.

Trainees learn computer skills at Hopeworks, a project conducted for youth in Camden, N.J.

something similar for Camden. Later, he met two local Lutheran pastors who supported the concept. Grants were applied for and received, and the program came into being in 2000.

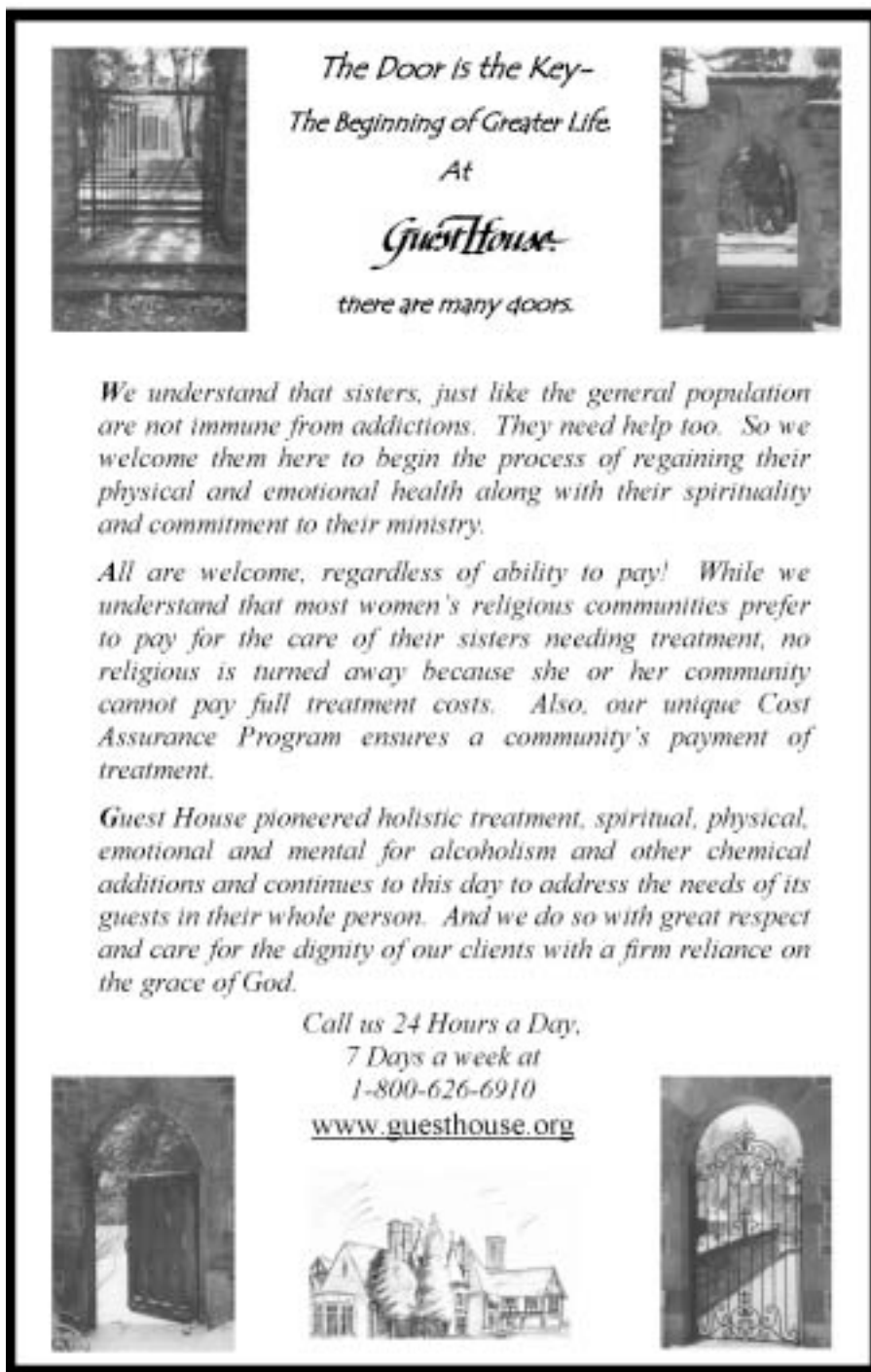
During the morning and the afternoon I met other trainers besides Mark Ford, as well as many trainees. The words *students* and *teachers* are avoided. "We don't want to use the pedagogical method of students sitting in a classroom with a teacher who has the answers," Jeff explained. "The idea is that all are learning to learn on various levels. Learning to Learn—that's our motto." The online curriculum was developed right at Hopeworks. "The young people just log in and move through a series of lessons at their own pace," Jeff explained, "one lesson at a time."

He acknowledged that the online method does not suit everyone: "Some simply don't like computers." But most who come to Hopeworks do, in part because the results are immediate. "They see a blue or red background, and learn how to center a photograph, for example," he said. "And the online curriculum is set up so that the trainees can take baby steps that later lead to the bigger steps." Jeff went on to cite Mark Ford as a primary example. "Mark can now create Web sites himself for some of the small businesses that are our clients, but in the beginning he had no idea he could do anything like that. He would have laughed at the idea. Now, other young people here see him as a role model of what they can do. The technology," he concluded, "is what allows it to happen."

But Mark Ford is more than a young role model on the technical level. The change in his whole lifestyle has sent out a message to his peers. "When I go back to the neighborhood where I grew up," he says, "the guys there see me and say: 'Man, I can't believe you're going to college and using computers. You're the same guy who used to do drugs with us.' Hopefully," he adds, "the change they see in me is a permanent one." As with the young men in his old neighborhood and the surrounding Camden area, racial profiling is a painful reality with

which he has considerable experience. "I've often been pulled over by the police, both local and state," Mark says. "Then, when everything checks out about the registration and my driver's license, they'll give me a ticket for not having my seatbelt on. But now," he adds with a laugh, "I have a seatbelt that goes on automatically, so they can't get me on that anymore."

In answer to the question, where would he be without Hopeworks, Mark replies: "I'd either be in jail, at home doing nothing, in a job I don't like or dead." Now, however, with only a few more credits needed for his associate of



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arts degree at Camden Community College, he plans to continue later toward a bachelor's degree at a local university. He is currently managing both to carry a full course load at the community college at night, and to work days at Hopeworks. "I guess you don't get much sleep," I said. "Not really," was his laconic response. He has now created his own Web site (www.markearlford.com) and hopes eventually to start an Internet business.

IN THE AFTERNOON, when the younger trainees come in for the after-school program, Jeff greets them at his desk in the front room and introduces them to me. Any sign of hanging back elicits comments like "Name! Eye contact! Shake hands! And do all three at the same time!" He virtually barks out these commands, but the young boys and girls—one was only 13—clearly respond to his gruffly friendly manner. When I asked one trainee about his hopes for the future, he said: "I want to work with computers where my aunt works." He lives with his aunt. His mother lives in an adjacent township. As to the boy's father, he said he did not know where he lives. A number of the trainees live with grandparents. Scattered and tenuous living arrangements of this kind reflect what Jeff calls the fragility of the lives of many of the young people in the program. "It's not uncommon," he said, "for us to be working with someone for two months, and suddenly they just disappear. Frequently we don't know why—maybe a fire, or an arrest, or the family's wage earner loses his or her job."

Drugs are a major cause of the fragility. Not only was Mark himself a onetime drug dealer and user; his own father died as a result of drug involvement. Crack cocaine can be

bought on the street for as little as five dollars, and marijuana is so available that, as he put it, "a lot of people use it just to get by day by day. They use it when they wake up, and they use it before they go to sleep." Then there are the heavy adult burdens borne by youth not ready to carry them. Mark said that some of the girls who have come to Hopeworks already have babies, or else have to take care of younger brothers or sisters in their families.

Adding to the overall sense of burden and fragility is the ever-present violence of Camden. Jeff speaks of it as "Iraq in my backyard." A public research firm that publishes annual ratings of cities, including violent crime indices, in 2004 named Camden the most dangerous city in the nation. Jeff observed that staying present to young people living in the midst of such violence and such poverty-driven hardship is one of his major challenges.

And yet, with over 700 young people having passed through Hopeworks since it began, the name itself underscores its purpose. "We call it Hopeworks—all one word—because one feeds into the other," Jeff said. "The hope, and the work we and the trainees do, they go together. Our door is open, and many have learned enough skills to find paying jobs." Some, in fact, have served several of Hopeworks's own clients by creating detailed neighborhood maps using software called Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

In a city where 60 percent of the teens drop out of high school and 20 percent of adults are unemployed, some trainees' goal—to advance their education through its literacy program—itself represents a notable accomplishment. Jeff explained that thanks to the federal Ability to Benefit program, young people at Hopeworks can start taking college courses at the Camden Community College without having a high school diploma. "Once they've had a set number of classes and have reached a certain educational level of proficiency, they can take the high school equivalency test and, if they pass, be granted a high school diploma even while they're continuing to work toward an associate of arts degree in the community college," Jeff said. "And at the same time, many of them are also continuing their computer learning here at Hopeworks."

It could be argued that when backed by a concrete system of supportive learning of this caliber, hope can indeed work in transformative ways. As for Jeff himself, he emphasizes that in terms of vocation, staying present to those at Hopeworks in the midst of Camden's ongoing violence and destitution means staying present to the cross itself. **A**

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Without Guile



"Don't you just hate the way blacks never match perfectly?"