

Ferguson – A City of Hope



(AP Photo/David Goldman)

Lisa Tebbe, left, embraces her husband, John Powell, both of Ferguson, Missouri, while looking over the sidewalk memorial near the spot where Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson.

“How did a social justice teacher not know?” The question haunts John Powell to this day.

John teaches social justice as part of the theology curriculum at Villa Duchesne and Oak Hill School in St. Louis. His wife, Lisa Tebbe, is an alumna of the Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Charles, where she is the admissions director.

The pair have grown up, worked in, researched and lived a life focused on social justice. So, how did they not know? How did they not see or understand the tension in Ferguson, Missouri, where they have made their home for nearly ten years?

Looking for a great home in a diverse community some years ago, Lisa and John were out for a Sunday drive when they spotted the home of their dreams. They moved to Ferguson in 2006 engaging in the community; they loved Ferguson, they were home. “As we drove down the street, people would stand up from their gardening and wave; Ferguson had the small town feel for which we had longed,” Lisa recalled. New events, new businesses were popping up, and Lisa and John found themselves participating, supportive, and proud of their community.

August 9, 2014, they were sitting at home listening to music, Lisa said, when she received a text. Someone had been shot in Ferguson, on the east side

of their town, not three miles away. Surprised, she got online to look for information and was stunned to see that, at the time, the body had been lying in the street for four hours already. A few hours later protests and prayer services started at the police headquarters, just a few blocks from their house. What was happening?

John speaks of the paradox “of being attracted to an area for its diversity, its community feel, and yet, not being aware of the injustices occurring right in their area.” After the shooting of Michael Brown, that changed. John and Lisa engaged in the community in deeper, more meaningful ways. They started attending meetings and protests and prayer services. They learned about the court systems, the way the community functioned. They heard their fellow Ferguson citizens share their stories of being pulled out of the car for a simple traffic violation and having obscenities screamed at them. That was not the Ferguson that Lisa and John knew.

If being a student, in fact a teacher, or administrator, in a Sacred Heart school has taught them anything, it is to find your passion, stand up and make a difference for people. And that they have done. The social justice teacher and his wife realized that they wanted to, in fact needed to, put into practice what John was teaching in the classroom. For them personally, Lisa offered, “that is the silver lining,” and do they ever practice those teachings now.

A group emerged in the aftermath of Michael Brown's shooting called ONE Ferguson; developed by engaged community members, it was founded to bring a voice to the city council in an effort to drive the foundational changes needed in the community. John is a deeply committed member of that effort. Whether the topic was city activity, a new police chief or Department of Justice discussions, ONE Ferguson is an important voice for the community focused on both changing what was wrong and encouraging all community members to participate in making the change. Sometimes, helping the hurting community know that they have a voice is the hardest part. So, sponsoring community dialogues, city council candidate forums and debates, encouraging the community to vote are all part of the work that needs to be done.

As the community continued to try to heal, the City of Ferguson resurrected its Human Rights Commission, designed to eliminate discrimination in housing,



A vibrant heart painted on a board that was used to cover broken windows in Ferguson, Missouri, is a visual sign of the hope in the community.

public accommodations, and employment; ensure fair treatment of individuals in the community and, importantly, expedite complaints. John sits on that commission. The Commission received a state award for the work it is doing, but John and Lisa quickly point out that the work has only just begun.

The wounds are deep and the work will take years. But John and Lisa are hopeful that in the work being done a model will emerge that can change the dynamics, the conversation not just in Ferguson, not just in St. Louis, but in the country.

Yes, they believe the root cause is still racism, something not fully and deeply understood by many. But they see much hope. They see hope in the faces, in the people of Ferguson, in so many coming together and engaging as a collective to make changes. They see hope in those who are working so hard, dozens and dozens of people in the past eighteen months, with families and jobs and very busy lives who are finding time to be involved, run for city council, knock on doors, to get people engaged.

They started feeling hope profoundly on the morning after the non-indictment of Ferguson Officer Darren Wilson in November of 2014. The question that arose was "What do we do the next day?" So, Lisa explained, "At 9 a.m. we went out to where the unrest had been to try to help. And scores of people were already there: they were there with brooms and



Lisa Tebbe and John Powell actively participate and support ONE Ferguson as it works to bring the voice of the community forward to the city leaders.

dustpans and supplies. Many were not even from Ferguson; they just came to help."

John and Lisa see and feel the Sacred Heart charism daily in their hometown of Ferguson. The RSCJ who have touched the lives of Lisa and John have "given me the moral compass to do what is right and follow my truth," Lisa shared. And, while the question of how did John not know haunts him, the hope that the social justice teacher and his wife are bringing to this broken community is profound, as together they work to reveal God's love in the heart of Ferguson. ✝

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