

John Wood speaks to other young adults on faith, life issues

Written by Terry Cregar | The Catholic Miscellany
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GREENVILLE—Most of us were warned at a very early age never to listen to strangers. But John Wood ultimately ignored that advice, and now he and those he has touched during his still-young life are happy that he did.

For the past several months, the 19-year-old Florida native has been speaking to Upstate high school youth on the importance of God in his life.

“I’m not a theologian or someone with a Ph.D.,” John said. “I just talk about things that I’ve encountered, things they’re going to have to face. Basically, I’m just telling my story.”

It’s a story that for John centered early on a child’s love of athletics and competition.

He played defensive end and tackle on an eighth grade Pop Warner League team while living in Florida, before he and his family moved to Greenville four years ago.

Like many people in their early teens, John’s faith life at the time was limited.

“That was a period where playing sports was the most important thing to me. I went to church, but it was more like just going through the motions.”

Home-schooled from the start, John’s parents enrolled him in a 10th-grade group program out of neighboring Easley.

One of his classes was debate. John said he hated the class initially, but stuck with it into the second semester when he joined a local debate club.

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“In the second semester we went to tournaments and competed, which was OK,” he said.

The tournaments, along with the competition they generated, convinced him to stay with the club into his junior year, and by the time he reached 12th grade he was the club’s president.

John and his debate partner would win a tournament that year held in North Carolina and John would earn several speaker awards.

“I was spending a lot of time on it by then,” he said.

It was at that North Carolina tournament where a woman whom John had never met approached him and suggested he take his talent for speaking beyond high school.

“The woman said ‘I really like your speaking style. I think you’re a good speaker, but I challenge you to use it not just here, but to serve the Lord.’”

John said he had given a talk during his senior year in high school at a youth group retreat, but that was as far as he had taken it beyond the debate club.

“That lady woke me up,” John said. “I began thinking about how can I use this gift that God has given me,” John said.

John then met with Chris Stansberry, youth director at St. Mary in Greenville, who invited him to speak to the youth group.

He gave his first talk last summer at St. Mary on the broad topic of the seven heavenly virtues versus the seven deadly sins.

“At that time, I really didn’t have anything specific that I wanted to talk about,” he said. “I didn’t have anything that really got me on fire.”

Since then, John has refined his talk, thanks in part to his postsecondary studies at Greenville Technical College where he’s working toward an associate degree in biology. He plans to transfer to Clemson University next year, where he’ll join his sister, Mary, who is currently a junior there.

“After taking some social science courses, I encountered a lot of things that everyone is going to have to encounter,” he said, specifically God’s purpose in one’s life and how young people like himself can get into a mental state where they can hear God speaking to them.

“A lot of youth groups today do a great job of directing young people to love God with their hearts and with their souls,” the St. Mary parishioner said. “But, when it comes to the mind, we tend to stop there.”

John said what typically happens is that high school youth move on to college, where they are blown out of the water.

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“I don’t give a talk to give them all of the answers, but to get them interested in learning on their own,” he said.

His current talk is called “Listening for God’s Call,” and it typically runs 30 to 40 minutes. “I don’t want to make it too long, but at the same time there’s a lot to be said.”

John said he leans heavily on his debate schooling in formulating and reinforcing his message to young people — only in a much longer format. At the same time, his talent for speaking can be linked to his parentage.

John’s father Steve is the founder of St. Joseph’s Covenant Keepers and host of Faith & Family Radio in Greenville. Steve has written several books on marriage and family and given talks at retreats.

John said he leans on his dad’s practical experiences, and his deep reservoir of research materials in helping to formulate his own message.

“My dad has a library that would boggle your mind,” John said, and whenever he had a question, instead of answering, Steve supplied him with a stack of related books and materials.

“He gave me the resources so that I could arrive at the answer by myself,” John said.

John has a page on his father’s Web site where groups can learn more about his message: www.dads.org/johnwood.asp. He speaks in the Southeast on weekends during the school year, and practically anywhere else when classes have ended.

Stansberry, who has known the Wood family since they moved to Greenville three years ago, described John as “a vibrant speaker who provides an effective witness of what it is like to be a young adult in today’s world.”

He said John is effective at telling youth how they can find protection, encouragement and resource in the Catholic Church.

At the moment, John said he plans to obtain his undergraduate degree in biology, with the ultimate goal of becoming a physician’s assistant, getting married and raising a family. Taking that route would allow him to build on his speaking talent.

That being said, however, he hasn’t ruled out a larger role in serving God.

“I’ll go down one path, but I haven’t ruled out the priesthood if that is what God is calling me to do,” he said.

For now, though, John seems to be enjoying the chance to know God, and himself, a little better, and sharing that journey with his peers.

“I’m 19 and I can relate to youth groups,” he said. “So, if I can do it now, then why not?”

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Since starting the talks with youth groups, John said he has benefited from the experiences as much as, if not more than, those who come to hear him and his message.

“I get really deep into everything I talk about, which has helped me grow and learn a lot about God and his creation,” he said.

As to where this ministry will take him ultimately, John said the answer to that question is out of his hands.

“It’s wherever God leads me,” he said.

The odds are good that John will be listening for that direction, even if it comes via a stranger.