

## Interview with Elizabeth Petheo

(October, 2009)



**Elizabeth with Ni-mah Warfa,  
one of the conference planning  
committee members**

[Note: Elizabeth and I had the following conversation on the day before she gave her keynote presentation at our annual Social Justice Conference with Youth. Kevin LaNave]

*Are there experiences in your family, qualities about your parents, stories in the past of your family, that really have played an important role, and can you speak to one or two of those?*

I guess the general circumstance of the household being of one culture, and the outside being of another culture, left me open and flexible to things that are different – things that sound different, different foods.

It was always kind of natural to me. Well, what's the big deal about that? Isn't that just how it is? Aren't everybody's parents from Hungary?

So I think that that cross-cultural experience on top of what I think of are really core Minnesota values – around looking out for each other, and participation – certainly that were expressed here at Cathedral High School reinforced, started to come together, and wove this cloth that was, OK, “international” on one hand, but “Oh, we've got to look out for each other”, it's about how we're all in this together.

So I think that that dynamic really helped to inform the path that I walked down.

*What are some connections that you see between who you've become, and your experiences in high school?*

You know, what's funny about it is that I never really thought of it as that big of a deal.

Maybe it's that sense of urgency [when faced with a situation or issue]. Can we do something about it? What can we do now? What are those entry points?

I still think that way, and I still feel almost relentless – I don't know if that's a good word to use – but I think that, because I take the work so seriously, and I feel that our time on earth is limited. Your time to have an impact on these issues, it's not that long. I mean, I could have sixty years; or I could have just tomorrow, and that could be it.

*What do you want young people to understand when they make choices about their future, about the impact of those choices on other people around the planet?*

I think about it as if there's this massive ball of yarn, and everybody has a piece tied to their finger. The string is going across every person's finger throughout the entire world, and when I go like this, that's going to pull somebody else that's going to pull somebody else, and that will have an impact all the way down the line.

So it's thinking about that connectivity, with every decision and every choice.

These are really big and complex issues. I think the most important thing to recognize is that you do have power in this; and there is a recognition of connection.

*Are you hopeful – and if so, what do you base your sense of hope on?*

I've always been hopeful. I think you have to be a person of hope in order to do this work, because there are so many opportunities to get discouraged and say, "Forget it; I don't want to think about it; it's too complicated, it's too difficult, it's too personal, it's too global." So if you didn't think there was something worth changing, then I think you would do something else, so "Yes". "Yes, I'm hopeful."

*What do you base it on? What do you draw from?*

That is tomorrow's keynote. But the stories of others that I've seen walking this path, and the people who have taught me through their life and through their choices, through small decisions along the way, that they've been able to have a big impact.

PS – A couple of years ago, Elizabeth shared with me that "much of my interest in social issues came from my early exposure through opportunities like 'Day on the Hill' and 'Seeking HOPE.'"

Elizabeth was the first student to suggest that CHS consider giving students the opportunity to participate in a "day on the hill" at the state capitol -- first in the spring of 1996 (with "Hunger Day on the Hill", coordinated by food shelves and other hunger-related organizations around the state), then in the spring of 1997 (with the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition's "Day on the Hill"). In both cases, CHS was the first school in the state of MN to have students participate, and thus opened the door for many other schools to do so.



**(left to right) Katie Rothstein, Carol Dombrowski, and Elizabeth Petheo visit with Bishop John Kinney at Day on the Hill, March, 1997 (photo courtesy of St Cloud Visitor)**

Elizabeth was also one of the students who participated in the difficult "neighborhood meeting" about the siting of a new emergency shelter for people experiencing homelessness that gave rise to a group entitled Seeking HOMes for PEople (Seeking HOPE, for short) that eventually did several vital actions of public-consciousness raising. In fact, she was the first student to speak at that meeting, in the midst of a very hostile crowd.