

A man with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a black clerical shirt and black pants, stands with his arms crossed on a polished wooden basketball court. The court floor features large, dark red lettering that reads "MARAUDER NATION". The background shows the court's lines and a dark wall.

Ben Brenkert, nSJ

At Home in the *Marauder Nation*

by Wendell J. Laurent

PHOTOS:
JAMES DeANGELO

Across the Hudson River from downtown Manhattan, nestled in a once-decaying but now booming neighborhood in Jersey City, lies the hallowed home of the *Marauder Nation*. This all-boys Jesuit high school, more commonly known as St. Peter's Prep, or simply "the Prep," has served central and northern New Jersey since 1872. Its moniker, the *Marauder Nation*, derives from the mascot of its 16 varsity athletic teams, but as many alumni, students and faculty will attest, it is much more than simply a mascot: the *Marauder Nation* is a state of mind. Second-year novice Benjamin Brenkert has invaded this lair during the spring semester of 2007 for his "long experiment," one of several experiences outside of the Jesuit novitiate that comprise an integral part of [formation for novices](#). Far from being an unwanted intruder, however, since his arrival Ben has experienced "a grand sense of welcome and invitation into the lives of the students and faculty." In fact, he has come to feel "very much at home in the *Marauder Nation*."



Ben's warm reception and initiation into the "Marauder cult" has translated into a very busy work schedule, but one that he welcomes and embraces wholeheartedly. "We've spent so much time in the novitiate studying the vows, it has been nice to actually live them, to be on mission, to be available to others at a moment's notice." For Ben, being available has meant moderating a homeroom class, teaching two freshman religion classes, helping to coordinate freshman and sophomore [Christian Service Program](#), helping to coach the freshman baseball team, and assisting Fr. Tom Benz, SJ in Campus Ministry with a plethora of duties.

Among Ben's most rewarding experiences thus far has been helping to facilitate the [Emmaus Retreats](#), which have had a decades-long and storied tradition at the Prep. According to Ben, "The Emmaus Retreats help students move from being self-absorbed to looking outward

to the needs of others. Grounded in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, these retreats are one of the foundations of the school's mission to form people for others."

In addition to the Emmaus Retreats, Ben's Campus Ministry duties include facilitating day retreats, such as the father-son retreats and the *Magis* retreats, giving reflections at Mass on Wednesday mornings, co-moderating a student Christian Life Community ("CLC") group and directing three students in Mark Link SJ's *Challenge* version of the *Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life*. Ben has

also found unpredictable opportunities for service, such as offering a listening ear to students who walk in to Campus Ministry needing to talk, rushing a student with a broken ankle to the emergency room or assisting a maintenance worker in acquiring a snow plow. The idea of being free and available for service takes on a life of its own in the praxis of Ben's work at the Prep.

Another rewarding aspect of Ben's ministry comes from helping to coordinate the freshman and sophomore Christian Service projects. While parts of Jersey City continue their slow



gentrification into a “gold coast,” students at Prep also encounter people in need in their work at local Boys and Girls Clubs and at the Jersey City Medical Center. Ben feels that even in this short period of time

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he has made an impact on the lives of some of the students he has mentored, all of whom he describes as “enthusiastic and genuine, good souls trying to grow up in a world with so many options and so many problems.”

It has been a tremendous gift for Ben to be present to these students and to help them navigate the treacherous waters of contemporary adolescence.

One could easily expect someone with Ben’s schedule and work load to burn out rather quickly. However, Ben finds strength and sustenance in prayer, especially the *Examen*, the daily Jesuit prayer of self-examination. He is heartened and inspired not only by the members of the Jesuit community with whom he lives, but also by the surprising number of fellow Neil Young and Emmylou Harris fans he has found at the Prep! “It has been such a privilege for me as a novice to live in this great Jesuit community, not as a ‘guest’ but as a ‘member’ of the community. I have felt incredibly graced to live with such a diverse group of Jesuit priests and brothers who do so much good work for the Society and the Church, and



also to have such a tremendous experience with our lay colleagues at the Prep. The preparation for life in the real world as a Jesuit has been extraordinary.”

Ben has also found working with the students to be inspiring in surprising ways. “When I first arrived at the Prep I was a very methodical and organized person, but I now realize I am being called to be more flexible and adaptive. It has been quite challenging to run a day without knowing what’s going to happen. But the beauty of it is that it *can* happen. In the novitiate, everything is ordered. In a high school, nothing is ordered. A school breathes on its own schedule. It has helped me to deeply experience availability, detachment and indifference.”

While Ben has “fallen in love with the *Marauder Nation*,” he realizes his time there

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is limited. He is looking forward to returning to the novitiate in Syracuse at the end of the semester and reuniting with his brother novices. He views this “long experiment” as the culmination of his formation in the novitiate, a program that has also afforded him opportunities to make the 30-day retreat, to study Spanish in Cochabamba, Bolivia, to help gut 27 houses in hurricane-devastated New

Orleans, and to work as a Cancer Care Technician at Calvary Hospital in the Bronx. But it has been his

time at the Prep that has compelled Ben to take greater ownership of his vocation. Far from the structure and schedule of the novitiate, Ben has had to take charge of and make time for his own prayer in the midst of a full apostolic day, which keeps him on the move from the moment he wakes up until he retires at night. “It has been quite challenging, but the graces I received on my long retreat have continued to unfold for me during my time at the Prep, and they have helped to bring me greater clarity in my vocation as a Jesuit.”

Ben will spend some time this summer with novices from around the country studying the documents of the Society of Jesus in Denver, CO. But he will spend most of the summer back in the routine of the novitiate, with the grace of God, preparing to take vows in August. The time for studying the vows and Jesuit life will be over, and the time to truly live those vows will arrive. As Ben will attest, his time in the *Marauder Nation* will have been one of the best teachers of all. ∞

