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The Theme of the TEDxNJIT Was Cities

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The theme of the recent TEDxNJIT event was “Urban Phoenix – Renewal and Revitalization.” Speakers from business, academia and the arts discussed the future of the city and especially what role technology can play in enhancing urban life.

The talks, held on Sept. 29 in the Jim Wise Theater at NJIT, focused on a range of subjects: how improved health care can spur urban renewal; the role of art and dance in the urban environment; new models for innovation, architecture and design; and how better urban schools can reduce poverty.

Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno, Newark-based filmmakers and founders of Bongiorno Productions, opened the evening by discussing urban education. Despite the growth of downtown areas, they said, cities like Newark continue to be plagued by poverty. And the best way to lift urban residents out of poverty, they added, is to improve the education in U.S. cities.

As their model they cited St. Benedict’s Prep in Newark, N.J., a school whose students, from the poorest neighborhoods in the region, all graduate and attend college. Under the guidance of the monks of Newark Abbey, the school’s philosophy follows an ancient Benedictine tradition known as “the Rule,” which is also the title of a documentary film produced by the couple.

“The monks really care about the boys and give them what they need,” said Jerome Bongiorno. “They are there for them 24/7 and help them cope with baggage such as broken homes, crime, drugs, guns and fear. They also foster a sense of togetherness among the students, which is the key to their success.”

Other speakers included Georreen Theodore, an associate professor of architecture at NJIT and principal member of the Interboro Team, winners of a “Rebuild By Design” grant following Hurricane Sandy; Donald Sebastian, the president and CEO of the New Jersey Innovation Institute (NJII), who discussed information such as the ‘new electricity and created a slideshow that, by way of time travel, illustrated what a 2020 high-tech city might look like; Tomas Gregorio, the senior executive director of healthcare delivery systems at NJII; Adesina Sampson, coach of NJIT’s Highlanders dance team; Michael Dixon, the general manager of IBM’s Global Smarter Cities Business; and Taneshia Nash Laird, founder and CEO of Legacy Business Advisors. The Highlanders dance team performed to bring the evening to an end.

By Robert Florida

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Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno, Newark-based filmmakers, discuss how to improve city schools during the recent TEDxNJIT.