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Elected Official, 24, Hopes to Interest Peers in Politics

By MEREDITH HOFFMAN

SOUTH ORANGE, N.J. — Three blocks up from the historic brick train station — past the Grid Iron Waffle Shop, the grocer and a flock of quaint two- and three-story buildings — Alex Torpey was working at his desk one recent afternoon in South Orange’s Village Hall.

Two young women who visited his cluttered office asked him to speak at a school health fair, and Mr. Torpey gladly agreed. Maybe, he said, he could even play sports with the children.

“I used to play tennis,” said Mr. Torpey, stretching out his long legs, covered in bluejeans. “I remember the good old days, when I had time to get exercise.”

Those good old days were three years ago, when he was 21 and a student at Hampshire College in Massachusetts. Since May, when he was elected village president as an independent candidate, he has been eating, sleeping and tweeting South Orange affairs, as the equivalent of a mayor.

While many of his peers are expressing their disillusionment by occupying and then getting thrown out of public spaces, Mr. Torpey has a more conventional view of how to create change, at least within the borders of this middle- and upper-middle-class suburb of about 16,000 residents.

His youthful conviction inspired his two 21-year-old afternoon visitors last week to solicit his help for the health fair.

“I started [following him on Twitter](#), and I thought it was the coolest thing he’s 24,” said Ashley Manz, a student at Seton Hall University in South Orange. (Mr. Torpey has almost 2,500 followers and has posted more than 3,300 messages.) “I set up this meeting on Twitter, and yeah, I have a crush on him.”

Mr. Torpey does not seem to be in office for the dates — or the money, as the position is unpaid. He runs a new-media consulting company, for which he often works in Starbucks, with breaks for chats with constituents. He also attends graduate school part time, in public administration and public policy, at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, and he volunteers 15 to 20 hours a week as an emergency medical technician.

“Sometimes I’ll be tending to someone bleeding, and another person will be like, ‘Aren’t you the mayor?’ ” Mr. Torpey said.

He is clearly attached to his new identity. When he left town for Thanksgiving, he said, “I felt like I was almost leaving my children behind without a baby sitter.”

Mr. Torpey has focused on making local government more accessible, by creating video updates that [he posts online](#) after each public meeting; by holding open-office hours; and by being constantly connected via social media. His desk, in an office that he converted from a storage closet, is packed with two laptops, two

cellphones, a walkie-talkie, speakers (that at any given time might be playing mood music), the occasional jar of peanut butter and a water bottle.

Mr. Torpey's governing style differs from that of the previous village president, Douglas Newman — "Like night and day," said Steven Rother, the village counsel. Mr. Newman, who did not run for re-election, was involved in even the smallest matters of government, while Mr. Torpey tends to delegate, Mr. Rother said.

"It would have been difficult with any new person coming in," Mr. Rother said, "but this particular transition was complicated by the fact that Alex is as young and inexperienced in government as he is."

The change was initially a challenge for the rest of the village board, all members of Mr. Newman's political party, Pure Progress. Among the six trustees is Janine Bauer, whom Mr. Torpey defeated, 708 votes to 694, to win the president position, a result she attributed to low voter turnout because "people thought that I was such a shoo-in."

Still, Mr. Torpey's fast learning curve and receptiveness to other's ideas — "Not like a bull in a china shop," Mr. Rother said — quickly improved the situation. "Alex is creating warm and fuzzy feelings by reaching out to people," Mr. Rother added.

Kelly Malloy, one of Mr. Torpey's classmates at Columbia High School, the local school, said she respected his boldness in seeking office so young.

"It took courage and a sense of adventure to do this," said Ms. Malloy, 23, who said Mr. Torpey had always expressed an interest in government.

He also "was always testing rules and boundaries," she recalled; one example was his bringing a lawn chair and leaves into class in his senior year.

Elizabeth Matto, director of the Youth Political Participation Program at Rutgers University, said a 2003 study showed a drop in the number of young people holding political office, but an increase in their community engagement through volunteering. She said that she recently noticed more young local officials, but that it could just be that they were receiving more attention.

Young people tend to care about their communities, she said, "but because of a decent amount of frustration with the political process they pursue volunteering."

As for Mr. Torpey, he hopes other 20-somethings will follow his lead. He said that he planned to create a nonprofit group to encourage young people to run for government offices independent of political parties. He said he hoped to speak with [James R. Kern III](#), the 22-year-old mayor of Pohatcong Township, N.J., about his idea.

Maybe, Mr. Torpey said, he will even entice some Occupy Wall Street protesters.

"I hope that when people go back home," he said, "they're not just like, 'O.K., that's my activism for the year.'"