

With a physicist's exactitude, Holt brings the science to the political

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The visitor is restless and talkative, unable to find a comfortable position on the couch -- equally unable to let a moment's silence pass without offering an argument in the form of an aphorism.

"The digital revolution is over -- it's time to move on," he says.



Tony Kurdzuk
/The Star-Ledger
New Jersey
Congressman
Rush Holt (D-
12th), at right,
walks down the
steps of the
Capitol on his
way back to his
office in the
Longworth
House Office
Building in
Washington,
D.C.

"We are building things atom by atom."

Then, "This is Star Trek replication -- the thing that makes anything."

His name is Neil Gershenfeld and he is director of the Center for Bits and Atoms at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he is professor.

By contrast, the man Gershenfeld is trying to persuade -- U.S. Rep. Rush Holt from New Jersey's 12th District -- sits quietly. The few questions he asks show Holt understands what his guest is saying. Gershenfeld senses he is making few points.

"Tell me what to do and I'll do it," he says to Holt. "Give me homework."

An inside joke. The MIT professor was once a student at Swarthmore College and his professor then was Rush Holt, a physicist and once head of Princeton University's Plasma Physics Laboratory.

Now Gershenfeld wants Holt to help him obtain federal money to build a national network of what he calls "Fab Labs," one in every county of the nation. The computer labs, he says, will train people to make virtually all they need. The thing that makes anything. "Distributed invention."

But Holt is unimpressed: "No one in appropriations is going to give you \$300 million just because the idea sounds neat. They want to know how it will help their people."

The encounter illustrates the blend of populist politics and physics that is Rush Dew Holt. He is the son of the youngest person elected to the Senate -- also Rush Holt -- a Depression-era maverick from West Virginia who conducted a one-man filibuster against changes in the New Deal and, his family believes, inspired Frank Capra's "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

His mother Helen, too, was in government -- a federal housing administrator under seven presidents. She is 95 and has an apartment in Washington where her son stays.

The younger Rush was more interested in science than politics. He was 50 years old before he won his first elective office in 1998 -- this Congressional seat.

"Not sure why I waited. I guess the circumstances were just not right."

Because he is a scientist, Holt is a magnet for people like Gershenfeld who want to talk to someone who understands them.

"We are here because of your background," says Cathleen Campbell, head of the U.S. Civilian Research and Development Foundation. "You understand the message."

Congress created the foundation -- with offices here and in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan -- as a means of employing Soviet-era scientists who might otherwise be selling their sometimes-dangerous skills to enemies of this country.

He spends time, too, with David Stark, a former Trenton resident and Rutgers engineer, who tells Holt he has developed the "Holy Grail" of insulating windows, one with 10 times the energy efficiency of the best around, durable enough to last 40 years.

"We ran into a scientific roadblock and need help," says Stark. His company, Eversealed Windows Inc., needs money to fix the problem.

The discussion then turns to chemical bonding and vacuums and inert gases.

"Sounds like a fundamental problem to me," Holt tells him.

The congressman sees no contradiction between politics and science.

"I've always been fascinated by how things work," he says. "And politics is how people work together."

Many scientists, he says, have a "psychological" problem with politics.

"They think it's dirty." But he doesn't think it is: "I grew up believing politics was a good thing. The intellectual intricacies of politics are at least as challenging as those of physics -- and they count for something in the real world."

Behind him, as he speaks, is a campaign poster for his father -- "A Man for All the People."

While he does the required political things expected from a congressman, he does it in an understated, almost detached, way. He's not a back-slapper, not a man-hugger. Holt spends hours calling officials in the five counties in his district -- Mercer, Middlesex, Hunterdon, Monmouth and Somerset -- to tell them how much they'll get from the stimulus. He'll ask about the progress of a repaving project but not about the mayor's spouse.

Holt shows up at required events, appearing before Jewish groups in Washington and the annual conference of Jersey letter carriers, but talks more about ideas than personalities -- pensions and naturally occurring retirement communities -- while others making the same circuit will offer personal anecdotes.

That doesn't mean he's not ambitious. He is. He wants to be a senator.

"You can accomplish more in that position and I truly believe I would be the strongest candidate for statewide office," he says. "I didn't just win as a Democrat in a Republican district, I made a Republican district a Democratic district."

Both Senate seats are held by Democrats. Holt won't mount a primary challenge against an incumbent, but he can wait: He is a fit 60 -- he swims every morning and arrives at the office before his staff.

His district -- which includes Princeton -- contains one of the most educated constituencies in the nation. He understands its appreciation of culture and history. He commissioned architect Michael Graves and artist Thomas George -- the son of cartoonist Rube Goldberg -- to design his election posters. Only he calls it "poster art."

Holt saw to the House passage of a bill to help raise private money to preserve historic sites from the American Revolution and War of 1812 -- a bill that passed 394-14 while he stood on the floor and, somehow oddly alone in a crowd of other representatives, watched the tally board. But by the time he got back to his office, the White House had called to offer congratulations. Later, President Obama summoned Holt to the White House to witness the signing of orders permitting stem cell research and forbidding political interference in science-based agencies.

While he waits for a chance at higher office, Holt exploits the opportunities his specialized knowledge provides. Last fall, he organized a conference on science and politics at Princeton. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi participated and, when it came time to put the stimulus bill together, Holt says she called on him.

"That bill now has \$22 billion for research and other science activities," he says. "It originally had single-digit billions. I can take credit for getting more in."

Pelosi also named the relatively junior lawmaker to chair the Select Intelligence Oversight Panel, created in response to the 9/11 Commission report. It gives him responsibility, but not much public attention -- meetings are usually closed.

"He can't even tell us what's going on," says an aide. "And we can't reach him because he's in a secure room without a cell phone."

Holt says he believes he got the job because, on the House Intelligence Committee, he had developed a reputation as a defender of civil liberties.

"I am, in fact, a card-carrying member of the ACLU," he says, poking fun at a line used by Republicans against 1988 presidential candidate Michael Dukakis.

He's a member of the labor and education and natural resources committees. He uses his time at hearings not so much to make points as to learn.

"Where can I get the data to learn what you're saying can be proven?" In one week, he asks that question both of one expert on the benefits of paid sick leave at a labor hearing and of another at a natural resources committee session on safe corridors for wild animals through developed lands in the West.

Holt ended one week speaking before a nearly empty House chamber to press for a 9/11 Commission-type probe of the anthrax attacks that followed the assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. One anthrax-laden letter was mailed from his district. You could almost see Jimmy Stewart's Jefferson Smith in Capra's movie, although Holt looks more like Henry Fonda. You could almost imagine Rush Dew Holt Sr. filibustering in the Senate.

There was the senior Holt's populism in the speech demanding an investigation -- "There are important policy and public safety questions that our government has yet to answer satisfactorily" -- but the son's special touch was obvious when he cited one of those questions:

"Is the science behind the case sound?"