

Alive

WITH THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL

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volunteers

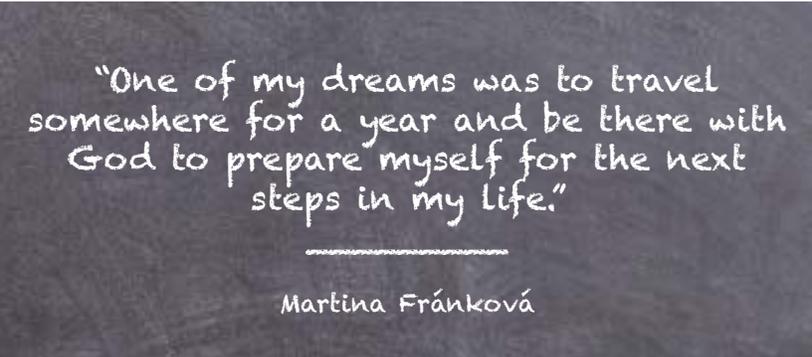
partners in our Franciscan mission

Bringing the Mission to Life

BY MICHAEL O'LOUGHLIN

Tau Volunteer uses sabbatical to live Gospel values

When Martina Fránková was searching for a way to spend her sabbatical year after six years of teaching middle school students in the Czech Republic, she began with careful discernment. And then she turned to Google.



"One of my dreams was to travel somewhere for a year and be there with God to prepare myself for the next steps in my life."

Martina Fránková

"A year ago, I was on an Ignatian retreat, and I was discerning many things, global and local," Martina recalled. "One of my dreams was to travel somewhere for a year and be there with God to prepare myself for the next steps in my life."

Using the popular search engine, she found a long list of Catholic volunteer options. When she contacted the School Sisters of St. Francis about our Tau Volunteer program, she told program coordinator Irene Perez that she was willing to try any number of opportunities: working with seniors, school children, the homeless. "I was really open to anything." Martina said she was "on cloud nine" when she saw how well Irene had matched her volunteer assignment to her experience and interests.

MICHAEL O'LOUGHLIN is director of marketing and communications for the School Sisters of St. Francis.

Martina's assignment takes her each weekday to Nativity Jesuit Academy, across the street from St. Joseph Center in Milwaukee. "In the morning I work with the kindergarten kids, and in the afternoon I help teachers with whatever they need. I need all the energy in the morning. In the afternoon, it is more contemplative. It's pretty well balanced."

"I really enjoy the little ones," Martina said. "I've never worked on a professional level with this age group. I'm surprised how sensitive they can be about religion, behavior, and distinguishing between good and bad."

"Martina has many gifts and talents, and one of them is her ability to relate to our students and be so patient with them while supporting each one of their needs," said kindergarten teacher Vanessa Solis. "Her openness to learning about a different culture from her own, and to share so much of her own culture with all of us, is contagious and has taught us all so much."

"Martina's dedication to service is at the center of what we instill in our students to be: 'men and women for others'," Ms. Solis continued. "She leads by example and this, in turn, helps our students see that we are all in this together in educating our students for a lifetime of Christian leadership and service. Her energy to help all of our students and work alongside the faculty to make our mission come to life each day has been an incredible addition to our team."

Living in Community

Martina lives in community at Maryhill Convent with eight sisters, and is impressed by how active and engaged the retired sisters are in social justice issues. "These women have seen a lot, so there is the wisdom.

It's interesting to listen to them. We talk about history and engaging in human rights. They write emails to their legislators. There are not many seniors in my country who would do that.

"I feel a sense of family with the sisters, which is what I was hoping I would experience," she said. "The more people there are in the house, the happier I am. We share supper and clean up after supper, and there's a chapel in Maryhill, so we go there to pray the Office. To me, that's such a great part of living there with the sisters: I can live in a house where there is a chapel."

Spiritual nourishment is important to Martina, and she tries to meet regularly with a spiritual director, though that's a challenge given that she doesn't have a car and the priest lives on the outskirts of Milwaukee. She said that, like the time she spent on the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Austria last year, she expects that the fruit of her time as a Tau Volunteer will only be fully evident after she has completed her term in October.

"I wrote a friend of mine a few weeks ago and I told her I would recommend [a Tau Volunteer experience] to everybody searching for something similar to

me," she said. "It was a case of trust and answering a calling. If I didn't trust that God would take care of me, I wouldn't be able to come so far for a year. I would be scared. The trust will lead you through. You don't have to be perfect, you just have to try."

Martina said she is praying the Novena to St Joseph, the patron saint for all working people, discerning what her vocation might be when she returns home.

"I like Nativity because the school makes such a difference. I really want to do something useful, something for God. That might be as teacher, or as a social worker working with immigrant refugees, or as a housewife, or through art. All these things are possibilities."

Whatever vocation Martina pursues back home, we are confident that her Christian faith and joyful spirit will have the same positive impact that they have had on her students, her coworkers, and our congregation.

To learn more about becoming a Tau Volunteer, or to support this program through your tax-deductible donation, visit our website, www.sssf.org.

Martina's patience and cultural sharing have been gifts for the students she works with at Nativity Jesuit Academy.

KHALA SAMPSON PHOTO

