



Parish Heartbeats: Stories of Faith In Action

Lady Ambassador in Our Midst

Never say never.

St. Margaret Mary 25-year parishioner Josephine Lewis was only mildly interested in genealogy, never dreaming that she would one day walk the land of her father's 1890 birthplace. "I'm too busy living life in the present to spend it exploring my past. But when an opportunity to teach conversational English to high schoolers in Turon, Poland dropped onto my lap, I jumped at that trip knowing I'd be within driving distance of my ancestry."

Although a highly accomplished business woman, Josephine was not an educator and was unfamiliar with WIESCO--Wisconsin International Educational Scientific Cultural Organization. Originally affiliated with UNESCO, now based in Milwaukee and once co-led by a retired priest, it sponsors several summer English language camps for up to 100 teens and native speaking English teachers in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Macedonia. Created after the fall of Communism to provide needed food, books and school supplies to freed countries, it has evolved into successfully lifting language barriers for over 25,000 secondary students since 1994. Little had Josephine ever considered any of those destinations as potential ministries beckoning her, and even less did she anticipate the spiritual richness awaiting her there.

Amazed at her own eagerness, within just hours of first learning in 2010 of the English camp concept she was registered and preparing to travel solo with eleven other geographically scattered volunteers for a 3-week teaching term in a boarding camp. "I never hesitated at that 'call.'"

While embarking on such a daunting adventure that offered neither training nor curriculum, Josephine recalls, "I just knew in my heart that God always sends me what I need. I forgot that walking was a challenge as I needed a hip replacement, but good doctors, steroid shots and trust made for a successful trip. I even eventually danced the polka."

In retrospect Josephine clearly sees her three WIESCO overseas teaching stints as vivid evidence of God's continuing providence. "I never intended a career in International Trade

or to be the first woman to represent the Port of Seattle in the Midwest." Yet the conversational English courses she designed and taught featured Seattle's seaport, Chicago's visitor attractions, Yellowstone National Park, American cowboy history and even laugh yoga. "Whatever your interests and aptitudes were, you developed classes on those."

Josephine had definite misgivings about her teaching adequacy, but her trust in God and WIESCO's trust in its volunteers resulted in a remarkably enriching ministry for her. "On that plane I realized that I was an unofficial ambassador of the US. I might possibly be those teens' only encounter ever with an American."



At last fulfilling her lifelong desire to counsel and mentor, Josephine completed a psychology degree at Illinois Benedictine University at age 66. That passion has served her well through WIESCO sites as far away as Moscow. "Nowadays when I think of all my unsolicited 'gifts' I am in awe. All the ministries and training I have undertaken have benefited me. In serving I have received abundantly."

Not yet reconciled to having reached her twilight years Josephine admits, "God keeps beckoning me with new opportunities that grow into ministries." She never hesitates to accept them, commenting, "It seems that God is not finished with me just yet. These days my volunteer ministry at Marianjoy Rehab Hospital in Wheaton has led me to pastoral work with patients." Having been in rehab there herself following three different replacement surgeries, Josephine cherishes the chance to give back. "I bring with me all the experience I've gained serving at SMMP. I wouldn't be the person I am today had I not been in this parish. My gifts were developed and honored here."

For more information about volunteering opportunities visit the WIESCO.org website.

By Marcia Mackenbrock

Parish Heartbeats is an occasional bulletin column that celebrates the ways St. Margaret Mary parishioners make a difference in the lives of others.