

Milwaukee Native Teaching English in Slovakia

CALLIE GAY
SPECIAL TO THE CATHOLIC HERALD

Kaitlin Trokan was 10, a student at St. Dominic Catholic School in Brookfield, when she started looking toward college and saving every penny she could to travel abroad. With an adopted brother from Guatemala and three foreign exchange student sisters from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, she credits her multicultural family for feeding her interest in other countries and helping her stay motivated to save the money she would later need to study in Italy.

After graduating from Catholic Memorial High School, she entered the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire to study education. She intentionally chose a secular university where she would be able to learn how to teach students in public schools and share her faith in a way that was less explicit than it had been for teachers in her Catholic schools.

She said, "At the time, I knew I was a Christian, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to remain Catholic."

She spent the year learning about non-Catholic denominations and Christianity as a whole, and she attended Bible studies that encouraged her to work on her personal relationship with Christ and conferences where she was taught how to speak about it.

"It was exactly what I needed. In learning about other denominations, I was able to step back and really decide to be Catholic."

She said the experience helped give her a firm foundation in her faith and prepared her for her vocation as a teacher, where she'll often be silently ministering to people who aren't practicing Catholics, and that by living outwardly as a person of faith no matter who she's surrounded by she'll be a better disciple for Christ and His Church.

In 2015, the summer before her sophomore year in college, Trokan used the money she'd saved up to study travel writing and beginner Italian in Tuscany, Italy, a small town an hour north of Rome. A few months after she came home from her travels abroad in Europe, sitting in the silence before the Eucharist in adoration, the idea of teaching abroad came to her.

"Right away I knew it was something I wanted to pursue," she said.

The long process to her final placement began the



▲ Kaitlin Trokan outside the opera house in Bratislava, Slovakia. (Submitted photo)

summer of 2017 when she had to get certified to Teach English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Part of her certification was classwork, but what she enjoyed most was working with other volunteers to teach beginner level English to recently relocated refugees in Milwaukee through Catholic Charities.

In January 2018, Trokan found out that she made it through round one of her application to the Fulbright Program. She was officially accepted to the program in March of the same year and all of her government forms were cleared two months later. In August, she flew to New York for a visa and 10 days later left for Slovakia.

She said, "I was never certain it was real and secure until I got on the plane. There was a lot of prayer in those months I waited, but specifically two of the same ones. The first was 'Lord, I know I want it, but I'm not sure if moving to Slovakia is right or not, so if you want me to go help me to get it, if not, don't let me get it.' The second was, 'Lord, if I get it, help me to accept it with humility, and if I don't, help me to accept it with grace knowing you have something better planned.'"

Trokan was assigned to Gymnázium sv. Edity Steinovej, Edith Stein middle and high school, in Košice, Slovakia, where she is teaching middle and high school English

conversation, high school global studies, and runs the English drama club.

She said, "I love global studies because we get to talk about a wide range of topics from religion to technology, feminism to economics, and politics from multiple perspectives in a discussion format."

Her students enjoy hearing about life in the United States and talking about how it's different from what they've seen on TV and in movies, but Trokan says they spend most of their time debating broader topics, like feminism, global politics, and the idea of truth.

While her school is bilingual, most of Trokan's sixth-grade equivalent students, who are just beginning at the school, know minimal English. She said, "That's a challenge for me, but my senior-level students are almost fluent, so I teach almost every level in between."

She said that going into the school year she expected it to be one of the hardest and greatest years of her life, but didn't expect the difficult parts to be eclipsed by the love she has for her students. "I get a lot of joy from them just greeting me in the morning, which may sound small, but it just starts class on a positive high energy note," She said.

In Slovakia, the students wait by their desk for the teacher to come in the room and say good morning before sitting down.

Trokan said, "I take it up a level and make it full of energy. I've had students tell me that the greeting exchange in my room makes their day and they leave feeling better. It's now one of my favorite parts of the day."

Trokan lives with a host family who speaks English; she says that most of her world in Slovakia can be navigated with her native language but her struggle to maintain conversations in Slovak helps her relate to her students. "When they say things like, 'I don't want to talk. It's hard to speak in English,' I can honestly say, 'I understand, because it's really hard for me to speak Slovak. It's the only way we get better, though,'" she said.

After this school year, Trokan plans to come home and hopes to teach in Milwaukee. She said, "I know that I'll be back in Slovakia, though, especially with the friends I have made here, the exchange students living here, and the affection I have developed for this country. Maybe I'll live abroad again one day in another country. Who knows where God will lead me?"