Student Helps Open Doors to Hope on San Francisco Streets

Karen Day, a third-year student at Starr King, wants to open a door between one congregation, safe and comfortable in a church, and another congregation, lonely and in need on the streets. “Whether you’re in the church or on the streets,” she said, “isolation can be a barrier to getting what we want in our lives.”

Last year, Karen did her fieldwork at the drop-in center of the Faithful Fools Street Ministry, a “ministry of presence that acknowledges each human’s incredible worth.” Run by the Rev. Kay Jorgensen, an SKSM graduate, and Carmen Barsody, a Franciscan nun, the organization is located in San Francisco’s Tenderloin, one of the city’s poorest districts next-door to some of its wealthiest.

For her internship this year, Karen chose to combine community and parish ministry by working with the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Francisco and the Faithful Fools a few blocks away.

The Fools’ blend of street theater and compassionate support, from warm clothing to social service advocacy, appealed to Karen, 46, whose background includes creative performance and education. Back in Ashville, N.C., she taught workshops using improvisational dance and storytelling. Before that she earned a master’s degree in interdisciplinary arts education at Columbia College and spent eight years at the First Unitarian Church of Chicago as the director of religious education.

“This work helps me break down my own walls and feel connected.”

“Part of my internship is meeting and being with people,” she said. “They may need to make a phone call or someone to go with them to a (social service) agency. Or sometimes they need a minister’s listening ear.”

Recently Karen began working with a homeless man who used to panhandle in front of the San Francisco church. He developed an infection, complicated by malnutrition, that required hospitalization. While in the hospital, he kicked his drug addiction. But after his release, he remained homeless and medically frail. The Faithful Fools helped him find a place to live. Now Karen helps monitor his daily medication and drives him to doctor’s appointments. “We offer him people who care, who want him to do well and who appreciate his life stories,” she said. “It gives the Faithful Fools pride to see someone, considered beyond hope, recovering, happier and healthier.”

Karen said at Starr King she found excitement and support for her dual internship, allowing her to break new ground on this uncommon blend of paths. “When I first got to the school,” she said, “I didn’t think the parish path was for me. But I was encouraged to go deeper within myself to see what would fit.”

Now Karen is convinced the Faithful Fools model could be successful in other places. After graduation, she hopes a church will hire her as a community minister whose priority will be to attend to the flow between the parish and the needs of the community.

“This work,” she said, “helps me break down my own walls and feel connected. It’s a way to live by our Unitarian Universalist principles and affirm the worth and dignity of every person.”

Faithful Fools Tenderloin Street Ministry, 234 Hyde St., San Francisco, CA 94102, 415/474-0508 faithfulfools@valuenet, www.faithfulfools.com
SKSM Summer Adventurers Tour Eastern Europe for Pilgrimage, Fellowship and a Special Celebration

It wouldn’t be safe to travel to Bethlehem this year, to walk the dusty, cobble streets strung with colored Christmas lights and enter the dim nativity shrine, its greasy lamps illuminating the old stones of imagined peace.

As the story goes, it wasn’t safe then. A raging Herod, renowned for his cruelty, killed children he feared would destroy him.

That innocents could bring down an empire! Is there this much power in ordinary sexual joy and the bonds of affection that give birth to our children?

A stone’s throw from the rough hills of Bethlehem, descending to an underground cave, you can see one burning candle refracted in a prism of mirrors.

Dana Worsnop preaching in the Torda church

“Incredible hospitality from people who have so little yet so much to give” is how Starr King third-year student Dana Worsnop described the time she spent this past summer with Transylvanian Unitarian villagers in Romania.

Worsnop and a group of Unitarian Universalist adventurers and friends traveled to Eastern Europe over 10 days in July and August to take part in a pilgrimage and the Transylvanian wedding festivities of Kinga-Reka Zsigmond, the 1999/2000 Francis Balázs scholar at Starr King.

Also among the group were Starr King President Rebecca Parker and students Cecilia Kingman Miller, Sandy Hart and John Fahey.

They were led by SKSM graduate David Keyes, who helped found Project Harvest Hope to strengthen ethnic Hungarian Unitarian towns and villages in Transylvania through sustainable agriculture and small-scale economic development.

“There’s very little work and horrible inflation there,” said Worsnop. “Young people are leaving the villages because there are no jobs.”

The travelers landed in Budapest to visit the Unitarian church there. A bus ride through the Carpathian Mountains brought them to Kolozsvár, headquarters of the Transylvanian Unitarian movement, and to a joyful reunion dinner with four of the five Balázs scholars. From there they headed to Meszko, where they visited the grave of Francis Balázs. In Torda they saw the church where the Unitarian King John Sigismund proclaimed religious freedom in 1568.

“The most incredible thing,” said Cecilia Kingman Miller, who traveled with her two children, Isaac and India, and husband Steve, “was being in a place where Unitarianism has survived so many obstacles and is still so alive. We stood in a place in a village where you can see nine different villages, each with a Unitarian steeple. This history makes the arc of Unitarianism more compelling.”

The group stayed with host families while they toured the countryside and learned about local culture, religion, folklore and economic development. They also toured Harvest Hope’s barns, fields and bakery.

A highlight of the trip was the Aug. 5 wedding of Kinga-Reka. The daughter of a Unitarian minister, she was one of the first women to enter the Unitarian ministry in Transylvania after the collapse of communism.

Days in advance, the women of Kinga-Reka’s village, with help from Sandy Hart, began preparing food to feed 400 guests. The festivities lasted from early evening to the next morning.

“The most incredible thing was being in a place where Unitarianism has survived so many obstacles and is still so alive. This history makes the arc of Unitarianism more compelling.”

“There’s lots of ritual and play involved in a Transylvanian wedding,” said Worsnop, describing the pre-ceremony mock negotiations between Csaba, the groom, and false brides supplied by Kinga-Reka’s family.

The trip, the people, the communion service with villagers and Rebecca Parker’s sermon in the Kolozsvár church were experiences Worsnop found deeply moving.

“I’ll go back to Transylvania,” she said, “because our connections with Unitarians there are so important. Our spiritual roots lie in this region. (Ethnic) Hungarians in this region are a repressed minority in Romania. Our witnessing will help prevent ethnic cleansing.”

Kinga-Reka Zsigmond and her new husband, Csaba, read a congratulatory card

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Vanessa Ament ('90) finished nearly three years of teaching religious education at the Studio City, Calif., Unitarian Universalist church to concentrate on sound effects work for film and video, sing in a jazz duo, compose music and homeschool her 9-year-old son, Nathanial. Both a Foley artist and sound effects editor, Vanessa recently completed two projects for Disney, “Lady and the Tramp II” and a sequel to the “Little Mermaid.” She sang one of her songs, “Every Other Night,” on the soundtrack of an independent film called “Foreign Correspondences.” While Vanessa enjoys her sound effects work, she says music is closest to her heart.

Stanley Aronson ('82) is enjoying his retirement, inaugurated on the first day of the new millennium. He said he’s playing lots of golf, reading and “generally hanging out.” The Unitarian Universalist Society of Stamford, Conn., elected him to minister emeritus status.

Michael Boardman ('63) says he’s just a couple of years from retirement. Now starting his fourth year as minister of the Eliot Church in South Natick, Mass., he plans eventually to leave New England for the rolling hills of Kentucky. His wife, Barbara Prairie, currently serves as the General Assembly administrator.

Recent grad Laura-Hummingbird Frazier ('00) moved to North Carolina and is soaking in her new environment. The shift from Berkeley to Winston-Salem has brought lower rents with dogs welcome, ding- and bumpersticker-free cars, bad smog, Confederate flags, organic food and rousing displays of weather.

For the past two years, Beatrice Hitchcock ('94) has led the Seward Unitarian Universalists in Alaska. This young congregation includes about 15 actively involved kids and 26 adults. The group moved not long ago to its fourth location, where Beatrice expects they’ll stay for a while. She started homeschooling her daughter Elizabeth this year and now leads a Brownie troop. Her husband Jim continues to work two jobs, one as a bush pilot. During the summer, the couple runs a bed and breakfast out of a cottage on their property. Guests come to the area to fish, sightsee and whale watch.

Whidbey Island, Wash., innkeeper Mitchell Howard ('74) added “school board member” to his resume in 1997 when he was elected to serve the 2000-student Coupeville district. His board performed so well that Washington’s governor named it the 1999 School Board of the Year. Mitchell is also in his second year of service (and first as secretary) on the Whidbey Island Unitarian Universalist congregation board. He sees several parallels between innkeeping and parish ministry. “It’s about preparing a space for a special kind of experience, especially over the weekend,” he said. “Some of our harried urbanite guests look upon the Penn Cove Inn as a retreat, and, in the Northwest, coffee is our sacrament.”

Phyllis Hubble ('91) and her husband, John Manwell, are learning American Sign Language. For the past six years they’ve worked as co-ministers of the First Unitarian Church in Baltimore. “Eye-opening” was how she described a course they took on deaf culture. As a result, they secured grants to offer basic American Sign Language training to church staff and expand church service interpreting to lectures and classes. They’re also planning to boost outreach efforts, probably through advertising and promotional booths at deaf community gatherings.

On Aug. 27, Dan King ('97) celebrated his installation at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Augusta, Ga., where he has served three years. At the same time, the congregation celebrated the completion of a major church renovation project. Other changes Dan has led include an improved and re-energized religious education program, which now covers children, youth and adults. Especially successful is a Wednesday evening Buddhist meditation group Dan calls a “major avenue for spiritual and membership growth.” Among his extra-curricular activities — serving as co-chair of Augustans Together, a group dedicated to eliminating racism in the community, and as one of three plaintiffs in an ACLU lawsuit against local government for using a symbol of the Ten Commandments on its court seal.

Terry Kime ('88) reports she started her 12th year with the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Erie, Penn., where a half-million dollar expansion and renovation was recently finished. Terry’s longtime interest in Buddhism prompted her 10-day silent retreat a few years ago at a Nova Scotia abbey. That experience led Terry to start a Unitarian Universalist Buddhist study group that has been meeting for the past two years. “I also love my annual weekly retreat with the Trappist monks in Piffard, New York,” she said. “Chanting the psalms with them at liturgies throughout the day and night is something special.”

With another short sabbatical coming up in 2001, Terry is considering work at the Zen Hospice Center in San Francisco.

Roen Repp ('60) passed away in November 1999 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, after suffering a heart attack. He was 67 years old. He served congregations in Palo Alto and Santa Rosa, Calif., as well as Marietta, Ohio, and Portsmouth, N.H. Over 25 years he worked throughout the world in the field of international development for various United Nations agencies, including UNICEF and the UN International Famine Relief Operation in Uganda.

In September, recent grad Ann Romanczuk ('00) took a part-time position at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka in Wayzata, Minn. She’s coordinating youth programming for a 260-member congregation, 200 of whom are children. The junior high and high school group alone totals 70 kids. On the volunteer side, Ann joined the board of directors of the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. With her own children in school and the family settling into a new house, she said, “life here is falling into place, piece by piece, beautifully.”

Dorothy Tilden Speerl passed away in December 1999 at age 93. An ordained Universalist minister for 70 years, she was in fellowship with both the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association. From 1965-66 she taught at Starr King, where she received a doctorate of sacred theology. She was known as an outstanding minister, preacher, religious educator and co-author of a popular curriculum for elementary school children.

Bethlehem
continued . . .

a memorial to the two million children
Hitler slew.
Spiraling deeper, you enter an earth-bound heaven of stars.

The tyrant prays that we will stop loving and performs his ritual slaughter to break the bonds of our affection.

O earth, give us another birth.
Let our small rituals of hope yield the power that can bring down empires.
Let tyrants tremble as we insist again this holy season that we will not stop loving, until every child is rocked in the cradle of peace.

Rebecca Parker

His passionate anti-slavery stance led him to travel California from 1860-64, preaching against the state's threatened secession from the Union.
GTU Online Journal Showcases SKSM Student Work

The Web is now home to thought-provoking scholarship and ideas from Graduate Theological Union students thanks to an innovative online publication that showcases their work. “Gravitas: A Journal of Religion and Theology” started as an experiment and is fast establishing itself as a voice for GTU students.

“Our intent two years ago was to become familiar with electronic publishing and its legal issues,” said Ann Hotta, GTU’s head of Information Services who was instrumental in launching the site. “This journal also seemed like a way to provide students with a place to publish their writing and research without a lot of overhead cost and to provide student editors with a valuable educational experience.”

Jeffrey Buehl, editor of “Gravitas” for the past two issues and an M.A. student at the GTU, was attracted to the challenge. The second editor to serve, he has a background in journalism as a music writer and columnist.

“I wanted to make ‘Gravitas’ much more of a real journal with first-person pieces, book reviews, reflective commentaries and academic writing that ran both short and long,” he said.

The fall 2000 issue includes “Reading Between the Lines: Women at the Tomb in Mark and Michelangelo’s Pieta,” a piece by Starr King student Dana Worsnop that explores the need to hold and grieve deeply over the body of a lost one. Also among this issue’s nine articles by GTU students are “The Paradox of the Cross: Power in Weakness, Wisdom in Foolishness” and “Bringing the Personal to Ethical Debate: Physician-Assisted Suicide.”

At first, professors from GTU schools recommended student work. Then Buehl opened the contribution process and now solicits work directly from students. Since Gravitas first appeared on the Web, about 30 students have submitted their writing.

“We need writers engaged in topics important to them,” said Buehl. “The prose must be lively and interesting to read, no matter the subject.”

The choice of name for this publication reflects Buehl’s intent. “Gravitas,” he said, comes from the Hellenistic tradition and means “gravity” or “weight” in regards to the integrity and persuasion of a public speaker.

“I would love if people saw a revolving table of writers who could help them understand theological issues,” said Buehl.

That willingness to write to the heart of important subjects provides students with an additional benefit on their curriculum vitae, according to Ann Hotta.

“It’s certainly a feather in one’s cap,” she said, “to show one is grappling with intellectual issues.”

To visit the “Gravitas” Website, go to www.gtu.edu/library/gravitas. Students can drop off manuscripts in a box on the reference desk of the GTU’s Flora Lamson Hewlett Library.

With Shiny Appreciation

A hearty thanks and pat on the back to Starr King students and staff who schlepped, swabbed and shined to make sure the school gleamed for Orientation Week 2000/2001—

Charlie Alday
Cheryl Bowlan
Rebecca Brooks
Lyn Cox
Mark Glovin

Sandy Hart
Patti Lawrence
Cecilia Kingman Miller
Rebecca Parker
Barbara Threet

Abraham Lincoln believed it was Reverend Thomas Starr King who kept California within the Union during the difficult days of the Civil War.