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The next donkey pilgrim

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By Kevin O'Hara, Eagle columnist,

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PITTSFIELD

Last November, I kissed the relic of Saint Faustina -- mystic and visionary -- following Mass and chaplet at The Shrine of the Divine Mercy in Stockbridge. That I attended this Polish nun's service was a fluke -- a request by relations visiting from the Philippines at the time.

Coincidence, perhaps, but the next morning I opened my email to find a letter from a young Polish woman -- a first. It read:

Dear Mr. O'Hara. My name is Agnieszka Jablonska. About a week ago I was lighting a fire in a little cob house when a thought came into my mind -- to go around the Irish coast with a donkey and a cart, planting a walnut tree in every county I pass. After some research I found your website of how you circled Ireland with a donkey in 1979, and decided to write you.

For the last 6 years I've been living and working in Ireland (County Galway -- I'm originally from southern Poland). In April, 2010, after a long, wet and cold Irish winter, me and my Irish partner, Maurice Sullivan, decided to go to Malaysia in search of the sun and to help our Malaysian friend to build his house.

On 9th of January 2011 my life changed. While volunteering on a farm on Penang Island, my long term partner, best friend, family, was attacked by 2 farm dogs and died. I helplessly watched my loved one die. I came back to Ireland and decided to try to live my life again.

In all these months of grief, sadness and struggle, I came to believe that by traveling by donkey and cart (Maurice used to keep donkeys), I will be able to overcome the sense of helplessness that is surrounding me; to gain energy and start believing that things are possible again. I don't know if the journey is the answer, but I won't know till I try?

I was wondering if you would have any advice? I think it would be incredible to discover if the hospitality of Irish people changed with the economic growth. I would like to follow your footsteps -- how would you feel about that? I would be very grateful for your reply.

I'm sending a link to a documentary made by RTE Radio One (in Ireland) about Mau rice -- maybe it will be easier to understand the story. Thank you.

Best wishes, Agnieszka Jablonska.

The attached 50-minute documentary was utterly heartbreaking. That this woman powerlessly watched two pit bulls maul her fiancé to death was one thing; quite another she had to repeatedly sidestep these vicious dogs throughout the remainder of that long, horrific day.

Moved by her grievous story, I promptly replied.

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"First off, start taking daily walks, even if you haven't a step in you," I encouraged her, "and chat freely with every roadside character you meet. Believe me, the long road ahead will be the mending of you, supplanting heartbreak with possibility, for you'll soon find the kindness of strangers is a gift like no other."

I rambled on, filled with a sense of inexplicable kinship.

"Every cloudbank will enrich you, every breeze will embrace you, every star will inspire you. And don't worry about Irish hospitality! Your donkey will be your passport -- as was mine -- opening the hearts (and pantries) of every farmhouse you pass, north and south. Oh, what epiphanies await you!"

In the passing months, I've sent her maps, notes, and how-to donkey books. My Pittsfield friends, Wayne and Eileen Myers, met up with Agnieszka in March and presented her with chocolate, funds, and a new journal. In April, my two sisters lunched with her in Galway City, finding her "sweet and sensible, but very sad." Two Vietnam vets, now living in Ireland, handed her a 100-euro note and a hazel stick upon hearing of her travels.

And Maurice's sister bought her a 15-year old jack, Mucci, for her 30th birthday from Jimmy McDermott -- the same horseman who procured my Missie 33 years ago. Now in his 80s, Jimmy Mac is thrilled by this unexpected longitudinal donkey study!

Finally, on June 13, Agnieszka and Mucci set out from Abbeyknockmoy, Co. Galway, in a "piddling downpour," in their quest to travel 2,000 miles around Ireland. After three trying weeks and a hundred rough miles -- though meeting nothing but kindness along the way -- they've reached their first base camp -- a sliver of sea-land in the village of Ballyconneely, Con ne mara -- the rock-strewn plot where she once lived happily with Maurice.

Agnieszka's goals remain steadfast -- to plant a walnut tree in Maurice's memory in every county she passes, and return with Mucci to this old homestead by January 9 -- the second anniversary of his death -- hoping to have found peace and solace by journey's end.

Meanwhile, I find myself praying to Saint Faustina for her safekeeping, just as my loved ones had prayed for me on those long-ago ancient roads.

Kevin O'Hara of Pittsfield, is author of "Last of the Donkey Pilgrims." He will be writing updates on Agnieszka's travels every four to six weeks for The Eagle.

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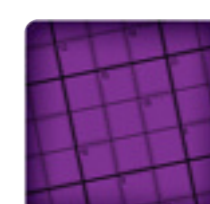
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| 4 | Kansas | 9 |
| 5 | Michigan State | 4 |

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