

# volunteers

## partners in our Franciscan mission

### Providing the Human Touch

**Art, healing, and community are part of Tau Volunteer's journey**

BY SARAH STEFANKO

Sarah Johnson discovered the School Sisters of St. Francis's Tau Volunteer program through the Catholic Volunteer Network after she completed her degree in social work at the State University of New York-Buffalo. She has been ministering at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in downtown Milwaukee, and living with a group of sisters on the city's southwest side since fall 2016.

"The first things that appealed to me about the Tau Volunteer Program were the uniqueness of the opportunity at the Cathedral, and living somewhere new," she said.

Sarah's work at the Cathedral began with serving at its Open Door Café, an outreach ministry that provides hot lunches, bag lunches, and hygiene kits each weekday to those in need. She now spends most of her time working with Cathedral Squared Enterprises, a women-focused nonprofit that transforms plastic bags into something new and beautiful.

"We cut the bags into loops, tie those together, and roll that into a ball of plastic yarn that we then crochet with," Sarah explained. "I lead workshops on the process for women in the program, manage the social media and web presence for it, and help sell our products at local festivals and markets."

Women who participate in the program have the opportunity to earn a small stipend for learning the process, and each artist receives 50 percent of the profit when one of her items sells.

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**SARAH STEFANKO** has been an associate of the School Sisters of St. Francis for 11 years.

"I love that everything is so focused on healing, and giving people dignity," she said. "In surveys done with the guests of the Open Door Cafe, many people said that one reason they love coming for lunch, and come back, is that while they are here, they feel human. It hurts me that people don't feel human, and aren't treated as human, but I am so happy that they have a place where they know they are going to be treated like they matter."



BETTY LEWIS PHOTOS

*Sarah helps women whose lives are in transition to transform plastic bags into something new and beautiful.*

*Sarah works with one of the participants in the Cathedral Squared Enterprises on a crocheted accessory.*

"It's beautiful to watch the community that forms during these crochet workshops, and the mentorship that develops among the women," she continued. "

Those community bonds are something Sarah's supervisor, Shelly Roder, sees Sarah helping to create. "One of our artisans referred to Sarah as 'my little sister' the other day," Shelly said. "There's something very familial about her. She has a natural ability to connect with and support people." Shelly noted that this makes Sarah a wonderful addition to the Cathedral's program.

"A lot of women we work with are in transition: from divorce, the death of a loved one, a lost job, a lost home," Shelly continued. "The hardest part of those experiences is the way they impact relationships. Building kinship is the core of helping people heal, and Sarah embodies that."

Nurturing kinship within a living group is also part of the Tau Volunteer experience, and living in community with the School Sisters of St. Francis has been a blessing for Sarah.

"The idea of living with sisters scared me a little at first," she admits. "But it was also something I was looking for, something that would push me out of my comfort zone. From day one, the sisters accepted me exactly as I am. I love living with my sisters! We're a little family; we are always learning about each other and from each other."

She has learned a lot about herself, too. "This has been such a growing experience, personally and professionally," Sarah said. "I have done things I never would have dreamed of, and have met amazing people. When I compare the way I was when I first came to the way I am now, I see so many great transformations. Being a Tau Volunteer has changed the course of my life, and I am so glad for it."

"We had not considered a two year service term until Sarah asked if she could stay for a second year at the Cathedral," said Irene Perez, Tau Volunteer program



coordinator. "That opened a whole new door for us, as well as for Sarah. Sarah has made such a strong impact at her service site, encouraging other women to take new opportunities, step out of comfort zones and make a difference. I have experienced Sarah's growth into a strong, well-balanced, caring and community-engaging young woman, and that has been her personal gift to all of us."

Shelly has seen this change in Sarah, as well, and the effect it has on other people. "She has bloomed so much here! I love watching her discover her creative gifts, which she might not have known about before, and then use them to help empower these women."

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**Do you know a post-graduate woman who may be interested in sharing service, community, and spirituality with the School Sisters of St. Francis? Learn more from Tau Volunteer Coordinator Irene Perez at 414-385-5255 or [iperez@sssf.org](mailto:iperez@sssf.org).**