

Giving Back / Building Up...A True Partner Project

By Sharon Van Duizend, UU Congregation of Fairfax

The seeds were planted in 2014. They grew from a request on a youth-adult journey to our partner church in Szentgerice when Rev. Varro Barna asked us to find a project which his congregation could offer as a permanent gift of gratitude to our church for 27 years of partnership.

What evolved was astonishing, as commitment grew on both sides of the Atlantic. For 11 autumn days, 12 people, ages 16-74, gathered to create a Peace Garden on our grounds and to produce a Village Life Festival, both of which involved 10 of our widespread church committees plus other individuals. Our goal was to include as many aspects of our congregation as possible to deepen and broaden the relationship to our partnership. We worked with our RE program to build excitement and anticipation; with the Property Stewardship and Social Justice Councils to expand the space where a memorial cairn had been built into the new Peace Garden; with the Endowment Committee whose grant



paid for additional plantings, building supplies for a new Transylvanian carved sign and oak kopjafa (see left), plus the airfare of the carver. Additional fundraising emerged by sharing the costs with Szentgerice, six weeks of Share-the Plate donations from UUCF members, a Faithify Campaign, and a grant from the UUPCC's Cathy Cordes Travel Fund.

THE FESTIVAL:

Close to 200 people came from our congregation and wider community to delight in trying Bird Milk and traditional dances (especially

when a village elder spontaneously took time from making chimney bread over a grill to place a water-filled paper cup on her head and join the merriment). Goulash, also prepared over an outdoor open flame, was a big hit, as well as having a chance to try our hand at carving a second kopjafa out of softer pine wood. Traditional fibers and personal photo albums added a vibrant touch.



Festival Activities



FRIDAY EVENING SERVICE: A Vespers service was built on “Memories”, theirs and ours, which we translated ahead and projected alongside the spoken word – so very meaningful, graced by hymns in both languages. All seven members of our UUCF committee took part.

Any and all expectations by our Partner Church Circle were joyfully exceeded, as these events embraced:

1. Working, eating, and sharing services together.
2. An exchange of gifts, most poignantly in this 450th anniversary year, receiving a framed print of David Ferenc advocating religious freedom.
3. Tours to local and DC sites, including a UU-sponsored inner city after-school program, and a free jazz concert.
4. Rich exchanges with host families and separate dinner hosts.
5. Events for all ages (Barna was asked by an RE seventh grader if he believed in Satan!)
6. Direct involvement by our church community: meal makers, drivers, tour guides, translators, festival aides, music makers, and a strengthening exchange among ministers.

We highly encourage other congregations to welcome their partners and work together to build permanent reminders of partnership together, and to use a Village Life Festival to share their rich nuances of culture. Our committee’s hearts are very full. Now, so too the hearts of many others.

