



The "Up Close" column highlights an outstanding nursing student. Send nominee ideas to squalls@aol.com.

By Sarah Qualls

Helen Gorecki



Helen Gorecki as a volunteer elf during the 'Compassion in Giving' program hosted by the Mountain and River Order, a Zen Buddhist Monastery, in Mt. Tremper, NY.

What do Australia, a Zen Buddhist monastery, and the Catskills Mountains have in common? The answer is simple: Helen Gorecki!

Ms. Gorecki is a first year nursing student at Phillips Beth Israel School of Nursing in New York City. A native of Gympie, Australia, in Queensland, Ms. Gorecki has resided in New York City for the past seven years. "I came from a rural town with around 20,000 people and coming to New York City was a tremendous experience. Although I came from an English-speaking country, the cultural adjustment wasn't easy, and my accent was very hard for people to understand, which was frustrating. This is a big city where you either sink or swim – I chose to swim, and I love it here. My initial plan was to stay

for a year, but I felt I hadn't experienced everything culturally that I wanted to and still haven't!"

Currently Ms. Gorecki manages three physical therapy practices and their staff in the New York area. A licensed Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) in New York, she has also volunteered as an EMT instructor for the Training Institute for Medical Emergencies and Rescue on Staten Island. She has also volunteered at the Food Bank for New York City and the Bowery Mission.

This year Ms. Gorecki took a different approach to the holiday season. "I worked at several shelters over the past few holidays and this year I worked with the Mountain and River Order, in their 'Compassion in Giving' program on December 16, 2006. I became interested in the Monastery when I wanted to further my meditation. I miss the open places, animals, and greenery from home, which is probably why I'm attracted to upstate New York." The Mountain and River Order is a Zen Buddhist Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York, which opens its doors to those in need in Kingston, New York, and outlying areas.

"This is one of the poorest areas in New York state," continues Ms. Gorecki, "so there are a lot of people in need in that area." According to the Mountains and Rivers Order website (www.mro.org), this event is in its nineteenth year. The monastery opens its doors up to 400 children, adults and elderly from nearby shelters and retirement homes for the traditional holiday celebration.

In 2006, Ms. Gorecki dressed as an elf for half a day to help participants find their way to the event, and spent the other half distributing food. "Being an elf was fun: getting to know the people on a personal level and finding out their backgrounds and what brought them there."

I asked Ms. Gorecki if she could tell if they had made a difference in the people attending the event. Ms. Gorecki responded with a story. "While I was helping out as an

elf, a person at my table told me her story and what brought her there year after year. She suffers from mental illness and first came to the dinner about five years ago. She came along with someone and did not want to come

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in at first. At the time she came she was ready to commit suicide, as she felt her life had no purpose. After coming to the event and feeling the love that surrounded her, she decided that she did not need to end her life but that she wanted to surround herself with love and be compassionate to others. She has been to the event every year since, takes her meds, and now has a volunteer job being a spokesperson for others suffering from mental illness. Every Christmas she volunteers at a church in her area that also provides a dinner for the community.”

In addition to the Mountain and River location in Mt. Tremper, the monastery also has a satellite facility located in Brooklyn called the Zen Center of New York City or the Fire Lotus Temple. “My husband and I both find fulfillment in going there. We chose this monastery because of its simplicity and because it helps us create awareness in our everyday life.”

Upon graduation Ms. Gorecki intends to continue her studies, while working for several years in either emergency care, an Intensive Care Unit, or in Labor and Delivery. Later, she’d like to engage in mission work with Doctors without Borders and become a nurse practitioner. “I would like to do something with holistic health. I have had tremendous results in using holistic health for myself so I want to be able to share this with others.

“Compassion for others should be something in our everyday lives,” she concludes. “It’s not just about showing it during one event a year.” ☺

