

# 'How God made me' — with a knack for compassion

Former FrancisCorps member heading to Haiti as Maryknoller

**By Tom Maguire**

Associate editor

**M**usts for the missionary are a cross, a big heart, and — in Syracuse, at least — a shovel.

Cincinnati native Jillian Foster got up around 5:30 a.m. one day to see an eye-popping 10 inches or so of snow in the long driveway in Syracuse.

She and four FrancisCorps colleagues simply attacked it and defeated it, and she made it to work at L'Arche around 9 a.m.

It was one of the triumphs in her nearly yearlong service with FrancisCorps, in which young adults volunteer as mentors and counselors for people in need.

After FrancisCorps, the 23-year-old University of Dayton grad with an interest in the environment and women's empowerment pondered a list of countries where she might want to be a Maryknoll Lay Missioner — El Salvador, Bolivia, Tanzania. But the "big surprise" was an assignment to Haiti.

He reaction: "Ohhh, I know nothing about Haiti," which wasn't on her original list.

But she has since studied the Caribbean nation, and on Jan. 12 Foster leaves for 3½ years as a Haiti Maryknoller.

That is "how God made me," she said — with an urge to "go out and learn about other places, and learn about other people."

She grew up in a middle-class family in Cincinnati, where her parents still live. She has a sister in South Carolina and a brother in Indiana.

Early on she played flute and violin, soccer and golf; and she also was active in theater in school.

At the University of Dayton, the "Jill of all trades" was a multidisciplinary major with minors in religious studies, sustainability, and computer science.

"Throughout college," Foster said, "I had gotten into my mind I really wanted to do service and kind of wanted it abroad and long-term too."

## Assignment: Africa

She learned a lot about social justice at Dayton when she was a student ambassador for Catholic Relief Services. And in the summer of her junior year, she conducted weather-related research during two months in Malawi, Africa.

She tested herself to see if she could go to another country and be comfortable there, so she lived in a cabin in Malawi. It was "kind of a community," and she got to know two Malawian students who served as translators.

At a post-graduate service fair at Dayton, the May 2018 grad (B.A. in human relations) met FrancisCorps and Maryknoll representatives.

FrancisCorps was founded on July 1, 1998, as an official ministry of the Conventual Franciscan Friars. For one year, the young-adult volunteers help people including refugees and those who have no home. The volunteers live at a local house and pray together every day.

Foster, who has aunts, uncles, and cousins who live in Syracuse, entered FrancisCorps, which operates in Syracuse, in August 2018. She did a lot of one-on-one work with a woman in her 70s named Lori (not her real name) at L'Arche, where people with and without disabilities share life in a community of faith.

Lori is a retiree, so she and Foster would go shopping, swimming, ice skating, and bowling, among other activities together.

Foster had never worked with people with disabilities before: "I learned about myself."

It expanded her comfort zone; she sees the humanity in people before looking at their faults. She sees Christ in other people; and in Haiti, she will be more comfortable with people who are different from her.

It was tough for Foster to leave L'Arche when the FrancisCorps stint ended in July 2019. Lori, whose practice was to give her a little pat, encircled her and hugged her tightly.

The L'Arche community will have a



Jillian Foster receives her mission cross from Maryknoll Lay Missioners' director of mission, Marj Humphrey, during the Dec. 14, 2019, Joint Mission Sending Ceremony in Ossining, N.Y. (Photo courtesy Maryknoll Lay Missioners)

place in Foster's heart, and she prays for them every day.

## A commitment to care

"When I spoke to Jill at the beginning of her FrancisCorps experience, she expressed an interest in perhaps continuing to serve internationally after her time with FrancisCorps," FrancisCorps Director Alexander "A.J." LaPoint said in an email. "I'm confident her experience here in Syracuse will serve her well as she begins this new, exciting journey. Our prayers will be with her as she continues to follow God's call wherever it may lead!"

In August 2019, Foster moved to Ossining, N.Y., for orientation with the Maryknoll Lay Missioners.

On Dec. 14, 2019, she was among four Maryknoll lay missioners and one Maryknoll sister who celebrated the beginning of their mission journeys in a Joint Mission Sending Ceremony in the Annunciation Chapel of the Maryknoll Sisters in Ossining.

Meinrad Scherer-Emunds, Director of Communications for the Maryknoll Lay Missioners, said the new missioners receive their mission crosses and express their commitment to "witness the Good News of Jesus

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11

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Maryknoll sisters and others bless the five new Maryknoll missionaries during the Joint Mission Sending Ceremony on Dec. 14. The new missionaries are, from left, Julie Lawler (assigned to Cambodia); Sister Rolande Kahindo, MM (to East Timor); Jillian Foster (to Haiti); Greg Garrity (to Kenya); and Brenda Seymour (to Kenya). (Photos courtesy Maryknoll Lay Missioners)



The five new Maryknoll missionaries read the Commitment Prayer during their Dec. 14 Sending Ceremony.

**MARYKNOLL LAY MISSIONER, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9**

Christ, in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are marginalized and oppressed.”

He said the missionaries commit themselves to “care for the earth, our common home, and to respond in service to help create a more just and compassionate world.”

Scherer-Emunds said Sister Theresa Kastner, MM, called Foster forth for service in Haiti:

“Jill, all of those who serve in Haiti are called to discover ways to walk with the people, walking there as partners in mission. If you let them, they will capture your heart

and challenge you in ways you never imagined. Welcome to this holy ground, welcome to precious Haiti. May God bless you abundantly.”

**Sent out to the world**

In an email, Foster described the Sending Ceremony:

“It is rare that I am able to appreciate events where I am the person (or one of the persons) being celebrated. The faces of the people present blend together and my attention span wavers. But this time was different. Before the ceremony, my friend told me and the other new missionaries to enjoy it. It was for us. Because of her words, I noticed the careful eye contact of the speakers as they said each of our names.

“I saw my dad look up from the songbook and smile at me. When I embraced the Maryknoll representatives I took my time and listened to the words they whispered in my ear and responded. When I saw everyone applauding, singing, and dancing during the final song (a Swahili song), I was struck with awe at the passion and joy everyone expressed.

“Many of them missionaries or returned missionaries, it was amazing to see the excitement and dedication of those around me. Whether I had spoken to them many times or only once, I was greeted with enthusiasm and well-wishes from sisters, brothers, priests, friends, and strangers alike. I am profoundly grateful to be welcomed by this amazing group of people and pray for God’s grace to grant me the love of mission that has been bestowed on them.”

Foster is not sure yet what work she will be doing in Gros-Morne, which she said is about three and a half hours north of Haiti’s capital city of Port-au-Prince. She will start with two months of language training.

Haiti is one of the most deforested countries in the world, she said, and planting trees is “super important.” So her work might focus on the environment. She will get to know the people before deciding what is best. She wants to give the people of Haiti a better quality of life so that, for example, they do not worry about their next meal. Whatever her project turns out to be, she hopes the people will

be able to keep it going and become independent.

At the Dec. 14 Sending Ceremony for the new missionaries, Christina Lamas, Executive Director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, was quoted as saying:

“Know that your witness and your yes to serve in Cambodia, East Timor, Haiti, and Kenya fills me personally with so much joy and a deep desire to continuously ask God, ‘Where are we going to serve next?’”

After her three and a half years are up in Haiti, Foster may sign another contract with the Lay Missioners, attend graduate school, or help developing countries with sustainability or the business supply chain. Or perhaps she will work abroad for Catholic Relief Services.

She went back to Cincinnati to spend Christmas with her family; soon she leaves for Haiti.

“I’m ready,” she said, “I’m ready.”

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