Happy Thanksgiving!

SJB News Notes

Franciscan Friars
Office of Communications
Province of St. John the Baptist

November 21, 2018

Geronimo!
He’s ready to make the leap of a lifetime

By Toni Cashnelli

You fall from an airplane two miles up and plunge to the ground. What could possibly go wrong? Undaunted by this prospect, friar Tom Speier is making his first parachute jump. “It’s on my bucket list,” he explains. And he’s not getting any younger.

At 86, Tom is not the oldest person to do a tandem jump with Start Skydiving at the Middletown (Ohio) Regional Airport. “The oldest we’ve had is 94,” says Office Manager Ashley Sauter. For some, a jump is a quirky gift for a birthday or Christmas. “Most tell me it’s on their bucket list.”

Tom is probably a good candidate. He is innately curious, which led him to study Biology and travel the world leading Franciscan Spiritual Direction Programs for 18 years. (Once you’ve stared down a Black Mamba snake in Zambia, skydiving is nothing.) And he loves sports of all sorts.

Hearing of Tom’s plans, Provincial Minister Mark Soehner wished him luck. Vicar Bill Farris asked if his affairs were in order. Today, Nov. 4, Tom is at the airport filling out a form labeled “Agreement”, a euphemism for

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Living gratefully

When I was in first grade or kindergarten, we learned the great story of the Pilgrims and Indians, who after a successful harvest decided to celebrate the God who saved them from starvation with a feast. Most people would bristle at this story now, as we’ve come to understand the longer history of exploitation and cultural genocide that was part of European expansion. Still, there was some truth about this moment for those who landed at Plymouth Rock and celebrated a three-day banquet in 1621. And for a child it was a good story that fostered values of diversity and gratitude.

I remember making my first card at the direction of our teacher. She encouraged each child to fold a piece of manila paper in half, then to trace their hand on that folded paper. Eventually, we put on a beak, turkey feet, and the multi-colored feathers where

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“Waiver”. It includes phrases like “assumption of risk”, “release from liabilities” and “covenant not to sue”.

Somehow he talked Province Nurse Michelle Viacava into joining him. Here to show solidarity is her friend Bill Bresser, also scheduled to jump.

“I have a bucket list to do a pilgrimage walk,” says Michelle, who would just as soon be elsewhere. Tom told her, “You’re supportive, so you’re going with me.”

The target time is 12:30 p.m. But planeloads of parachutists are ahead of them, and wind and clouds have slowed things down. “Clouds have to be a certain height” for safe jumping, Ashley says. “We can jump under but not through clouds,” since visibility is a high priority.

‘Like floating’

The rookie jumpers cross the wind-whipped field to a staging hangar to “get geared up,” as Ashley calls it, then stop to look as people point. In the distance, parachutes float from the sky as gently as milkweed fluff – a lovely sight.

Inside the hangar, Diego Gutierrez gathers the unfurled parachutes to re-pack canopies, safety-checking rigging for the next flight. “You have to make sure lines are in proper order, there are no holes in the canopy and the fabric is out of the way of the lines,” he says, which should reassure Tom, Michelle and Bill.

Most of the six customers in their group are tandem-jumping, harnessed to instructors who will guide them from freefall to landing. Recent returnees eagerly share their stories. “Awesome!” one says of the experience.

“Breathtaking!” says another. A young man compares skydiving to “drop tower” amusement park rides. “Those are scary; you feel as though your heart is about to stop.” But with skydiving, “It feels like you’re floating.”

“They’ll call your name when they’re ready,” Ashley had advised, so eyes are fixed on a digital board flashing the names of the next jumpers.

While some pace nervously, Tom chats up the staff. He started his bucket list last year, he says, “reasoning that the end is coming. I want to get this in before I go home,” as in, home to the Lord.

A hot-air balloon ride was also on the list. Tom crossed that off when he was told, “You’ve got to be able to jump off a kitchen chair” to do it.

To preserve the experience for posterity, Michelle and Tom have each purchased a “media
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packag". A videographer will record their pre-jump jitters, accompany them on the plane, jump alongside, then shoot the freefall and landing. Recording an intro to the video he asks, “Who here is the most frightened?” and Tom and Bill point to Michelle.

Basic training

After two hours of waiting, it’s time to go. Introducing themselves, their jump partners pull blue flight suits from a rolling rack. They’re kind of cool – think Tom Cruise in Top Gun – but hard to get into. Judging from Tom’s face, the harness is as uncomfortable as it looks. “This is the most strenuous part,” his partner assures him.

Tom says he is prepared for this “because of all my travels around the world. This is nothing compared to Victoria Falls” in Zambia, where bungee-jumping is popular. He had the chance to try that, too, “but I backed out of it when I found out a woman did it the day before and her neck snapped.” Yikes.

There is basic instruction for jumping – more like falling – from the plane. Partners will signal when to fold arms, and when to bend knees. The free fall lasts about 40 seconds before they deploy the chute, and the descent time depends upon the altitude.

The videographer records the suited-up trio. “Is this your first jump?” he asks. Tom nods. “It'll make you young,” the guy assures him. There are jokes about tangled cords and failed parachutes, then they all come together for prayer or supplication.

Outside, pilot Brian Woolfenden taxis Lady Liberty, a single-engine Cessna Caravan, to a stop for loading. Rookies and coaches pile in, facing backwards, straddling benches on either side. Tom and his partner board last; they’ll be first to jump. Engine noise precludes conversation during the 15-minute climb, which is just as well.

“We’ll go up to 11,000 feet today,” shouts Brian. “We’re usually at 14,000, but it’s a little chilly up there today.” (The temperature drops 3.5 degrees for every 1,000 feet you climb.) Chutes are deployed at around the mile-high mark.

Instructors strap themselves to jumpers, who will “wear” them like oversized backpacks. “Two minutes,” Brian yells to the back of the plane. The cabin door slides open and cold air rushes in.

Tom is first in line to jump.
‘You felt free’

As Tom and his teacher scoot to the edge of the door, their videographer bails first, ready to capture the action. They topple after him, then things move quickly. Soon it’s Bill’s turn, and Michelle’s, and in a matter of seconds the plane is empty, bouncing from the buoyancy of a 3,400-pound weight loss. In the distance, parachutes burst open like blossoms.

The plane descends as jumpers on the ground emerge from heaps of crumpled parachutes. Michelle is ecstatic. “It was great. I loved it. You felt free. It was beautiful. I’d do it again.” Bill says he was thinking about “doing everything right” on the way down, ‘holding my head back, pulling my legs up” for landing.

Tom, who looks a bit green, admits to feeling airsick and wishes he’d brought Dramamine. As a result, “The free fall was kind of a blur,” he says. “But I liked coming down and looking around, the foliage was beautiful.” The highlight was an aerial view of the AK Steel plant where his father used to work.

As the three trade stories, Tom is planning his next adventure. “I’d like to do a zip-line,” one of those downhill plunges from a pulley attached to a rope. After you’ve survived an 11,000-foot fall, how hard can it be?

—Mark Soehner, OFM

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our small fingers were traced. After writing some sentiment from the board thanking our parents, we had achieved our first Thanksgiving Day card! I was very proud to bring that home to my parents, and surprised to find it as a treasure in my mother’s hoard of childhood items years later.

Thanksgiving means many things this year. I am mostly grateful for God’s grace that supports my very being and living and keeps giving. I receive forgiveness, encouragement, and genuine peace from God through the different sides of our relationship: Deep Friend, Lover, Way Maker, Jokester, God. I can’t even begin to name it all. And of course, I still hold the primal relationships with my family as dear: parents, siblings, step sisters, spouses, children, grandparents. And for this incredible vocation as a friar minor—the journey continues! Friends and acquaintances make my life rich.

Counting blessings sometimes helps me realize that I can’t count them all. It moves me to live in a world where there is abundance, where sharing what I have is possible. When I’m in an emotional space of fear, it’s because I’ve taken my eyes off of how God is working in my life. When you’re overwhelmed by fear you become possessive and see others as competing for the same limited resources. Grateful living helps me see that God is giving what we need and more! Life is more effortless, and I can be more generous.

Let’s really celebrate this Thursday of Thanksgiving. Let’s feast on the goodness of God, and that crispy turkey, sweet potatoes, potatoes and gravy, rolls, green bean casserole and pumpkin pie. It’s the beginning of The Banquet where diversity and gratitude reign.

—Mark Soehner, OFM
RB rolls out the welcome mat

“One of the best” is how President Tom Burke described the Oct. 28 Open House at Roger Bacon High School, which brought in the largest number of prospective families they’ve seen in five years. “Thanks to the nine friars who came,” he says. “The brown robes made an impression on people.”
“It was harder adjusting to the culture coming back here than when I left,” says Robert Seay, who recently returned to Houston from a two-week trip to the Republic of Ghana in West Africa. Robert joined fellow priests Ted Parker of Detroit and Donald Sterling of Baltimore in exploring what was known as the “Gold Coast”, a point of departure for slaves during the colonial period. “We were able to see the dungeons and caves the slaves were taken into” in the fortresses along the coast. “It was very emotional,” Robert says. Hosted by Holy Cross Brothers at their novitiate, the three visited Conventual Franciscans, had lunch with retired Bishop Peter Kwasi Sarpong, and toured local villages where poverty is prevalent. “It caused me to look at poverty in a different way. We talk about it but we don’t live it,” Robert says. One bright spot was the focus on education in Ghana. “There are schools almost everywhere.” It was his first time in Africa, and “I’m ready to go back. It was quite an experience.”

Al Mascia helped develop a Children’s Chapel at Our Lady of La Salette Parish in Berkley, Mich., where he serves as Coordinator of Faith Formation. Sundays at 9:30 a.m., kindergartners and first-graders are now able to meet in their own space next door to the sacristy in church. “We’re excited about that,” says Al. A donation from a family who lost an adult son was used to alter the space for the kids.

The photo gracing the inside cover of the 2019 calendar for Arlington Memorial Gardens in Cincinnati was taken by our own Frank Jasper.

Encouraged by Scott Obrecht, Frank entered it in the cemetery’s annual Calendar Photo Contest of seasonal Arlington scenes.

The newest partner at St. Anthony Center in Over-the-Rhine is Foot Care for the Souls, a non-profit which provides foot care and new socks and shoes for those in need. Aid is offered from 6:30 p.m.-8:30 p.m. during the winter; details are forthcoming. It was Sr. Bonnie Steinlage of partner Haircuts from the Heart who introduced SAC to Foot Care for the Souls. According to Sr. Bonnie, “The St. Anthony Center is now the only place in town which cares for the poor head to toe”!

Nov. 19 was Thanksgiving food distribution day for the Franciscan Outreach Program at Transfiguration Parish in Southfield, Mich. Phil Wilhelm and Clyde Bostick drew turkey duty. The reach of the program, which began more than 65 years ago at Duns Scotus, now extends beyond Southfield into Southeast Michigan.

Last week’s ice storm didn’t discourage this Carolina Wren from hanging around one of Ric Schneider’s homemade bird houses at the Monastery of St. Clare in Cincinnati.

The next issue of News Notes will be distributed Dec. 6.