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Maryland teachers head to Alaska to build partnerships, expand outreach

Lynn LeCluyse Catholic News Service | Aug. 2, 2013
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On Monday, Carol Mackie Morris and Margaret Mackie plan to leave behind the comforts of home in Maryland to embark on a three-week journey to Alaska.

During their trip, the sisters hope to develop partnerships, expand outreach and compare the spiritual beliefs of the native Alaskans to those of the Catholic faith.

The women have more in common than their family ties and travel plans: The two are also art teachers for kindergarten through eighth-grade students at Catholic schools. Morris works at St. Michael School in Ridge, Md., in the Washington archdiocese while Mackie works at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex, Md., which is in the Baltimore archdiocese.

The duo hopes to learn more about the native Alaskan art culture and incorporate their newfound knowledge into their curriculums back home. They will focus on iconography, spirituality and nature, exploring these aspects in several places including Anchorage, Homer, Whittier, Valdez, McCarthy and Kennecott.

"We are very excited to get a new perspective on art to bring back to our students from a part of our country that is so different from anywhere on the mainland," Morris told Catholic News Service.

They'll record their activities with sketches, video recordings, photography and journal entries posted to a blog titled "Art Expedition: Morris and Mackie." [1]

The plans for the Alaskan adventure originated when Morris applied for a travel scholarship from a local community organization, the sisters said in an interview July 28 while they were in Washington for an art class. She had pursued the same scholarship in past years, suggesting travel to locations near Maryland and was told she needed to select a more adventurous setting.

Although Morris did not receive the scholarship, she and Mackie decided to take the trip to Alaska anyway, using Morris' carefully planned itinerary. With financial help from their mother and brother Paul, who works in Homer, Alaska, as a salmon and halibut fisherman, the pair was able to make the proposed trip a reality.

The objective of the trip is "to share and experience our faith through art. I believe that the Alaskan people and nature will refresh and invigorate my faith journey," Morris said. "Pope John Paul II asked Catholics to evangelize the faith. Margaret and I are quietly evangelizing our faith by sharing our talents and learning about God's creation."

Mackie added, "When traveling, seeing the beauty of nature is awe-inspiring and reminds me of God making the earth. It is always a joy meeting new people and learning how important their faith is to them and how they practice their faith."

To prepare for their experience, the women were taking a botanical drawing course at the Corcoran College of Art and Design's Georgetown campus and gathering portable art supplies to bring along on their journey.

The sisters will begin the trip by meeting with Catherine Neumayr, principal at Holy Rosary Academy, an independent Catholic school in Anchorage. They will discuss their plans for an email pen-pal program between the students at Holy Rosary and St. Michael and hold a metal-embossed icon workshop for the Holy Rosary community Aug. 9.

Morris noted that the Holy Rosary Academy community "has a deep understanding of icons to encourage spiritual growth."

"A spiritual connection can happen during the act of creating an icon," she explained. "The person creating the icon naturally reflects on the subject of the icon -- for example, the Blessed Mother. This personal connection can be inspiring to the artist as well as the viewer."

The first leg of the sisters' trip also will entail a visit to the Alaskan Heritage Museum to learn about the history, culture and art of the region's native peoples.

Other highlights of the excursion will include a visit to the Alaska zoo to discuss an interactive teaching program, a meeting with education and outreach specialist Patrick Ryan from the Alaska Botanical Garden, tours of several churches and, they hope, a meeting with a Russian iconographer in Anchorage.

"Art has always been the great way to spread the faith," Mackie said. "It is inspiring and comforting to go into churches and to visually experience our faith. Every church has special saints, prayers and history that built it faith of its parishioners. I am looking forward to experiencing this in Alaska."

The women also have set aside time to visit their brother Paul in Homer to tour his fishing boat and see the inlet where he lives.

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Links:
[1] http://artcrossings.wordpress.com/