

A nun? In our dormitory? Yes, but . . . ?



By Lisa Velders

Sister Heliena Krenn confirms none of the movie and television stereotypes of a nun.

I had expected a twinkling Debbie Reynolds, strumming her guitar and singing "Dominique, . . . nique, . . . nique." Or the opposite, a harsh-voiced, steely-eyed creature clutching her cross.

Instead, I found a quiet, 45-year-old woman wearing a woman, if somewhat quizzical smile as she opened the door to her dormitory room in Selleck Quadrangle.

Her gray hair was tucked beneath a navy blue veil. Her skin was pale, her blue eyes faded. And her voice, far from harsh, contained the faint, soft lilt of a German accent, a remnant of her Austrian past.

At age 24, in Windischgarsten, Austria, Sister Heliena decided she "wanted to do more for God." She became a Missionary Sister, Servant of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps she took her vows because, as a young girl, she was impressed by her parents' religious faith. Or maybe it was the influence of a teacher who, in speaking of "professions fit for a girl," mentioned the Missionary Sisters.

She said it was a sacrifice for her family when she joined an order which required her living in foreign countries. But they were proud that she "was willing to do this," she said.

Her friends, at the same time, tried to "make it (the idea of becoming a nun) very distasteful." But it is a decision Sister Heliena claims not to regret.

Before taking her vows, Sister Heliena spent four years studying English literature at the University of Vienna.

Now, more than 12 years later, she is a Ph.D. candidate in English literature at UNL. She plans to return to Taiwan to the Catholic university where she has taught English literature for nine years, in the fall.

She said she still receives letters from Taiwanese students hoping she will return.

Religious instruction is not part of the Catholic university curriculum in Taiwan. In fact, "one has to be careful," Sister Heliena said. Western religious values emerge in Western literature, she said, and she was careful not to impose them on her students.

Most Taiwanese students go to the Catholic university, Sister Heliena said, not because it is Catholic, but because their own universities are over-crowded.

However, she instructs about 10 Taiwanese students who express a "hunger for a deeper meaning in life," each semester in religion. She suggested that some Taiwanese might reject Buddhism in favor of Catholicism because "for them, the ideal is to go west (where) life is more convenient."

Now, after three years at UNL, Sister Heliena speaks in the hushed tone of a prisoner marking time, about completing her thesis on Joseph Conrad.

Not that her experience at UNL has been bad. On the contrary, she said she has been favorably impressed with the UNL English Dept., where, she said, "I am accepted

for what I am."

And dorm life is little different from her campus life in Taiwan, where she served as a resident counselor.

She has her own friends—largely among the graduate students.

Nor has she ever experienced any antagonistic student reaction to her presence in the dorm. Dressed daily in the navy blue habit of her order, she is, in fact, a rather visible Selleck resident. But she suspects she might make some Catholic girls, in particular, uncomfortable. They might, she said with a smile, think she was trying to get them to join the order.

Sister Heliena said she doesn't see much campus interest in religion—a fairly common phenomenon, she added.

"Young people are planning their lives, not thinking so much of what is after this life," she said.

I asked Sister Heliena about lay people taking on Church duties. She explained that it is necessary, but that "being a nun or a priest has the additional purpose of being more exclusively dedicated to God and to His work."

The life of a missionary sister is a full one, she said. Little time remains for personal interests. But that "doesn't mean it is not a happy, fulfilling life," she said.

And on that note, I could not ask her the questions my friends had suggested when I told them I was going to interview a nun.



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