**Language assistant Julia Prager Hessel – January 2023**

Hello! My name is Julia, and I am currently working in the English Department at Gymnasium Chotěboř as part of a U.S. Fulbright teaching grant, intended to increase cultural exchange and English education between the United States and the Czech Republic. I grew up in New York, went to university in New Orleans, Louisiana, and recently graduated from a Master’s program in London. I teach most students in the school once per week in class, and facilitate a “walk and talk” conversation club, a Mock Trial team, and a book club after school.

Having only ever lived in and around major cities, my first few days in Chotěboř were different, to say the least. I met my mentor teacher- the man charged with making sure I could live and teach here– for the first time when he picked me up from the airport and, in a few short hours, we arrived in Chotěboř. I was intimidated by its small size and nervous about spending a year in a place where I might not be able to blend in; in New York, I could go grocery shopping in my pajamas, but here, I might run into a student, a student’s parent, or a coworker. During my first week in Chotěboř, my mentor, Mr. Bárta, brought me to his regular Thursday night football game (in which I have since played almost every week, and a community into which I have been welcomed so warmly). After the first round of post-football *pivo* but before being introduced to all the players, I heard something that sounded like “americanska” in a conversation behind me. Needless to say, I felt very seen.

My comfortability in town, though, grew in tandem with my comfortability in the classroom. My first few lessons at school consisted mostly of silent rooms and big eyes; I would ask a question, and get absolutely nothing. I felt like a court jester, silently begging for just one student to ask one question, or answer one of mine. I even tried neck stretches before class to encourage them just to nod in response. One student told me that her peers were probably scared to answer my questions lest they make a grammar mistake that surely I, a native English speaker, would recognize. I tried to emphasize that in my classes, it is better to make a mistake than to not try at all. I tried to point out that I can’t even make all of the sounds you need to speak Czech, let alone continue a conversation past “dobry den.”

After a few lessons, the questions started flowing, as did the invitations. I had dinner with some of my older students, and we discussed fashion, travel, and gender norms in our different countries. I was invited to visit volleyball trainings for a team a few students play on, and I was struck by their extracurricular passion, athleticism, and willingness to speak English casually, outside of the classroom setting. When I first received these and other invitations, I was hesitant to accept them. Despite the fact that I am not a full department teacher and that I am only four years older than my oldest students, accepting, or even offering, these invitations would be seen as inappropriate in American teaching practice. I was nervous to spend time with students outside of class, and more nervous still to participate in school-sponsored events– like ribbon parties with graduating maturita students– where teachers are encouraged to drink with their students. Once I adjusted, though, convinced by my fellow teachers and the organizers of my Fulbright program that having more personal relationships with students was more common here, classroom relationships began to take off. We still have lazy days and Monday mornings, but the classroom silence mostly came to a halt. The more I learned about my students as people– what they were passionate about outside of school, what they were interested in learning more about, etc.– the better I could tailor both my lesson topics and my interactions with students in the classroom. Maybe seeing me sweatily attempt to keep up with them in volleyball practice makes my students more comfortable with me, too, and more open to expressing themselves and their thoughts in class. Yes, I still hear their grammar mistakes, but just as I can help them gain comfortability with English, they can teach me about Czech food, help me with my pronunciation of “Chotěboř,” or even teach me how to serve a volleyball. Now, I look forward to running into students at the grocery store or on the bus and asking about their day, checking in about how they feel in class, or just saying “Hi.”

At this more-or-less halfway point, I do not necessarily feel that I fit into Chotěboř seamlessly, or that I am indifferentiable from life-long residents, but I am more than okay with that. My role here- in the classroom, on the soccer field, at cafes with my students– depends on my differences, and what I can offer from my reflections upon them. My students, aided by my experiences in Chotěboř, have taught me just as I have taught them; they have emphasized the importance of community, and forced me reconsider the value I place on “blending in.” Moreover, they have awakened a passion for teaching I never knew I had. I have always been drawn to mentorship opportunities, in and out of academic settings, but the relationships I have formed have inspired and energized me to new heights.

I have students who I see outside of class in my clubs or their sports practice every week, and I have students who I only speak with during in-class discussions. I have students who are fluent in English to the point that we can discuss philosophy, politics, and law with little to no language barrier, and I have students who are working on basic vocabulary with which to describe a bedroom. In all of these interactions– from discussing the inevitable (and universal) anxiety graduating from high school brings, to teaching Tercie students how to say “slippers”– I find fulfillment and joy. There are successes that come in the form of facilitating a discussion on utilitarianism, ethical dilemmas, and thought experiments so advanced and intense that Septima students did not want to leave at the bell, and there are successes that look like teaching Kvarta students to correctly pronounce “optional,” and applauding them when they nail it. Despite the inevitable exhaustion of seemingly endless lesson planning, working with multiple teachers and, thus, teaching styles, and walking the line between entertaining and educating, I leave school each day with a renewed sense of gratitude for the students I teach and their willingness to learn, and for the teachers I teach with and welcoming arms with which they have allowed me into their classrooms. I am thankful for the opportunity to experience this life so different from my own, and so excited for the rest of this year.