

## **Br. Joe Kotula, ofm**



He remembers clearly the moment he became captivated by the Franciscans. Br. Joe Kotula, ofm, was on Arch Street in Boston attending Mass when the presiding friar did something unorthodox for the early 1980s.

“The friar came down off the pulpit to give the homily and I was blown away by that,” Br. Joe said. “God came off the pulpit. I grew up where priests were God on Earth and to see that happen at Mass, it led me to say, well, the friars are really cool.”

The friars weren’t only cool, they provided a welcoming space for healing, opening new opportunities for Kotula to explore something he had unwittingly been doing his entire life – living in the spirit of St. Francis.

Born in 1948 in New Eagle, Pa., Joseph Kotula grew up near the Monongahela River, spending as much time outside as he could. Graduating from high school in 1966, an Army recruiter encouraged him to enlist in the service. After four years in the Army, he returned to Pennsylvania, working in a steel mill, but kept getting laid off. So, he moved to California by hitchhiking.

It was on that West Coast trip that he discovered backpacking.

“I hiked the Grand Canyon down to the river and back up in the same day, with nothing but a canteen of water. That was it. I was young, foolish and had a lot of energy, but it was not easy,” Br. Joe said. “I met people going down there that had backpacks, and they said, we sleep down there. And I said, really, you’re not allowed to sleep down there. Well, we do it anyways. So, one of the first things I did when I got to

California was go to a swap meet. I bought a backpack and started backpacking and I've been backpacking ever since."

His backpacking life has taken him to Colorado and Western Canada, where he finally achieved his goal of seeing a grizzly bear. He hiked sections of the Long Trail in Vermont, where he got the idea to complete the 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail by section-hiking. He completed that quest in 2018. And while he's had memorable, spirit-filled moments on the trail, his time outside has created a perspective of wilderness and gratitude.

"When you're out hiking in the wilderness, that's when you get this experience that you're a guest," he said. "We as human beings tend to think everything is there for us so I'm in control. But you get out in the wilderness, and you realize, or I realize, I'm pretty small. They're welcoming me. I'm a welcomed guest, but I'm a guest."

But while he later found his footing on remote hiking trails, Joe first had to endure moments of uncertainty. After time in California, Kotula found his way back to the East Coast (via hitchhiking again) and moved to Massachusetts – the home state of the woman he was engaged to. She

introduced him to the friars on Arch Street in Boston. The engagement didn't last. The connection with the friars did.

"I started to become part of a group called Young Adult Catholics. I liked the whole prospect of who they were. They took everybody as individuals, not as a group."



While feeling welcomed by the friars, Kotula resisted the idea of entering official formation as his experience in the Army made him leery of joining any formal organization. He finally called the friars vocation director in late 1982 and his journey began with the order.

The connections between Br. Joe's life and the Franciscan way are clear to see from a distance – his love of the outdoors and his itinerant existence with few possessions easily connect back to stories of St. Francis. In some ways, it feels as if Br. Joe was destined to find the friars.

“Most of my life was a fairly simple life,” Br. Joe said. “I hitchhiked a lot, living with nothing. I mean, I always say my standard of living went up 300 percent when I joined the friars. It wasn’t like I knew about Francis and then went and did these things, but as I learned more about him, I did start to make some connections. Francis learned by living. His Canticle of the Creatures came at the end of his life, not at the beginning and we forget that sometimes. We learn by living.”



During his Franciscan novitiate, Br. Joe spent some time at St. Bonaventure University where he met Fr. Dan Riley, ofm, and Fr. Dan Hurley, ofm, as the idea of the Mountain was taking shape. In 1989, he arrived at Mt. Irenaeus for an internship and never left.

“I became this person who takes care of the place by default, not by being a

maintenance man,” Br. Joe said. “I have the ability to look at things and maybe troubleshoot things.”

For Br. Joe, the heart of life at Mt. Irenaeus is to practice active contemplation, that balance between working (like fixing up the property) and being with God in community. He cherishes the core community of professed friars and welcomes the support of others who have joined them on the Mountain.

“We don’t claim to be able to teach you active contemplation. We attempt to live it. Sometimes we do. Sometimes we don’t,” Kotula said. “You know when you’re not in balance, because either the activity or the mind takes over. It’s usually the activity that takes over because when you’re really active, even when you try to be quiet, it’s very difficult. Part of contemplation is to quiet the mind and have perspective.”

