

A group of volunteers is working on a stone wall at Biely Kameň castle ruins. In the foreground, two women in white t-shirts and gloves are using tools to work on the wall. A man in a red t-shirt and khaki pants is standing nearby, looking towards the wall. A wheelbarrow filled with stones is in the center. In the background, another person in a white t-shirt is visible. The scene is outdoors with trees and a stone wall.

# Volunteering means spending time in a useful way

*THERE ARE PLENTY OF OPPORTUNITIES TO VOLUNTEER*

**Text: Jana Liptáková • Photo: Courtesy of Castrum Sancti Georgii and the Pontis Foundation**

**T**here are various ways people can start volunteering. But what all volunteers can share is a feeling of fulfilment and reward.

“Volunteering is a combination of something pleasant and useful,” Veronika Jirku from Banská Bystrica said when sharing her path to volunteering with *The Slovak Spectator*.

She noted that each volunteer needs to find their own volunteering activity, one that interests them. “Some don’t want to meet other people, and some people prefer to walk dogs, others prefer to paint the fence, so everybody needs to find their own thing that interests them.”

## **GIVING BACK FOR THE SAKE OF FUTURE GENERATIONS**

Monika Winczerová, a native of the town of Svätý Jur, close to Bratislava, began volunteering some 16 years ago.

At the time, she was responding to an offer from her then employer in Bratislava to join Naše Mesto, the largest corporate volunteering event. She and her colleagues collected rubbish in the municipal forests in Bratislava. It appealed to her so much that she began organising volunteering activities for her colleagues beyond the event.

“We first cleaned all the tourist trails in the Small Carpathians around Bratislava,” she said. Afterwards, they advanced towards Svätý Jur, Marianka, Borinka, and Limbach – all the way up to Pezinská Baba, a recreational resort. They then switched to planting trees in the Small Carpathian forests that had been damaged by weather events, and also began restoring castle ruins. After helping with cleaning and building work at the ruins of Plavecký, Dobrá Voda and Tematín castles, all in western Slovakia, she lamented when talking to Tematín’s castellan that it

was sad that she and her colleagues were helping in distant castles when there was a castle, Biely Kameň (White Stone), in ruins, right in her hometown that no one cared about it. The castellan replied that he had just seen on social networks that some activists were putting together a group to do something about it.

“I immediately contacted them and even though this connection didn’t lead to any tangible results, it kick-started me so strongly that I resolved to try to save the castle on my own,” she recalled.

In 2021, she rented the castle ruins from its private owner, launched the non-profit organisation Castrum Sancti Georgii and began, with only the help of volunteers, to restore the 13<sup>th</sup> century Gothic castle, which is a protected national cultural monument hidden in the forest above Svätý Jur. At the very beginning she struggled to





The non-profit organisation *Castrum Sancti Georgii* has been restoring the ruins of Biely Kameň castle since 2021.



## Naše Mesto (Our Town)

Box: Naše Mesto – ‘Our Town’ in English – is the largest corporate volunteering event in central Europe. This year the event will take place in Slovakia on Friday, June 7. Organised by the Pontis Foundation for the eighteenth time, hundreds of volunteers wearing white “I Have My Heart in the Right Town” T-shirts will help NGOs, schools, kindergartens and centres that provide social care. For instance, they will clean up nature and community centres, restore castles and other monuments, and spend time with the residents of various social service facilities.

raise money for restoration work, but year after year, as the results of the volunteers’ work started to become more visible, donors began to trust her more and more. Winczerová estimates that they need almost €100,000 per season in order for the work to continue at its current pace.

In the first three seasons they cut down the trees and greenery that had grown inside the collapsed castle buildings, and fixed some of the walls that remained standing, as well as the fortifications.

“The castle is so huge – it’s five times bigger than well-known guard castles like Revište, Šášov or Blatnický – that even though we have done a lot, it’s still a drop in the ocean,” said Winczerová.

She estimates that for now work still needs to be done just to stabilise the ruins for the next 10 years. The next phases may involve building the miss-

ing parts of the fortification walls, then excavating debris from the lower floors of the former castle buildings. Nevertheless, the castle is already accompanied by many legends in its current condition, for example that it used to be connected via an underground tunnel with the church in Svätý Jur.

“It’s attractive precisely because it’s so mysterious, concealed in the forest that has grown here,” Winczerová said. She adds that the place is a popular destination for hikes and picnics for locals, and visitors from Bratislava or its vicinity.

Although she often despairs of where she will obtain money and volunteers, volunteering at the castle makes a lot of sense to her.

“I generally believe in good, that not everything in life can be measured in money or profit,” she said. “As I’m getting older, I’m realising that human-

kind only has a chance to survive if we don’t just consume, but give something back. I’m giving away in the form of restoring this piece of our national heritage for the next generations.”

### SPENDING TIME IN A USEFUL WAY

Adriana Dudová from Michalovce, eastern Slovakia, who works with ČSOB bank, started volunteering some years ago. She has already worked as a coordinator of regional collections for civic associations and non-profit organisations, as well as helping at the Slovak-Ukrainian border when Russia attacked Ukraine, just to mention a few of her activities. “Although I don’t have a lot of time right now, I like this possibility of self-fulfilment and helping others through volunteering,” she said. She appreciates that the bank enables





During the Naše Mesto corporate volunteering event hundreds of volunteers clean up public spaces and schools, old-age homes and kindergartens, restore castles and other monuments, and spend time with the residents of various social-service facilities.



her to participate in volunteering projects, and believes that Naše Mesto can spread into smaller towns, like Michalovce in eastern Slovakia.

“In the past, volunteers cleaned the shores of Ružín reservoir. In the future this can be done at Zemplínska Šírava reservoir, close to Michalovce,” she said. Volunteering gives her a sense of satisfaction that she is useful as a person, and that she can apply her time in a meaningful way.

“There really is no nicer feeling than when someone thanks you for what you do,” she said, adding that there are many stories with happy endings. They also often stay in touch for years with the people they’ve helped.

### GOODNESS IS CONTAGIOUS

Veronika Jirku from Banská Bystrica, central Slovakia, encountered volunteering when she took a job at Slov-

enská Sporiteľňa bank (SLSP) some years ago. When she was told during on boarding what activities she could take part in at the bank, they included volunteering.

“I was so intrigued that I definitely wanted to try it out,” said Jirku.

Her first volunteering appointment was at the Senium senior house in Banská Bystrica. Here she and her colleague made Christmas decorations and played board games with local seniors. At that time, as she no longer had any grandparents and her father had died from cancer, she appreciated the chance of being in contact with seniors.

“It’s so rewarding in that you learn a lot of things and meet new people,” she said. She adds that seniors living in senior houses are often lonely, as their relatives live far away and seldomly visit.

She found volunteering so satisfying that she became involved in the organ-

ising of volunteering activities at SLSP. She and her colleagues write personalised postcards to lonely seniors in a senior house in Rohožník, walk dogs, paint fences, plant trees and create teaching aids for children with various developmental disorders. Since 2023 they have participated in the Naše Mesto event.

During volunteering activities people from various departments of the bank can get to know each other better and relax. Volunteering finally started to make more sense to them as it’s a combination of something pleasant and useful, noted Jirku. She continues to organise some volunteering activities, either for her colleagues as well as beyond SLSP during her current maternity leave as well.

“Goodness is contagious,” she said when sharing her volunteering experiences with The Slovak Spectator. © TSS