

Getting to Know Tom Patterson

Tom Patterson is a quiet, behind-the-scenes kinda guy. If you are new to the congregation you likely have no idea the important role he played in the creation of UUCSC. Tom and his late wife Joan, along with the late Winnie and Pete Bennis, were on the Futures Committee at Westminster Unitarian Church in East Greenwich charged with exploring how to deal with the burgeoning congregation there. The Committee explored many options and as Joan said with a chuckle when I talked with her many years ago, “Next thing I knew we were signed up to go to a weekend-long New Congregational Training Workshop at the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in Boston.”

Tom and Joan attended the training and with the support of the Westminster congregation and help from Fred Gillis of the UUA the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County began meeting in 1989. Tom and Joan along with Pete and Winnie Bennis are considered the founders of UUCSC. Other Westminster congregants who saw a need for a liberal religious voice in South County joined with them, attracting new members and meeting in a wide variety of locations before landing in their permanent home at Lily Pads in 2009.

Tom wasn't brought up as a Unitarian Universalist. After meeting at Ohio State University and marrying in 1956 he and Joan were living in Milford, New Hampshire and attending a Congregational Church. The “fire and brimstone” tone of the minister there drove the Pattersons (and several other parishioners) across the street to the Unitarian Church where they found the services much more to their liking.

Tom and Joan lived in several places around New England as Tom pursued his career as a mechanical engineer. But it was Joan's desire to finish a Master's Degree in Library Science that brought them to Rhode Island in 1972. They intended to stay for only one year as Joan finished the program that she had started in New Hampshire but which was no longer available there. They began attending services at Westminster Unitarian and made many deep and lasting friendships there. When the year was up the housing market had crashed; they couldn't sell their house and as one thing led to another they remained in Rhode Island.

Many of Tom's career years were spent doing machine design for newspaper presses. He is a man who likes to figure out a problem and fix it. Though he did serve as secretary and treasurer and various other positions for the church he says he was more often the go-fer for Joan and other movers and shakers of the church. Even today he has no official position on a committee but when something needs to be fixed he is often right there with his longtime buddy Ed Burrell.

When Joan passed away in 2011 some of the spark went out of Tom. He knew he had found an irreplaceable treasure in her. After raising their two children—Ted, currently residing in Westerly and Janet who now lives in California—Tom and Joan traveled extensively, particularly enjoying Elderhostel trips- Tom's favorite being a train trip across Canada.

Tom rents a space he uses as a combination metal and wood working workshop. His array of machinery and tools is quite impressive. He would be happy to show people around his workshop—once he has it organized. After being in storage for five years it has been taking quite a lot of effort to get it set back up again. Tom spends a good part of two or three days in the shop but still dreams of life on the farm in Ohio. He would love to again own a small house with a two car garage (for the workshop) situated on two acres so he could have a garden and maybe raise a few chickens.

Elizabeth Donovan, June 2020