

## **Our Stories—Jean Bowen**

Anyone who knows Jean Bowen would likely agree that the central theme in her life has been social justice. She has spent her life speaking up for the underdog, fighting for the rights of the disabled and truly caring for people who are oft times ignored by others. Jean had a comfortable, happy childhood during which the traits of kindness and acting ladylike were highly valued, a childhood in which she was protected from the unpleasant awareness of the inequity and injustices that plague the world.

In 1966 she married a handsome, six and half foot tall West Point graduate from Nevada. That marriage, a happy one, gave her two children, a comfortable life, lots of travel across the United States and beyond, and a chance to grow her social awareness. They divorced amicably in 1994.

The tumultuous years of 1968-69 at the beginning of her married life were a real eye-opener and the beginning of Jean's social justice awakening. Her young husband had four years of active military duty that he had to serve as part of his West Point requirement. Suddenly her comfortable life was threatened while at the same time the soldiers stationed in Vietnam, her husband among them, were vilified by the antiwar protestors marching around the country. She watched the television news incessantly; she began to deeply explore her beliefs and see the world in a new way. She became involved in the feminist movement, joining NOW and reading early feminist writings. Her husband left the military as soon as his obligation was fulfilled and he was supportive of her growing activism.

As her children grew a bit older Jean's activism started taking the form of paid work. Living in North Salem, NY, she worked at three agencies in CT, for many years working at all of them at the same time. In 1979 she took a job at WeCAHR—Western Connecticut Association for Human Rights—where she worked for twenty eight years as the Executive Director. The mission of WeCAHR states that they advocate for the civil and human rights of people with disabilities. They work to create and promote personal success, independence and community involvement for children and adults with disabilities. This could well have been Jean's mission statement too. In 2008 she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Council of Executives of The Arc, which advocates locally and nationally for the rights of people with disabilities. Jean was the leader of efforts to protect the rights of residents of Southbury Training School and require the state to give them opportunities to live in the community.

Jean also worked as Advisor of People First of Connecticut and Self Advocates Becoming Empowered, both state and national programs that expanded on her work at WeCAHR. This work included working with numerous state and federal agencies, investigation of claims of discrimination and abuse, class action lawsuits, public education of the issues and always the personal support and advocacy of the individual clients. This work was immensely satisfying to Jean. A story which illustrates this work and is perhaps one which is most gratifying to Jean is that of Richard Messier. Autistic and unable to speak, Messier was mistreated as a child by his family and then ended up spending 36 years at the Southbury Training School. In 2005, thanks to work by WeCAHR and others, he was able to move to his own home at Stetson Place in Danbury, CT. With 24/7 caregivers and friends he is able to work and spend time visiting the family of his primary caregiver and members of his circle of friends. Richard Messier's story and those of others were featured in a production of Connecticut Public Television titled "Able Lives." Richard is now a proud homeowner who used a Section 8 voucher to purchase a condo in a housing development that Jean advocated for and fought to build for the community and which houses nine other individuals with disabilities.

Another important thread in Jean's life has always been family. After marrying Tom Nerney in 2005, whom she met through her work at WeCAHR, she shared with him an extended family of six children and twelve grandchildren. In Tom she had found a true kindred spirit and fellow warrior in the fight for social justice and she was devastated when he passed away in 2018. They also shared a love for being on the water and for salt water fishing. This love brought them to Rhode Island, first just renting a slip at Ram Point and staying aboard the Julie Jean on weekends and eventually buying a house in Wakefield in 2008.

Having earlier joined a UU Congregation in Danbury looking for support through divorce and ill health, Jean made a beeline for UUCSC when she moved here full time. After retiring from WeCAHR she continued to volunteer for several years. As that has wound down she has devoted herself to social justice work through Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense and through UUCSC's Social Justice Team, among other organizations. Disappointed and frustrated after the 2016 election she gave her energy to spearheading the move to reorganize the Social Justice Team at UUCSC into its current form.

Jean has been pleased with UUCSC's efforts to keep people connected during the Pandemic and has participated in many Zoom meetings, co-leading the Antiracism Group on Monday evenings for one, and enjoying the virtual services and weekly newsletter. She looks forward to the time when we can meet again in person but for now is content to meet on her very comfortable patio or via the computer screen.

Her mother would no doubt be pleased that Jean has always remained a "lady." But her gracious demeanor belies the tough as nails tenacity that has changed the lives of numerous individuals directly and more broadly helped change the face of disability care far into the future.

*Elizabeth Donovan, August 2020*