

Our Stories—Rene Bertrand

Ten years ago Rene Bertrand heard a voice, “You will build a waterfall.” He was standing in his back yard where a tree had just fallen, the crown of the tree pointing to a sinkhole that had developed over an area previously leveled with fill. After 41 years in AA Rene is accustomed to turning to a higher power for strength and guidance. So build he did. Today he has what is likely the only waterfall in all of Narragansett. His yard is an oasis of calm, well shaded and featuring not only the soothing sound of the water burbling down the hill but a small pond complete with koi, birds and butterflies flying about and several piled-stone formations that delight the eye and serve as places of prayer.

At the age of 34 Rene (rhymes with Benny) made some major changes in his life. Divorced and raising a twelve year old son he decided it was time to redirect the energy he expended on being angry and use it in positive ways to make a better life for them both. He began his long journey on the road to recovery, a road he has traveled consistently for over four decades. He found the strength to make these changes came from a very spiritual force—a higher power that he relies on to help him tap into his own power. He returned to school and studied massage therapy with a focus on stress and sports injuries. He turned his attention to his interest in art. Without formal training or classes he taught himself to draw and to paint, primarily using chalk pastel, learning by doing.

At an age when some might be retired Rene is still practicing massage therapy; or at least he was until the Pandemic hit. He has a home office complete with a full size sauna. For the past ten years he has been a co-coach for two programs run by the South County YMCA; “Live Strong,” for those living with and recovering from cancer and “Rock Steady” for people living with Parkinson’s Disease. In both programs he is using the many skills he acquired over decades of helping people with sports injuries along with specific training he received to help people use their bodies efficiently and carefully, giving them a better quality of life with less pain. He has become an accomplished artist exhibiting in galleries throughout South County and beyond. His home is his gallery and he has two rooms that he devotes to his art making.

Rene was brought up as a Catholic but found that the religion didn’t really serve him very well after he was divorced. For many years, though he considers himself a Christian and is deeply spiritual, he only went to church for weddings and funerals. Until he kept hearing about the UU church at Lily Pads. He came to a service and he liked the open mindedness, the tolerance and the acceptance that he found at UUCSC. He likes the positive energy he feels on a Sunday morning. And he likes the people.

Rene is a people person and the isolation of the Pandemic has hit him hard. He misses his clients at the YMCA, many of whom he considers friends and he worries about how they are doing. He misses art gatherings and getting together with friends. Online services and Zoom meetings are not for him. He feels a real need to get together in person with people. He is very grateful that he has his art to keep him busy and feed his soul. He is grateful for his garden oasis. He is particularly grateful for a new relationship in his life that started in February and has weathered the challenges of two states and strange new safety requirements. He misses being able to pay back to the world, something that is of utmost importance to him.

Elizabeth Donovan, August 2020