

Our Stories—Russell Stokes and Mary Finnegan

Russell Stokes and Mary Finnegan first became acquainted through their daughters, Laurel and Allie, who were good friends in elementary school. It wasn't until Russell and Mary met at UUCSC (aka the American Legion Bingo Hall), that they realized they had much in common—both are committed to social justice causes and both are nature lovers. They were married at UUCSC in 2010 in the presence of family and friends.

Mary had come to UUCSC in 2000 looking for a new spiritual connection. The Catholic Church of her upbringing was no longer resonating with her and she had read about the congregation in an article about former interim minister Tricia Hart in the *South County Independent*. Russell, who says the natural world is his most spiritual place, had already been attending for a few years, enjoyed the community and was a member of Common Ground and the Racial Justice Committee.

Mary had been interested in environmental issues in high school and her eyes were opened to a range of social justice issues at Boston College where she lived in the Center for Social Justice, a co-op of about a dozen students. Russell's interest in social justice had its genesis in his personal experiences. His family lived in Tuskegee, Alabama until they relocated to the Boston area when he was eight years old. He recalls the stark difference between the two locales and as a Black youth was keenly aware of the events of the Civil Rights Movement. He believes that everyone is good and trying to do the best they can and he tries to approach them, both personally and professionally, openly and one-on-one. Both Mary and Russell have continued through the years to be very active in the Social Action group at UUCSC.

After college, Mary completed her MSW at Boston College and began working in the field of child and family counseling. She worked as a school social worker for Westerly Public Schools for many years until her retirement in 2019.

After getting his medical degree at the University of Virginia, Russell completed residencies in both pediatrics and emergency medicine. He worked with the National Health Services in clinics and emergency rooms in underserved communities. He then spent 15 years working in the emergency room at New London Hospital. His family, by then including three children, was initially drawn to RI by the Meadowbrook Waldorf School. Eventually he moved to RI and soon after decided to open a private practice in pediatrics in Westerly.

Mary has loved retirement from day one and has much to fill her days. She loves to be outside, walking, biking, kayaking and observing nature and she has several groups of friends that she gets together with including her UUCSC small group. Her daughter, Allie, lives with them and she enjoys spending time with her. In May she and Russell made the decision to expand their Covid pod and Mary's older daughter Sarah, along with her husband and two children, came from Baltimore to stay with them while the two parents worked remotely. Mary took over as Grandma/camp counselor and jumped right in entertaining Catherine and Richard and sharing her love of nature and gardening with them. They bird watched, worked at the Community Garden, biked and more. Allie was Mary's right hand gal and loved having the whole family together. Having seven people in the house made for a hectic but wonderful summer.

It went so well that Sarah and Eric, having always talked about returning to RI, decided that now was the time and in short order found a home to purchase just minutes away from Mary and Russell. Mary is delighted! She feels fortunate to have her grandchildren so close and has happily signed on to continue helping with childcare—so long as she still has time for her women’s groups and her kayaking. It warms her heart when the kids refer to their house as their second home.

Russell has three children—Laurel lives in NYC and works for Harper Collins; Alea is a high school librarian in Braintree, MA: and Jonathan is self employed and lives in Pawcatuck, CT. Though the Pandemic has changed the frequency of their visits they have continued to come to RI.

Russell made the decision in March to close his medical practice—a decision he had been mulling for a while. So in addition to participating when he could in the summer’s adventures, Russell spent a lot of time wrapping up his practice and closing the office. He hasn’t had much of a chance to adjust to retirement but he has been taking long bike rides with close friend Nick Smith. He also caught the sourdough baking bug after Nick gave him some of his sourdough starter. Sourdough baking involves a live culture created from a mixture of water and flour that is allowed to ferment thus cultivating the wild yeast naturally found in the environment. It has to be fed more water and flour to be kept alive and to be activated. Making a good loaf of bread entails feel and practice more than strict adherence to a recipe. The process has a mystique about it because it is unpredictable and requires a lot of patience. Russell is intently trying different flours and experimenting with new combinations and the family is happily enjoying fresh bread every three days or so, some perhaps a little denser than desired but all very tasty.

Elizabeth Donovan, October 2020

Next week we’ll learn about Mary’s daughter Allie.