

Our Stories—Jeff and Cindy Berry

From the time he was a young boy, Jeff Berry had a special affinity for Salt Pond in Narragansett. Both sets of his grandparents had summer cottages there and he and his parents came down from Warwick frequently to spend time on the water. The boats, the tinkering about the homestead, the neighborhood—everything about it felt like home to Jeff. Jeff attended Warwick public schools and then got his degree in electrical engineering at Worcester Poly Tech. When it was time for him to set out on his own it is no surprise that he chose South County to settle in. Now, several decades later, he lives across the street from those two cottages. He inherited the cottages—one of which his father lived in until his passing in 2014— and rents them out to family and friends.

Cindy Cole Berry grew up in Lincoln, attended Hope High School in Providence and flunked out of URI in her first year. As she says, “I majored in frat parties and drinking; I even flunked volleyball!” Her parents were infuriated and said they would only pay for one more year of school and then she would be on her own. She attended a nine month program at Katharine Gibbs, earning a certificate in secretarial skills. This led to several short term jobs including ones as a legal secretary and as a lab tech at Brown University. She was married briefly in 1968 and joined the Air National Guard in Texas for a short time before ending up back in Rhode Island and working as a secretary in the marketing department of an electro manufacturing company in East Greenwich. It was here that she and Jeff met in 1982.

Cindy returned to URI in 1985, finally ready to do the work necessary to attain her nursing degree. She says she couldn't have done it without Jeff holding her hand through organic chemistry. They were married in 1988 and she graduated in 1989, 21 years after she had first started college. In the years following she worked at RI Hospital as a floating nurse, then at Jane Brown South Psychiatric Unit and Kent County Mental Health and later in several different nursing homes in the South County area. She spent her last nursing years before retirement caring for both her and Jeff's parents.

Jeff grew up unchurched—his mother's reaction to a very strict Baptist upbringing that she vowed not to force onto her son. Nonetheless, he was raised with a very clear moral code. He never yearned to be part of a church—it was simply not part of his experience. Cindy, on the other hand, never met a church that she didn't like. She was baptized in the Episcopal Church, raised and confirmed as a Congregationalist, was later baptized a second time by immersion, attended Catholic mass as a child with her French Canadian grandmother (homily spoken in French, mass in Latin) and visited a Buddhist Center—she has always been interested in religions and was always very active in the churches she attended. Cindy still visits St. Anne's shrine in Fall River and La Salette Shrine in Massachusetts, often with a dear friend who is a Passionist Nun. So it was at her urging that she and Jeff began to look for a religious community in South County. They both realized that with neither of them having siblings and with no children of their own, a spiritual community could be very important in their lives. Jeff felt that if they found the right community, they would have examples of how to lead a life in positive ways and a church could lead to the flowering of friendships. In his early forties he was beginning to yearn for that connection.

They came across an ad in the local paper inviting people to attend an every other Tuesday night meeting of Unitarian Universalists at the Clark Library in Carolina. Joan and Tom Patterson and Winnie and Pete Bennis were trying to form a new congregation to fill a need they saw for a liberal

religious voice in southern Rhode Island. Cindy and Jeff liked what they heard. Jeff liked the accepting viewpoint and lack of dogma and most especially the fact that one did not have to dress up to attend services. On July 1, 1991 UUCSC became a nonprofit corporation and elected its first board of directors with Cindy Cole Berry as president, a position she held until 1994. Cindy and Jeff stayed very involved with the administration of the church through the moves to several temporary locations and finally to our home here at Lily Pads, through guest speakers, interim ministers and much change and growth.

Jeff's primary contribution has been on the finance committee, originally as the treasurer but as the church grew he became the collector, tracking receivables. For several years he was an RE advisor and for ten years, up until 2016, he was one of the mentors for the Coming-of-Age program working one-on-one with a teen mentee. Whenever a church fundraiser is being held Jeff and Cindy are not hard to find, assisting in whatever way is necessary, helping in years past to run the Annual Silent Auction, the Harvest Fest and more recently the Holiday Fair. Though now retired as the "Bag Lady," Cindy started the popular sale table at the Holiday Fair, recycling gently used hand bags. And though Cindy has served on numerous committees over the years her most treasured connection to the church is through her small group, members coming and going, but with a core set of nine members who have met for twenty years. The group met outside biweekly this summer and is Zooming again as the pandemic restrictions tighten. They are in touch with multiple texts back and forth causing their phones to ping cheerily throughout each day.

Jeff is still working full time and besides his volunteer work for the church, he serves on the boards of the Town of Narragansett Harbor Commission and the New England Wireless and Steam Museum in EG. There is always plenty of house maintenance to keep up with and he has three boats, none of which made it into the water this past summer. Cindy enjoys reading and is happily retired. They both wonder about how the COVID 19 pandemic will change things for the future. Will people go back to their regular routines? They miss people at church. The online offerings are wonderful but just not the same. They wait, like we all do, until we can meet again in person on a Sunday morning. Meanwhile, life is pretty good in their neighborhood on the Salt Pond and there is always plenty of tinkering to do.

Elizabeth Donovan, December 2020