

Our Stories—Linda Whyte Burrell and Ed Burrell

Linda Whyte Burrell and Ed Burrell may not be credited with being founders of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County but they were movers and shakers in our congregation almost from the very beginning. Their hard work over two decades on the Land and Building Committee helped land us in our cherished home at Lily Pads. And Linda's work on the Worship Committee (often a committee of one in the early years), along with the input of all those involved in our nascent years helped set the tone for the welcoming and accepting atmosphere that is our hallmark and which draws so many people to return after their first Sunday visit.

Though Linda and Ed met in New London, CT in 1965 they didn't go on their first date until 1989. In the intervening 24 years they were each divorced and then widowed. They both had children; Linda had two sons and a daughter, Ed two sons. Eight months after that first date Linda moved to RI to marry Ed. It wasn't that they didn't know how to move fast when the time was right!

Linda's two younger children, Jamillah and Peter, were soon enrolled at Chariho Middle School and the family settled into life together in Hope Valley. Her older son, Gordon, and Ed's sons Mel and Chris had already flown the coop and were on their own.

Ed, a member of the Narragansett Tribe, was born in Westerly and lived in southeastern Connecticut until he moved to Hope Valley in 1986. He was brought up as a Baptist but didn't attend church as an adult. Linda was born in New Bedford and she too had moved away from organized religion. In her early thirties she attended a service at First Unitarian of New Bedford at the urging of a good friend. When she spotted several banners of the World's Religions on the sanctuary wall she was intrigued; she returned to become a very active and supportive member of the congregation. She attended church there for ten years and she and Ed still get together with members there at least once a year.

One of her goals in attending church was introducing religion to her children about whom she now says "They are Unitarian to the core but don't darken the door of a church unless I am speaking from the pulpit." Unitarian to the core is a fine result and the church will be waiting if and when they decide to return.

Ed enjoyed going to church with Linda in New Bedford while they were courting and was happy to attend Westminster UU just to be with his lovely new wife. On that very first visit to the church in East Greenwich, Jamillah, 13 years old and wearing her Chariho Middle School jacket, was approached (perhaps better described as accosted) by Winnie Bennis and Joan Patterson. "Where do you live?", they asked. "We are starting a UU congregation in southern RI. Where are your parents?" And so began Linda and Ed's long and active association with what soon became UUCSC. A mention here has to be made about Joan and Winnie, founders of UUCSC along with their husbands, Tom and Pete. Joan and Winnie, now deceased, were congenial and known for their gracious and friendly demeanors but they were very determined to be successful in creating a congregation of UUs in southern RI. They didn't miss an opportunity to talk about their new church or pass up a chance to ask someone to join them. It is their warm and welcoming embrace that is at the heart of our congregation, more than thirty years after its inception.

Ed and Linda truly found a home at UUCSC. Ed appreciated the friendliness and relaxed vibe of the church. Linda served as the second president of the congregation (1994-8) and was the lone member

of the worship committee arranging for someone to speak at each of the services. She has served in many roles over the years. But it is perhaps Linda and Ed's work on the Land and Building Committee that has been their most influential contribution to the church. They were a natural fit for this committee with Ed's background in construction and heavy machinery and Linda's background in art and design and her being a self-described "architecture junkie." The many places that the church met, the dozens of sites for a "Home of Our Own" that were looked at and evaluated and the history of our congregation since its founding in 1989 all deserve to be addressed in a longer, separate article but we shall fast forward to 2009 when UUCSC moved into our home at Lily Pads. A home that was the culmination of years of searching and hard work by many in the congregation.

Today, ten plus years later, Ed is on the Facilities Committee where his skills continue to be put to good use. Linda, who loves to entertain and set a nice table, is involved now with hospitality at the church but they both remain always on call to do whatever is needed to keep our community going and to support our members.

Ed has been retired for fourteen years but remains a member of the International Union of Operating Engineers. His favorite pastime is watching videos of heavy equipment and television shows like Highway Through Hell, Ice Road Truckers and Heavy Rescue: 401, all reality shows filmed in Canada and featuring ice and mud, skilled drivers and daring rescues. He shares this interest with grandchildren James and Leonora, the three of them on the floor gathered around the computer, Leonora in tiara and sparkles, watching the trucks overcome dangerous and harrowing conditions in order to keep the roads open and rescue the unfortunate truckers who have broken down or lost their way. The trios newest interest is in the radio-controlled models of trucks and planes that are very popular in Austria.

Linda has many creative interests and keeps busy cooking, sewing, knitting and drawing architectural plans. Linda and Ed hope to move closer to Linda's son Peter and his family in the near future and she is dreaming of building a new home, perhaps for all of them to live in together.

Both Linda and Ed are feeling the grief of the isolation necessitated by the pandemic. They love to entertain and Ed enjoys the men's breakfast group and is looking forward to resuming it in a non-Zoom format when it can actually include food. They are hopeful that even when apart physically our connections at UUCSC are so deep that when the congregation can get together again, we will have a magical rebirth and we will be stronger than ever, we will have renewed energy and enthusiasm and what seems like a step backward might actually be two steps forward.

Elizabeth Donovan, January 2021