

## **Our Stories—Natalie Herbermann**

There are many reasons why any one of us might not volunteer our time to causes that are dear to our hearts. Perhaps you are supporting other causes that are important. Perhaps you have young children and are struggling to hold on to a coherent thought for more than a minute. Perhaps you are a school teacher and your energy is sapped at the end of a day. Or your job requires long hours and frequent travel. Or you are too shy, can't drive, think you are too young or too old. Natalie Herbermann was never one to shirk her desire and her responsibility to support that which she cared about. As a parent of young children her volunteering often revolved around their needs and activities. And Natalie knew that balance is important and there is a time for everything.

So several years ago Natalie joined the church choir to fulfill her desire to make music with others and to participate in a new way with our congregation. Four years ago she decided it was finally time to really step up and give back to the church that had supported her family through all the travails of raising four children and all the challenges of life. She joined the Board of Directors and she so enjoyed working with the "brilliant, talented" people on the Board that she was inspired in 2019 to step into a leadership role and take on the position of President of UUCSC. She says she is constantly learning from the solutions-based team that guides our church. She finds our leadership, and truly all of our volunteers, to be creative, innovative and enthusiastic. And she is moved that all the hard work done by our volunteers is done for a higher purpose than self. All are working to better our community and better our world. She acknowledges that the church is becoming short-handed in leadership and urges people to step up however they can. Working together is a great way to learn, to make deep friendships and to truly be a part of our community.

Natalie was brought up in Rochester, NY where she attended Catholic school. She met her husband, Henry, who is from the south Jersey shore, when they were both at Fordham University. With degrees under their belts—hers in philosophy, his in economics—they married right out of college. Henry was, and still is, a passionate surfer and surf conditions were an important consideration in their choice of a locale in which to settle down. He had narrowed it down to four general locations: New England, New Zealand, North Carolina and Hawaii. They proceeded to visit all four areas and it wasn't long before they made Rhode Island their home.

Before having children of their own they opened their hearts to being foster parents, a rewarding and difficult undertaking. After a couple of long term placements in which the children were reunited with their birth parents, a child in their care whom they had come to love became available for adoption. David was the first child to officially join their family. Eventually the family included three more children—two biological children, Patrick and Luke, and a second adopted child, Mayra, the only girl in the crew. Raising a family of combined biological and adopted children was not quite as easy as they had naively assumed it would be. Adding to the challenge was the fact that the two children they fell in love with and added to their family were Black and the rest of the family is white. With their young children in tow they attended the Catholic church but decided that they needed to find a church that would better embrace their diverse family. They saw an ad in the Narragansett Times for UUCSC which at the time was meeting at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Kingston. Not knowing much about UUism they were pleasantly surprised to find a welcoming and supportive congregation that had a strong focus on social justice issues and wasn't afraid to look at the history of racism in the United States, an issue close to their hearts for obvious reasons. And, as so many have said about UUCSC, they simply liked the people in the congregation and felt comfortable there. The church

became a big part of their lives and was there for them through the inevitable hard patches that a large family is bound to have.

The children attended religious education up through junior youth group, a couple of them continuing on through senior youth group. All four—ranging in age now from 22 to 30 years of age—are basically on their own, though Patrick is home temporarily while doing an internship for his senior year at the Webb Institute for Naval Architecture—the Hogwarts for boatbuilders as the family refers to it. David moved out several years ago and has worked several different jobs. Myra attends CCRI and is a delivery driver for Amazon. Luke is an EMT and bartender.

Many years ago Natalie and Henry had both returned to school and received teaching certificates. Henry teaches 7th grade science at Curtis Corner Middle School. Natalie worked at Ocean Tides in Narragansett and then for seven years at the North Kingstown High School before being recruited to work at the Rhode Island Training School. The four-day a week schedule gave her a flexibility that proved very valuable to her busy family. She eventually moved to the Department of Corrections and today teaches three classes to men ranging in age from 18 to 65 who reside in maximum security and will likely never leave the facility. Natalie is inspired by these men who have dealt with great adversity in their lives but who nonetheless often have a great sense of humor, who come to the classes despite not being required to do so and who have a great desire to learn. She doesn't feel that Zoom teaching works nearly as well with her students as their educational backgrounds are not strong and she hopes that the in-person restrictions can be lifted soon.

Once their parenting skills were less in demand, Natalie and Henry decided to do something completely new together. They took a sailing class at URI despite the fact that neither of them had sailed before. They had so much fun that they bought a 28 ft. sailboat and being out on the water has become their new passion.

As we all are, Natalie is saddened by the loss of our in-person services due to the Covid pandemic. She knows that the online options don't work as well for some in the congregation and she hopes that members will reach out if they are not getting what they need. She continues to sing in the choir even though the technology involved is sometimes a challenge. And she very much looks forward to continuing to help guide the congregation as we hopefully get back to meeting in our church at Lily Pads in the near future.

*Elizabeth Donovan, January 2021*