

## **Our Stories—Winnie and Pete Bennis**

UUCSC was founded in 1989 by two couples that were members of the Westminster Unitarian Church in East Greenwich. Tom and Joan Patterson and Winnie and Pete Bennis had met at Westminster Unitarian only to find out that they lived a stone's throw away from each other in Richmond. They soon became fast friends.

In the late 1980s the Westminster Unitarian Church in East Greenwich was bursting at the seams. The congregation was growing; the sanctuary could not. The unique and beautiful space built in 1963 seated 90 people "in the round" and did not lend itself well to being renovated. The Futures Committee was charged with exploring possible remedies to the dilemma and one of the recommendations was to start another nearby congregation. Winnie and Joan, serving on the committee, did note that it was a long 1/2 hour drive from Richmond to East Greenwich. As Joan Patterson said many years ago with a chuckle, "before we knew what was happening, Winnie and I were signed up for a weekend-long workshop at the UUA in Boston called 'Building a New Congregation'."<sup>1</sup> Winnie was unable to attend due to an unexpected last minute conflict so Tom joined Joan at the workshop that would lead to the beginnings of this congregation.

By all accounts Winnie and Joan were dedicated proponents of the proposed new church in South County—placing notices in the local paper to attract potential members, speaking to anyone and everyone about it and holding first meetings in their homes. Tom and Pete were the quiet, behind the scenes support. Though Pete was known to express some skepticism, telling Winnie "It will never work."<sup>2</sup>

Winnie and Pete have passed away, as has Joan, so I asked Tom Patterson to share some remembrances of his friends.

Pete (given name Mason A. Bennis) was a weatherman in Providence. (He also like duck hunting) Winnie and Pete sold their house in East Greenwich when he was transferred to Ohio but upon his retirement the couple moved back to Rhode Island, settling in Richmond. Tom recalls lots of dinners spent enjoying each other's company and playing cards. He fondly remembers the frequent trips to Ogunquit, Maine that the two couples took together. Each trip had to include a visit by Joan and Winnie to a particular quilt store (Joan was an avid quilter) and they all enjoyed browsing in the used book store.

Winnie and Pete had two children. Their son, Admiral Richard E. Bennis of the Coast Guard, was in charge of shutting down NYC Harbor during 9/11. He has since passed away. Their daughter Joyce worked at Langworthy Library and was always very good with children. She passed away in 2020. Winnie and Pete had three grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Born in Providence, Winnie attended Rhode Island College of Education and taught at schools in Narragansett, East Greenwich and Coventry in addition to ones out of state. She was on the Board of the Clark Memorial Library and was a member of the Richmond Historical Society.

Linda Whyte Burrell recalls that Winnie was a fabulous detail person and made a terrific Vice President, remembering everything that Linda, as President, forgot. She notes that Pete's early lack of

conviction regarding the feasibility of the new congregation only “spurred Winnie and Joan on to greater effort—and here we are with over two hundred members and friends!!”

There is more to this story of course, in the church records and in the memories of others in the congregation that have been long time members. But there is no doubt that all of us at UUCSC owe a debt of gratitude to Winnie and Pete Bennis and Joan and Tom Patterson for their vision of a liberal religious voice in southern Rhode Island.

*Elizabeth Donovan, February 2021*

Notes:

1. Spoken to author in interview of 2009
2. Reported by Linda White Burrell

Anyone who wants to add their personal recollections to this story can contact me at [elizdn@hotmail.com](mailto:elizdn@hotmail.com)