

Our Stories—Vikki Lepree

Vikki Lepree wasn't looking to find a church community in 1991 when she happened to receive a telephone call from a woman she had never met. Winnie Bennis, one of the founders of UUCSC, had been at the hair salon and had gotten Vikki's name from one of her piano students. "Could Vikki play the organ?" "A new Unitarian Universalist church had begun services at the Masonic Temple in Charlestown." Though Vikki couldn't play the organ, she *could* play the keyboard and thus began her tenure as the first Music Director of UUCSC.

Brought up in Nutley, NJ, 20 minutes outside of NYC, Vikki loved attending the Episcopal Church with her family. She sang in the church choir and she was confirmed as a teen. But in high school she felt herself pulled to different ways to be spiritual. She studied yoga and meditation. She had always loved nature and being outdoors and a trip to the Grand Canyon let her see that too as a way to be spiritual. Though she didn't know much about Unitarian Universalism when she first began playing at the church she thought the guest speakers were inspirational and she soon became very friendly with other young moms at the church—Ali Buffum and Nancy Dean among them. On January 17, 1993, Charter Sunday, Vikki was one of the 31 people who signed the membership book at UUCSC.

Vikki's husband, John Jackson, also grew up in Nutley. His father was from Green Hill in South Kingstown and the family visited RI often. When John introduced Vikki to the area she fell in love with it too. They came to spend some time here after finishing college in 1976. The seashore and the open spaces of Green Hill were a welcome change after having been in such an urban area. Because teaching jobs were scarce, Vikki began to take on private music students; in no time at all she had 40 piano students. Green Hill was soon home. They lived in three rooms they rented in the original 1750s farmhouse of Burnside Acres Farm, a 20 acre working farm. John was taken under the wing of the owner, growing fresh market vegetables and eventually purchasing the property. The local favorites, sweet corn and tomatoes, are anxiously awaited every July by locals and summer visitors alike. Vikki, with the help of her in-laws and children, operated their Farmer's Wagon in Charlestown from 1990 until 2012 when it was moved to its present location in Quonochotaug. Their farm has also participated in farmers' markets in Charlestown, Richmond and Westerly.

Daughter Kathryn was born in 1991 and son Ben was born in 1993. Vikki remembers having to call Linda Whyte Burrell to tell her she wouldn't be able to play for the Sunday service that morning! Vikki feels that Kathryn and Ben had a well rounded religious education at UUCSC, attending the RE program with Sally Barney as director and completing the Coming of Age program with Brenda Beauregard and Dave Hurdis as attentive and inspirational mentors.

In 1999 Vikki returned to school to get re-certified to teach in the public schools. When she began teaching in school she gave up playing at the church but was still a committed and involved member. Vikki is passionate about music and about getting others to be enthusiastic—be they students or the congregation at UUCSC. She taught music, chorus and band at the Scituate Middle School for six years and then at Thompson Middle School in Newport for nine years before returning to school again to get a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership. She served as the Assistant Principal at Richmond Elementary from 2016 to 2019 when she retired.

John retired from full time farming this past year, leasing the Burnside Farm acreage to Quonnie Farms where their daughter and son-in-law work as the retail and growing managers respectively. Vikki's

favorite thing about being retired is the freedom of time. True to their love of the great outdoors she and John have always enjoyed camping and this year of Covid and retirement gave them a perfect opportunity. They just returned from a two month trip to Arizona, traveling in their truck camper. They were able to be pandemic safe and visit National and State Parks along the way, spend time with her mother and entertain other relatives at the campsite.

That phone call from Winnie Bennis in 1991 led to far more than a music gig. Lifelong friends were made, a community embraced a young family and together they all grew, supporting each other and making a spiritual home—a spiritual home that today reaches out to other families and individuals. Vikki was thrilled when the congregation voted to make the move to Lily Pads and she was glad to be a part of the effort to achieve that goal. And she will be thrilled when we can be back at our church at Lily Pads again.

Elizabeth Donovan March 2021