

Crossings

Winter 2016–2017

*The Magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Church
at Washington Crossing*

Houses of Healing

A doorway to
racial justice

Path to Membership

Inside Roots & Wings

Freedom To Be

Jo Millner's 58
years at UUCWC



UUCWC • Celebrating 100 Years of Congregational Life



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CROSSINGS: OUR PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

Articles in *Crossings* focus on the positive work done by UUCWC members and friends that demonstrates our congregation's commitment to the [7 Principles](#). Many good works by our committees, teams, and individuals are inspirational. Unless you are intimately involved with these efforts, however, it can be easy to miss the time and selfless dedication, the challenges overcome, or the joy experienced by those involved — not to mention the impact on those who benefit from their work. By telling our stories, we hope to inspire even greater engagement in social justice, charity, and other positive efforts within UUCWC.

UUCWC MISSION STATEMENT

Inspired by our Principles and Purposes, members of the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing unite to create a welcoming, caring religious community. Within this community, we encourage and affirm the individual's quest for authenticity, wisdom and spiritual deepening. We gather to celebrate the wonder of the cosmos and the mystery of life, its passages, its joys and sorrows. Compelled by justice, we give voice to societal concerns and reach out to touch the lives of others.

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Open to You.

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Awaken the Human Potential in Our Prisons

As a way to become involved in UUCWC's racial justice initiative, Houses of Healing offers a soul-searching way to live our first principle of Unitarian Universalism. Pris Gaver brought her 20 years of experience with Houses of Healing to UUCWC.

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Roots Hold Me Close, Wings Set Me Free

Our new path to membership, Roots and Wings, is intentional from a visitor's very first greeting at the door. As we grow, new members are equipped with tools and knowledge intended to increase the chances they will find a long-term spiritual home here.

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4 Women and a Congregation

This issue, we conclude our Centennial series about 50-year members. Jo Millner (pictured far right, above, with other UUCWC long-timers at Creed Myers' 50th anniversary recognition in 1998) is a Mormon-raised former Marine who values the freedom Unitarian Universalism has given her and her children to explore their own religious beliefs.

ON OUR COVER: Pris Gaver receives an award from the commissioner of the New Jersey Department of corrections for her 20 years of volunteerism through the Houses of Healing program.

There But

for Fortune

Recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of each person extends to those in our prison system. As one of the ways to become involved in UUCWC's racial justice initiative, Houses of Healing offers us a unique way to live this first principle of Unitarian Universalism — challenging our biases and assumptions.

Story by Mary Lou Dahms

Houses of Healing “taught me how to understand life in a different way as far as to respect myself and others. Everyone has their own problems and we all make mistakes. But it’s how you recover from them that counts.”

— Houses of Healing graduate

Pris Gaver first heard about [Houses of Healing](#) at a conference she attended in 1997. One of the speakers was Joan Borysenko, best-selling author of [Minding the Body, Mending the Mind](#), whose workshop drew on her book and experiences as a therapist. During that all-day workshop, Borysenko spent 15 minutes talking about Houses of Healing, an emotional literacy program for people who are incarcerated and sponsored by the Lionheart Foundation.

Pris had been toying with the idea of doing therapy work with prisoners, and what Borysenko had to say was an “Aha!” moment. A voice in her head said, “Put your money where your mouth is. This is what you are supposed to do.”

Pris already had a background as an addictions therapist, but the per-diem assignments she

was getting did not satisfy her desire to truly help people make sense of their lives and move forward. As she says, “Hearing Borysenko describe the Houses of Healing book and program was my wake-up call. The book took everything I had been using in my own therapy practice and put it into time-limited, teachable segments.”

When she returned from the conference, she called the [Lionheart Foundation](#) and ended up talking to Robin Casarjian, author of the book [Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom](#), for two hours. The foundation sent Pris the book and the training manual. The organization provides these materials to prisoners and to the volunteers who serve as teachers/facilitators of the program.

Little did Pris know then how receipt of those

ABOUT OUR HEADLINE

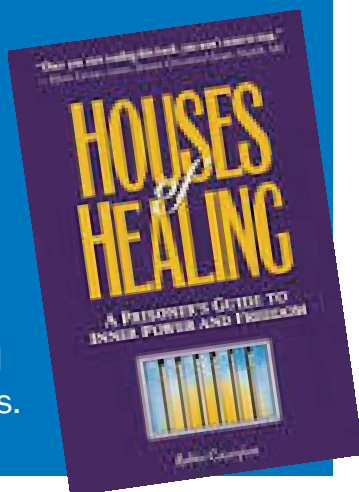
“There But for Fortune” is a song written by Phil Ochs, whose topical folk music of the 1960s and 1970s ranged from the civil rights to the antiwar movement. His first verse of “There But for Fortune” captured the righteous indignation of the inequities of our justice system:

Show me a prison, show me a jail
Show me a prisoner, man, whose face is growin' pale
And I'll show you a young man with many reasons why
And there but for fortune, may go you or I

ABOUT THE LIONHEART FOUNDATION

Lionheart founder and director Robin Casarjian first developed a course in emotional literacy skill building for inmates after being invited to give a talk on anger, resentment, and forgiveness to inmates in a Massachusetts prison in 1988. Previously, she had taught emotional literacy programs in corporate settings. She was astonished that 200 men came to her first all-day course. She realized that there was a huge unmet need for this kind of program among people in prison and that she had found her calling.

In 1992, she started the Lionheart Foundation to bring social emotional literacy programs to prisoners, and later expanded the programs to reach at risk youth and teen parents. Her 1995 book, *Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom*, emerged as a way to disseminate this material more widely. The book is hailed by prisoners, prison administrators, chaplains, ministers, and volunteers working to help imprisoned people see themselves in a new light and to begin to rebuild their sense of self-worth. Today it is an international program, distributed in many countries.



materials would cascade into two decades of meaningful work — and become one of the cornerstones of what is now UUCWC's racial justice initiative.

Persistence pays off

For Pris, introducing and leading a program in a prison — a setting in which she had no experience — was entirely new. Her desire to make a real difference in people's lives, however, helped her overcome her initial reluctance, and she set out to bring the Houses of Healing program to prisons in New Jersey. Pris started by networking with other people in the state who had requested the program materials. She called and met with prison administrators. Many expressed little interest in providing emotional literacy training to their inmates.

To get her foot in the door, Pris usually approached the prison's education department with a presentation based on the Houses of Healing program. Her first success was with the Edna Mahan Correctional Center, a women's prison in Clinton. She began leading some of the first Houses of Healing workshops in New Jersey there.

As she tells it, "For my first

course, I simply took the training manual and followed Step 1, Step 2, Step 3 and so on. My early efforts seem rudimentary now, but it was better than anything the prison had offered before. The positive feedback I received and the impact I saw it have on the lives of these women encouraged me to go on."

The course begins by asking students to answer the question "Who am I?" and then to explore how they got from innocent child to prisoner. They learn that they — like all of us — are more than the sum of their mistakes. Students begin to value their own self-worth and to see the importance of putting energy into it. They feel a sense of hope that helps them move forward.

One important segment of the course teaches mindfulness, relaxation, and meditation. These skills can help people channel their emotions from anger into a more positive direction. Many people in prison were sexually or physically abused as children; among women, as many as 80% to 85% have reported having been abused. Pris has seen dramatic improvements in both behavior and anger-management skills among people who have struggled

for years with negative feelings and post-traumatic stress.

"In the 13 weeks of the course," Pris says, "I can actually see personal positive change in the people who attend and do the work. I also truly come to care for the people I work with. I am there for them, I accept what they tell me, and I believe they can succeed. I let them know they are someone of worth and value, and they respond to my trust. Each time I present the course, I see breakthroughs — some of them profound."

Seeing the difference this course makes for others has encouraged Pris to keep teaching it for close to 20 years.

From those original programs at Edna Mahan, Pris went on to teach Houses of Healing at Jones Farm and at the Center for Rehabilitation and Facilitation, both in Trenton. Over the years, she's taught anywhere from two to four classes a week, sometimes with as many as 20 to 25 students for 13 weeks, up to three times a year.

Passing the torch

As Pris embarked on her 20th year of teaching Houses of Healing in 2015, UUCWC began exploring ideas for its churchwide racial justice initiative. Rev. Kim saw Pris



Jones Farm in Ewing, N.J., where Pris, Lynne, and Elliott have facilitated Houses of Healing. The state-run dairy farm is run almost exclusively on prison labor by inmates who either live on the farm or are bussed in.

with the *Houses of Healing* book and, having taught the program herself during an internship, Rev. Kim asked Pris if she would bring Houses of Healing to UUCWC as a racial justice volunteer opportunity.

Elliott Dunner decided to get involved after reading article after article about the impact of mass incarceration and the fact that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world (716 per 100,000 people as of July 2015, according to the U.K.-based [International Center for Prison Studies](https://www.prisonstudies.org/)). He attended and participated in Pris's course at Jones Farm last March.

"I wanted to learn from the inside about prisons and their impact on the people who are held there," says Elliott. "I was amazed to find that the guys at Jones Farm are more like us than not. I saw full knowledge of right and wrong, analytical thinking and disarming

HOUSES OF HEALING: FILLING A NICHE

The Houses of Healing program addresses emotional issues that lead people to prison. At one time, Jones Farm, near Trenton, recognized the niche that Houses of Healing filled, requiring prisoners to participate in the program. At the time, 30 to 40 men would sign up at once.



Photo courtesy of the Lionheart Foundation

Today, Pris is lucky to get eight participants. Many prisons have put more rules in place for bringing programs into prisons and offer less flexibility in conducting them. The process for getting clearance to volunteer in New Jersey prisons is also more onerous, and, unfortunately, many prison systems appear to be less vested in rehabilitation and offer fewer programs than they once did.

Whether this change is based on funding constraints, empirical data about recidivism, fear and misinformation, or politics, it is unfortunate. As a society, we can find ways to rehabilitate people — or build more prisons.

“The price we pay as a society by punishing crime rather than rehabilitating offenders is far too steep for all of us,” says Lynne Molnar, who has facilitated Houses of Healing at Jones Farm. “We need to help our fellow citizens return to their communities sooner and better able to cope.”

Some courts are beginning to use 12-step programs as a means of rehabilitation for drug offenses. Pennsylvania and some other states also offer Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition (ARD), a special pretrial intervention program designed to eliminate costly and time-consuming trials and to offer offenders probation or community service.

These kinds of approaches offer second chances and a means of providing treatment instead of meting out punishment for certain crimes. But whether they address root causes of behavior as a way to prevent people from recycling into the justice system is unclear. Houses of Healing fills a niche, recognizing what one violence prevention expert calls the “tremendous human potential lying dormant in our prisons.”

— Michael D. Dalzell, editor, with reporting from Mary Lou Dahms

senses of humor. I found common ground that I did not expect, and I am impressed with how hard these men have worked to make themselves better people.

“They are not afraid to reflect on how they screwed up and they are committed to learning how to make better decisions and overcoming the abuse many of them have suffered. They handle difficult situations every day in prison, and they are developing tools, such as meditation and anger management, to help them apply the lessons they learned once they get out,” Elliott continues.

“I highly recommend to anyone and everyone to learn more about this program and get involved.”

Lynne Molnar also has gotten involved and, with Elliott, recently co-facilitated a program at Jones Farm. Although she always had been interested in the rights of people in prison, Lynne confesses that she hadn’t taken action until learning about Houses of Healing through

Pris’s involvement. She is eager to learn more and to begin co-teaching with others.

“I hope others will get involved,” she says, because “it’s been gratifying not only to see the growth that people in prison achieve, but also to experience personal growth by doing the work of introspection and self-exploration myself.”

For inmates, that work involves a lot of journaling and meditation. Lynne has noticed that, sometimes, “the quieter participants are more comfortable opening up.”

In addition to Lynne and Elliott, Sallie Dunner, Di-
anne Ross, and Shelly Catanzaro were approved as volunteers this summer and trained with Pris in the fall. Pris, meanwhile, is breaking new ground with the program, piloting it this fall at a federal prison at Fort Dix, N.J. Pris will conduct sessions in English, while a co-facilitator from Ecuador will conduct them in Spanish.

“Prisoners feel neglected because they are neglected”

A number of church members have signed up to teach Houses of Healing as a correspondence course. Participants are assigned to a prisoner who has consented to work through the 13 lessons by mail. For protection, facilitators’ mail arrives via the Lionheart Foundation, and the facilitator can use an alias if he or she prefers to remain anonymous.

Heidi Dalzell, a clinical therapist, is one of these facilitators. She became involved as a result of the experience of one of her clients. As the



Edna Mahon Correctional Center, a women's prison in Clinton, N.J., was the first facility to allow Pris to introduce the Houses of Healing curriculum to inmates.

client’s mental illness worsened and her behavior became more erratic, her husband abandoned her. The client later committed a felony, and although her crime did not result in physical harm to anyone, she received a harsh sentence because she didn’t have the capacity to advocate for herself. She is currently on parole and seeing Heidi for care as part of the terms of her parole.

The fact that her client’s deteriorating mental health situation was not considered during her trial and sentencing made Heidi more aware of the inequities of our justice system. This year, Heidi worked on the Houses of Healing correspondence program with a prisoner in California. Let’s call him José.

Heidi describes some of her initial experiences working with José. “At first, José’s responses were very superficial. When he opened up, he knew the anger he expressed was not socially acceptable and he apologized for scaring me. I let him know that it’s important to get feelings out in the open. I gave him permission to be honest and told him I was there for him and was not afraid.”

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— Heidi Dalzell

As a young immigrant from Mexico who did not speak English, José was bullied — not just by fellow students but by his elementary school teachers as well. Connections he made by joining a Spanish-speaking gang helped him feel accepted but got him involved in drug use and dealing, and he committed a violent offense for which he is now in prison and awaiting sentencing. He is fortunate that his own family is caring and supportive and his siblings are successful. Heidi can see that he, too, has the qualifications to succeed.

As a therapist, Heidi says she has learned as much as José by participating in this program. Perhaps equally important, it lets her give back by helping people who have been forgotten by the wider world. Prisoners benefit from having someone who cares about them and is invested in helping them succeed.

“It helps me to see what people go through when they end up in prison,” says Heidi. “José had a public defender who had insufficient information to represent him and very little time to plead his case. Often people meet their clients right before they go into court and end up negotiating a plea bargain for the sake of expediency.

“Prisoners feel neglected because they *are* neglected,” she continues. “The courts are as overburdened as the prisons themselves. They are like factories churning out sentences with people’s

lives and futures at stake. The ripple effect on their families and communities is devastating.”

Heidi echoes Lynne’s sentiment that it’s been rewarding to see a person change — in Jose’s case, his ability to develop insights into himself and articulate why he’s done the things he’s done. “Learning to meditate has helped him control his emotions,” says Heidi. “Where he once may have lashed out at a guard skipping him when he was waiting in line, now he can just say, ‘Hey, you skipped me.’ Meditating and learning self-regulation have given him coping skills.”

The coping skills Houses of Healing provides can help men and women not only while they are in prison but also after they are released.

Connie Schofer has seen this progress in the man she is working with through the correspondence course. Connie became involved in Houses of Healing after reading some of the books suggested as part of UUCWC’s racial justice initiative. What she learned from her reading about inequities in our justice system outraged her.

Tim, the man she corresponds with, is incarcerated in upstate New York. She and Tim are about halfway through the program. He is 50, about a year and a half away from parole and very motivated to be released so he can help his aging parents. He attends Narcotics Anonymous, has strong religious beliefs, and works in the prison law office. He still struggles to overcome difficult memories from childhood, most notably from the sexual and physical abuse he suffered. Writing about these experiences to someone who can listen and affirm has helped him to heal and move on.

“Being the sounding board for someone as he works to re-establish his sense of self-worth lets me help in my own small way to right the

lives and futures at stake. The ripple effect on their families and communities is devastating.”

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st PRINCIPLE
The inherent worth and dignity of every person



Photo by Dianne Ross

The New Jersey Department of Corrections presented awards to 15 of its most dedicated volunteers a ceremony held on September 27 at the War Memorial in Trenton. Among those recognized was Pris Gaver, for her work with the Houses of Healing program.

wrongs in the life of at least one imprisoned person,” says Connie. “Once Tim and I finish the program, I plan to correspond with another person in prison. These fellow citizens need our support, and this is something I can do to help.”

Be the change

Pris, Lynne, Heidi, and Elliott agree that they’ve seen the Houses of Healing program make a difference and that offering such programs more widely could be beneficial. It will take more people to get involved, however, to bring these programs to more men and women in prison.

What are we doing as a church community? What can each one of us do to help our fellow human beings who have made mistakes? Do we want our prisons to be houses of punishment — or houses of healing?

As Gandhi reminds us: “Be the change that you wish to see in the world.”

MARY LOU DAHMS has served on the Board of Trustees and the Worship Associates. She is currently chairing the Communications Committee and serving on the Caring Committee and Council for Faith in Action. She is also a member of a small group ministry and has been a member of UUCWC since 2003.

OUR NEW PATH TO MEMBERSHIP

UUCWC's last major growth spurt came in the years after the new sanctuary was built. Today, the success of Roots and Wings suggests that we are on the precipice of another growth spurt. Through the program, new members are equipped with tools and knowledge that make them more likely to find a long-term spiritual home here.

To the Germantown, Lower Bucks, Princeton, and Dorothea Dix UU congregations:

This year brings much excitement, reflection, and anticipation for the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing. This year we celebrate 100 years as a congregation!

With our roots in Trenton and a story that stretches 17 full-time ministers and countless ministries long, we are taking the time to remember and learn. While it is easy to reflect on how our own lives and community have been so greatly affected by the presence of UUCWC, in recalling this past century we also know that some of the story of your congregation is entwined here, too.

I am honored to know that our congregations are bound within one another and look forward to our shared faith and common history drawing us closer to forge new ties.

In faith,

Rev. Kim Wildszewski

Story by
Christine Piatek

February 2016 letter from Rev. Kim to four local UU congregations on the eve of UUCWC's centennial. All of these congregations [share a common history](#) with us.

The Roots and Wings program evokes themes in Rev. Kim's letter to neighboring congregations, remembering and celebrating our religious past while looking to our future through a joyful kaleidoscope. At UUCWC, Roots and Wings is our chosen path to membership — a path that has evolved over many years.

This journey begins where you might expect — right at the front door of our building. With broad smiles and a firm grasp of the hand, UUCWC greeters extend a warm and intentional welcome to visitors and long-term members alike each and every Sunday. Ask any member of the congregation and they will quickly tell you the name of the congregant who first met their gaze and spoke the first words of welcome.

A new component of our welcoming ministry is the "Talk and Tour" that Rev. Kim introduced two years ago. On a typical Talk and Tour, members of the Membership Ministry meet visitors in the sanctuary after a Sunday service. Penny Gardner, Kevyn Malloy, Lynda and Roger Shapiro, Colin and Sparky Unsworth, and Holly and Jim Sanders then lead a 15-minute tour of our building.

At least twice a month, they share with visitors the history of our congregation, tell them about our facilities and activities, and methodically lead them to the Crossings Room to partake in fellowship hour. Visitors learn when they arrive downstairs that anyone holding a large red mug is part of the Membership brigade. Those people help visitors to engage in conversations during coffee hour and address a wide range of questions that may come up.

Talk and Tour breaks the ice and provides an instant measure of comfort. Later, the Roots and Wings conversations with Rev. Kim forge a foundation for successful membership. Roots and Wings is now a prerequisite for visitors and friends who want to become members of UUCWC — a joyful experience and an intentional path to membership at UUCWC. Potential members must attend both the "Roots" and "Wings" sessions with Rev. Kim before they can sign the membership book.

Roots hold me close...

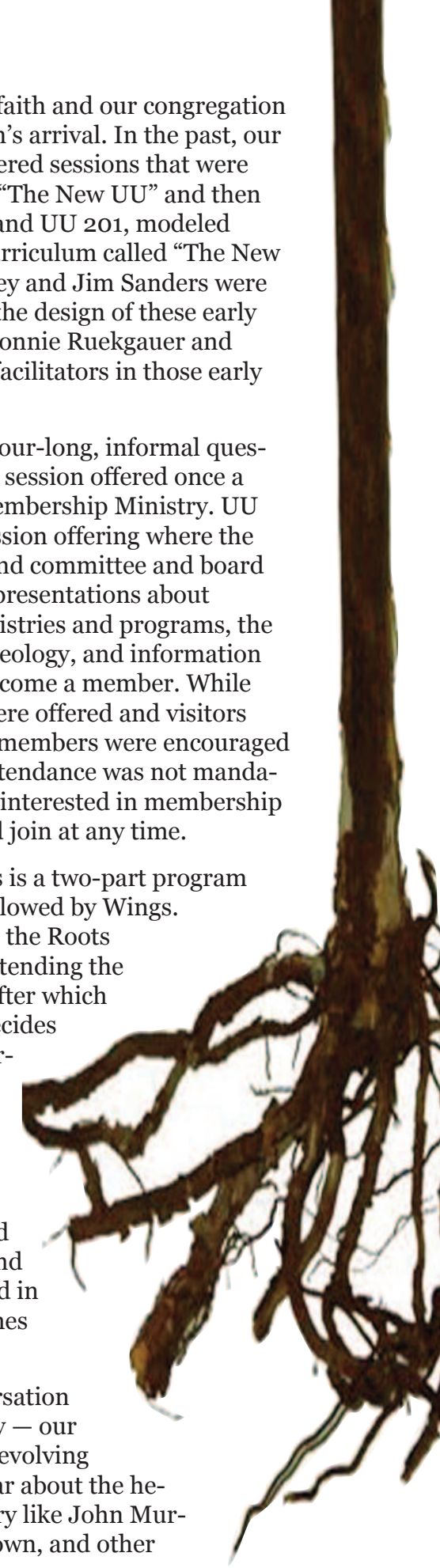
Roots and Wings differs from the way UUCWC introduced prospective members to both the Unitar-

ian Universalist faith and our congregation prior to Rev. Kim's arrival. In the past, our congregation offered sessions that were originally called "The New UU" and then became UU 101 and UU 201, modeled after the UUA curriculum called "The New UU." Holly Bussey and Jim Sanders were instrumental in the design of these early programs, and Bonnie Ruekgauer and Lori Rahn were facilitators in those early years.

UU 101 was an hour-long, informal question-and-answer session offered once a month by the Membership Ministry. UU 201 was a six-session offering where the minister, staff, and committee and board members made presentations about UUCWC, its ministries and programs, the sources of UU theology, and information about ways to become a member. While these sessions were offered and visitors and prospective members were encouraged to participate, attendance was not mandatory and anyone interested in membership at UUCWC could join at any time.

Roots and Wings is a two-part program — Roots first, followed by Wings. One must attend the Roots session before attending the Wings session, after which the individual decides whether membership is right for him or her. The two sessions total roughly 4 hours of listening, learning, and sharing. Roots and Wings are offered in tandem eight times each year.

Roots is a conversation about UU history — our roots — and our evolving theology. We hear about the heroes of UU history like John Murray, Olympia Brown, and other



BRINGING R&W CONCEPTS TO CHILDREN THROUGH RE

Evoking the themes of roots and wings [in her DRE blog](#), Director of Religious Education Robin Pugh describes the history of religious education at UUCWC as a transformation: rooted in our fundamental principle of raising up the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, but embracing change and the modernity of a fast-paced society. “We teach the seven principles and the way they shape and inform who we are and influence our way of being in the world. Our children know that each of us is responsible and capable to help change the world for the better,” Robin writes.

Our children’s religious education (RE) curriculum descends from the work of [Sophia Lyon Fahs](#). Her transformation of Unitarian religious education in the 1940s is credited in part with the resurgence of the denomination as those children grew into adults who were encouraged to explore life’s questions. “We wish children to come to know God directly through original approaches of their own to the universe,” Fahs wrote in describing her approach.

Today’s children’s RE program at UUCWC builds a foundation for children to become rooted in a faith tradition that gives them wings to change the world.

founders and activists of this faith. Here, prospective members can ask questions about the UU faith tradition and our UUCWC community. Penny Gardner, who chairs the Membership Ministry, notes that “Kim’s full grasp of our heritage and theology makes her uniquely qualified to definitively answer every question.”

...Wings set me free

In Wings, Rev. Kim shares that 88% of UUs have come from another faith tradition. She notes that while adults who join Unitarian Universalism come using language of negation (e.g., “sin” or “damnation”), our children raised in the UU tradition instinctively use language of affirmation (“we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all”). Here, we learn that our chalice is a symbol of welcoming.

Wings allows participants to share their personal spiritual roots, what motivates and inspires them, and what they hope to discover as they move forward in community at UUCWC. Rev. Kim begins the Wings conversation with a reading by Rev. David S. Blanchard of the First UU Church of Rochester. The reading describes church much like a home – a place of refuge and challenge, of comfort and risk; a place of acceptance and love; a place to grow wings and soar.

Wings also very frankly outlines the expectations of members: regular attendance; embracing a culture that honors diversity and our principles, broad themes that are reflected in the lighting of our candles of fellowship; participation in spiritual development through religious education offerings; service to the UUCWC community; and pledging

annually to sustain this community. In return, prospective members learn that they can expect the support and care of the community during times of need; tolerance and acceptance of their chosen spiritual practices; opportunities for growth and challenge; empowerment of our youth; and the opportunity to become part of an evolving community.

And then Rev. Kim pulls out something unexpected: “We will disappoint you.” As a covenantal community “trying very hard to ‘do church’ well,” she says, there will be times of disappointment and disagreement. These words reflect the challenge of an authentic community: one that can disagree and dissent and still hold each other in love and respect, while seeking mutually satisfying solutions to conflict.

It is often difficult to see the impact of one’s own work. Rev. Kim reflects that each time she gears up for Roots, she wonders “if I am sharing too much history; if the stories I’ve lifted up are interesting; if only I get excited by the depth of our timeline because it’s what I’ve studied and what inspires me. But every single time I offer Roots, the overall response from the group is interest, intrigue, and gratitude.”

Rev. Kim has found that “folks are especially hungry to learn that Unitarian Universalism has such deep historical roots,” noting that ours is often stereotyped as a “new age” religion without ties to the world or Abrahamic religions. “Many of us want to be able to place our theological diversity into some kind of understandable story or box. Roots gives them this. It answers the questions of how we came to be a community of pluralities, diversity

and, still, appreciation. I think it also helps us envision how we can each find a place within the larger whole today and in the years to come.”

Former Membership Ministry Co-chair Marty Friedman believes that the Roots and Wings program “ensures that new members are more fully informed and more intentional when they sign the membership book.” Marty’s conviction is backed by the work of congregational growth consultants, who believe that setting higher expectations for congregants leads to more committed members. Marty expects that “this will lead to more satisfying engagement of new members and less early attrition than we’ve had in the past.”

In their own words

Lucy Nugent, who began attending UUCWC with her friend and neighbor Pris Gaver during Rev. Charles Stephens’ tenure as minister, says Roots and Wings gave her “a much clearer understanding and cementing in my mind that UUCWC is where I am supposed to be.” Lucy describes the program as “a positive undertaking for potential members and an interesting journey.” When she completed the program and decided to sign the membership book, Lucy “felt proud to be part of a congregation that fits so well with my path at this time.”

Lydia McMorrow and Nancy McNamara have a unique perspective on the path to membership through Roots and Wings. Lydia and Nancy are both former and — now — new members of UUCWC. They joined in the 1990s, left for a few years, and have recently returned.

“If these sessions hadn’t been offered, we might have continued as ‘friends’ of the church, continuing to attend Sunday services without formally rejoining,” Lydia muses. For her, the sessions made clear what was expected of members and what she could expect from the congregation. She was struck by Rev. Kim’s comment that there will be disappointment and saw it as “a good reminder that the church is made up of humans and nothing is perfect.”

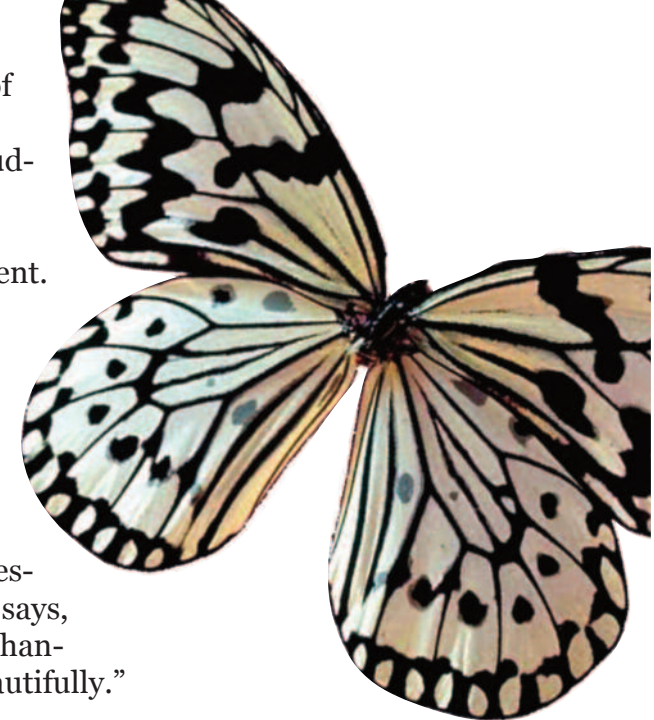
Nancy, too, likes the notion “that while we are grounded in our principles, we are still evolving as a religion.” Nancy appreciates the clarity of Rev. Kim’s presentation of the expectations and respon-

sibilities of membership, including a financial commitment. “Breaking the great taboo about discussing money is really necessary,” she says, “and Kim handled it beautifully.”

Roger Shapiro, a former Membership Ministry co-chair who is still active within the ministry, was involved in both the UU 101 and UU 201 programs. Roger feels that Roots and Wings gives prospective members “to have a deeper understanding of the beliefs and approaches UUs take, as well as specific information about the ministries of our fellowship. Over time, we believe this will help new members become engaged more quickly and, hopefully, be active members for many years.”

And while many elements influence a person’s decision to join the church — starting with that very first greeting at the door — Roots and Wings provides a solid foundation for a satisfying and long-term membership at UUCWC. Though it may be early to assess the return on investment in Roots & Wings through membership growth alone, in the past two years, 59 graduates of Roots and Wings have become members. Growth diversifies, stimulates, and enriches a congregation — suggesting that while Roots and Wings is a program for prospective members, it can be of immense value to all members.

CHRISTINE PIATEK joined UUCWC in March 1997. In researching this article, Chris participated in a Wings session, which Chris says was “very well attended, informative, and inspiring.”



A People of Freedom

*At 93, **Jo Millner** is not only our oldest member, she is our longest-tenured one. In 58 years with UUCWC, she has come to value how the freedom “to be” that our congregation cherishes helped her to nourish an appreciation of religious pluralism in her children and allowed her to stay close to her Mormon family.*

*Story by **Margaret DeAngelis***

The first thing I notice as I walk up to Jo Millner’s door is the picture on the front of the door. It is of a young woman dressed in a World War II-era Marine uniform.

When I walk in, Jo is waiting, along with her son Fred — Jo with a shy smile and Fred with a big smile. I immediately ask whose picture is on the door. Jo’s smile turns from shy to pride “It’s me,” she announces.

“I joined the Marines at the age of 21. They were just beginning to ship women overseas, but the war ended 22 months later, so they sent us all home lickety split,” she recalls. “I went through basic train-

ing in New River, North Carolina. I had fun.”

“She used to sing Marine songs to me when I was a kid,” Fred laughs. “Cat songs about Quantico.

“How many kids could say their mother was a marine sergeant? Not many.”

Seeking a spiritual home

Long before she became a Marine, Jo Millner grew up as a Mormon in Salt Lake City. “When I was 8, it was my time to be baptized. Right then and there, I rejected the religion. I knew it wasn’t for me. I just didn’t find the right path.”

Jo met her husband while he was in the Navy and stationed in Southern California. The two married there, and Fred and his brother were born in California. After their time in the service came to an end, the Millners’ next stage of life brought them east.

“We went to Trenton because my husband grew up there and he had family ties,” says Jo. “My father-in-law moved to Trenton in 1890, so they go way back.”

As her four children grew up, Jo would listen as they described themselves as “half Mormon and half Jewish.” Jo felt the need to find the family a spiritual home.

“I wanted to visit a bunch of churches, so I brought them first to a Sunday school at the Unitarian church in Trenton. That was the first church we visited — and we stayed. The church appealed to me and I liked the minister, Bill Horton.” Jo formally joined the First Unitarian Church of Trenton in 1958, as Rev. Horton’s term as minister was coming to an end.

After Rev. Horton came [Dwight Brown](#), something of a Renaissance Man who rented a room in their apartment upstairs and had a VW bug in the 1950’s. Fred used to babysit for Dwight’s kids. “Dwight went to Dallas later and then to Boston with the National UU organization. He went far,” Jo remembers. “When I first met him, I took to him right away and volunteered in the office during the day with mailings and schedules and typical UU office work.”

While Jo worked, Fred liked to explore the church building — a grand old mansion at 489 West State Street that the congregation had purchased in 1955.

“The house was six stories, with a basement and sub-basement. You would walk onto the first floor and there were two, maybe three floors above that to get to the main floor. I loved exploring and



Jo Millner served in the Marines during World War II. This picture hangs on her front door of the facility where she lives.

finding new rooms,” Fred recalls.

But the room that served as the sanctuary, he adds, was tiny and crowded. “It couldn’t hold a lot of people. The church needed to expand, because this, after all, was just an old house. We needed to be alive, more colorful, more presentable.”

The congregational discussion that arose from that need was among the most contentious in the church’s history.

“I can remember hearing about the move from Trenton in college,” says Fred. “There were people who had very strong opinions about moving out of Trenton. And there was a splinter group that

Over the course of our centennial year, Margaret DeAngelis interviewed all four of our living members who have been with our congregation for at least 50 years — half our history. What she found inspiring about this process is that each woman tells her own story of a community that continues to grow, to reach for new understandings, and to honor our history in the process.



William Horton, our 10th minister, served at the time Jo Millner joined our congregation.

moved to Bux-Mont. And another splinter group that went to Bordentown.”

Even after the decision was made to move, says Jo, little was actually settled. “Everybody was looking at where we should go, and it took a while to find the right place. Finally, everybody

chose Washington Crossing, and they bought the property.” And even then, she says, “it was a big question whether to move out so far.”

“I could think what I want”

But moving was not the first important juncture for our congregation during the 1960s.

“I remember being at a business meeting at church with my mother and father when I was a senior in 1964,” says Fred. “There was a discussion about civil rights and marching in Selma. Everyone was arguing. Then we had to vote. My father was surprised at how I voted. That was OK, though.”

Jo says her husband was “not that active in church,” though he was supportive of his wife and children’s activities. “In high school, I was in a youth group for 4 years,” says Fred. “We did a service each year and a show. My father came to our youth group shows.”

Fred has many fond memories of growing up in our congregation and says he is thankful his mother found our church. “The church had such a big influence on me.

“I have beautiful memories of Creed Myers and the Myers family. Creed was heavily involved in

camping trips to different parks, some in Northern Jersey, some in South Jersey. I have great memories of the Pinelands.”

Jo says “I liked that Fred liked the church. My other son, Steve, wasn’t as interested but the activities were good for all the children. I was involved in a lot of the organizations and the decoration of the church. I loved working in the office. The church was the only place for me.

I ask Jo what she likes best about our church. Her health prevents her from making it to services these days, so her reply is in past tense, but her heart is clearly still present with us.

“What I loved most is that I could think what I wanted and I made friends. People were allowed to be who they were, and we had an open congregation. I guess I thought I wanted the children to be exposed to learning about different religions, and then if they wanted someday to choose another then they could. But I thought this was the place to be, to grow and to learn. They had choices, and Fred was good about keeping an open mind and acceptance.”

Fred eventually became a Quaker. “We are able to have a dialogue about UU services and Quaker meetings,” says Jo. “I think that is good.”

And what could have been different? You might be surprised at Jo’s answer.

“We needed to advertise more to bring more people in,” she says. “So many people do not know what they are missing. There are things to learn and to say. And a while back, we didn’t bring in as many people in as we could have, because it’s a tough thing to advertise a church. But since then, the congregation has grown.” Jo laughs. “Maybe I have to swing back in there to hear Rev. Kim’s services.”

Fred asks his mother if something stands out most about church. “I loved the weekend retreat at the shore,” she says, recalling how in the days before Kirkridge, the annual retreat took place at Murray Grove. “You took your bedroll and they had cabins and you could sleep inside or out.

That was beautiful.”

Fred puts his finger on something else that has been special to both he and his mother. It’s wrapped in an appreciation that those of us who came to Unitarian Universalism from other faith traditions hold: We don’t have leave behind what we held close.

“It meant so much that mom never lost touch with her parents and siblings. We would go out to Salt Lake City and have family reunions. I feel blessed that I have this incredible Mormon heritage, Jewish heritage, and UU heritage.

“I’m thankful I know my mother’s family. My mom’s great-great grandmother converted to Mormonism in New York in the 1830s. We are descendants of up to nine Mayflower ancestors. When we were younger, Mom wasn’t interested in this fact but she is now.”

Fred then beams, “My mom is wonderful. Did you know she went back to college after I graduated college? She graduated Trenton State magna cum laude.”

Jo looks at me and says, “You know I often wonder what I was doing here in general.” I remind her from our short meeting how many paths she traveled, her beautiful history, being a Marine sergeant, her family, the fact that she changed



The back view of the First Unitarian Church of Trenton (left) gives a glimpse of the many rooms Jo’s son, Fred, enjoyed exploring in his youth. The church also owned the building next door — home to Sunday school, along with cabaret nights and parties for the adults. Jo did most of the decorating for these events.

faiths and yet stayed close with her Mormon family. “Well I had fun, I enjoyed the Marines, doing library work, organizing, raising a family, working in the office for our ministers. I didn’t do anything remarkable but I had fun.”

I tell her, “You are remarkable and the impact of your life on so many others is extraordinary.”

Jo gives me a big smile, “Thank you.”

MARGARET DEANGELIS has been a UUCWC member since 2007. Her interviews with 50-year members Mary Ann Sprenkle, Betsy Young, and Terry Caton have appeared in previous versions of *Crossings*.

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