

Crossings

Spring 2015

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

Making a Difference

Marty Friedman's
Choices Change Lives

By Sun or by Stealth

Earth Ministry's Footprint is Everywhere

This I Believe

Coming of Age, UU Style



PHOTO BY BERT WOLFE

Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing
268 Washington Crossing-Pennington Road, Titusville, NJ 08560
(609) 737-0515 • www.uucwc.org

Minister: Rev. Kimberly Wildszewski

Board of Trustees:
Steve Fishbein, President Andrew Conrad
Maria Baratta, Vice President Bill Cox
George Faulkner, Treasurer Mary Lou Dahms
Mike Dalzell, Secretary Kathy Frey
Mike Hanson

The electronic version of this magazine contains hyperlinks. If you are reading this in PDF format, click on the [underlined text](#) for more information about the phrase or subject.

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.

Crossings

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

Crossings is produced quarterly by the UUCWC Communications Committee.

Editor:
Michael D. Dalzell
crossings@uucwc.org

Graphic Designer:
Lori O'Neil

Chair, Editorial Advisory Board:
Rich DiGeorgio
communications@uucwc.org

Editorial Advisory Board:
Jim Bicksler
Elliott Dunner
George Faulkner
Marty Friedman
Loren McAlister
Lynne Quinto
Jane Shafer
Roger Shapiro
Dan Tuft
Pamela V'Combe
Regina Podhorin Zilinsky

Writers:
Mary Lou Dahms
Margaret DeAngelis
Karen DiGeorgio
Rich DiGeorgio
Chris Piatek
Phyllis Warren

Photographers:
Lou Csabay
Barbara Drew
M.J. Hansen
Colin Unsworth
Bert Wolfe



Join the Journey.
Open to You.

Copyright 2015, Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing



PHOTO BY LOU CSABAY

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- 4 Walking the Talk on Economic Justice
Marty Friedman could have done anything in life. For more than 20 years, he has chosen to help disadvantaged children in some of the region's most impoverished neighborhoods improve literacy, graduation rates, safety, and social skills. His work, faith, and activities at UUCWC have parallels that are more than coincidental.
- 8 A Green Sanctuary on Our Blue Boat Home
With passion that runs deeper than most of us realize, UUCWC's Earth Ministry works hard to uphold our commitment to the 7th Principle. Some of its work has been high profile, some flies under the radar, and some of it has generated extensive discussion that, in the end, has exemplified our democratic principles in action.
- 14 A Rare Opportunity to Journey Into the Self
Coming of Age classes encourage youth to explore what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, helps them to identify their personal beliefs, and empowers them to act on those values. Graduates say COA prepared them for life by shaping their perspectives on the world and on the importance of community.

ON OUR COVER: Marty Friedman congratulates an EducationWorks student for his award-winning video that was placed on the Philadelphia city and school district websites.

HIS LABOR OF LOVE



In some of New Jersey and Pennsylvania’s most impoverished neighborhoods, you have to look hard to find hope for the future. Having spent a lifetime helping people make a difference in their own lives and in their communities, Marty Friedman knows where to look.

Story by **Christine Piatek**

You could say that Marty Friedman came full circle on Sept. 12, 2014. On that day, Marty delivered the keynote address at a 20th anniversary celebration of the founding of [AmeriCorps](#). This commemoration — one of many around the country — took place at the State Museum in Trenton. Marty, the executive director of the not-for-profit organization [EducationWorks](#) (EW), a charter AmeriCorps program he founded in 1994, spoke passionately about a form of service that changes lives and raises up individuals to be all that they can be. So much so that participants in Marty’s programs do not want to leave and his staff pass up higher-paying positions to continue serving the community.

Service to community is one way to describe what EW provides. *Service to one another* may be a way to describe what it tries to foster. “EducationWorks helps to strengthen communities by engaging members to help themselves and

each other, bringing resources, unleashing their talents, respecting them, and connecting them with others,” says Marty. “We help people learn that they can make a difference in their own lives, no matter what their circumstances, and in the lives of others. And then they do.”

Finding his passion

The foundation for EW was the National and Community Service Act of 1990, federal legislation signed by then-President Bush that laid the groundwork for AmeriCorps and guaranteed federal support for service learning programs and community service. New Jersey was among the states competing for initial funding for community service programs. Having left a career as a college professor and now working for New Jersey’s Department of Higher Education, Marty was the point person for New Jersey’s four community service proposals — all of which were awarded funding.

1st PRINCIPLE
The inherent worth and dignity of every person



EducationWorks collaborated with the City of Philadelphia to create PowerCorpsPHL, an AmeriCorps program to promote nonviolence and engages youths in environmental service. Marty serves on the PowerCorpsPHL leadership team.

In 1992, Marty and others created the Urban Schools Service Corps, which received funding that was used to engage 120 teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community leaders to plan and implement a program in the 12 largest and most impoverished cities and neighborhoods in New Jersey. Then, in 1993, President Clinton signed the National Community Service Trust Act, creating AmeriCorps and the [Corporation for National and Community Service](#), providing Americans greater opportunities to engage in community service.

In 1994, following the elimination of the state Department of Higher Education, Marty and his staff moved to the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation in Princeton, changed the name of the Urban Schools Service Corps to the National School and Community Corps, and brought the program to Philadelphia, where it became a charter AmeriCorps program. The program grew substantially over the next seven years and, in 2001, Marty left Woodrow Wilson to create a new

not-for-profit entity — EducationWorks — to continue the National School and Community Corps and develop other programs.

For Marty, the transition from working with government-sponsored community service programs to creating one, then leading and growing it, has been nothing less than a “labor of love.” In a strained economy, competing for limited sources of funding is a difficult task that can be a source of stress and burnout among executive directors. Yet hearing Marty speak passionately about EW, its work, and its mission is to understand his commitment to social justice. Marty feels that he has “never done anything that produced more change, more rapidly, and for more people, of greater importance than this work with EW.”

Making a difference

EW has steadfastly and very purposefully worked with only the most profoundly impoverished communities, providing services to schools that operate

*It puts flesh
on my UU
bones.*

under extreme difficulty — that is, those with severe fiscal constraints and student populations with low achievement levels. Geographically, EW's focus is

mainly Philadelphia, but also includes Camden, Norristown, Pa., and Chester, Pa. EW has invested in the human capital of neighborhoods, mentoring, and building relationships with students and parents in many ways — not least by recruiting from its neighborhoods most of the thousands of people who have served as its AmeriCorps members and by having more than half of its staff be former AmeriCorps members.

Through its in-school, after-school, mentoring, anti-violence, and summer learning programs, EW has cut truancy in half, substantially increased parental involvement in their children's education, and helped to reduce crime in neighborhoods in which its programs operate. Giving kids an alternative to delinquency and the tools to both compete and enjoy doing so strengthens community and individual lives. To achieve this steadfast focus on the most impoverished and difficult communities, Marty and EW must routinely say “no” to requests that they provide services or develop programs in more affluent communities.

Two programs over which Marty bubbles with pride are support of youth courts through EW's [Youth Court Support Center](#) and [PowerCorpsPHL](#), a new program that places AmeriCorps members into environmental service projects as building trails, removing brush, planting trees, and reducing flooding. Most youths in the PowerCorpsPHL program are on probation and parolees or recently returned from incarceration.

Youth courts are student-run disciplinary systems that provide an alternative to suspensions. Students serve as judges, jurors, bailiffs, and defense counsel. Instead of suspensions and expulsions, which place

students on the street and feed the potential for them to spiral into juvenile delinquency and crime, students who commit infractions get a restorative sentence, such as community service, writing a letter of apology, serving on the youth court, or helping teachers after school. The goals are to help students evaluate their behavior, repair the harm they did, make better decisions, become leaders, and build respect among peers. Youth courts have been wildly successful wherever established. EW helps schools to establish youth courts by coordinating training, recruiting volunteers, providing materials, and collecting data on and providing analysis of the programs' success.

Through the PowerCorpsPHL program, EW provided the crews to build Philadelphia's first [pump track](#), a recreational venue constructed of mounds and berms, providing cyclists with a place to engage in challenging mountain biking, and which also serves to retain storm water. As with all its programs, EW assisted crew members with job training, counseling, and in finding jobs.

Reflecting on EW's progress over the long haul, Marty takes an honestly modest stance. “This is a mixed picture. We've been able to build on successes and learn from failures, but the failures still sting. My vision was to develop a national program; we haven't made it yet and might never.”

Although EW has evolved differently than he what he envisioned 25 years ago, there's no dispute that, at the local level, it has had a positive impact on tens of thousands of lives. “We've developed new programs that I didn't envision at the start, like PowerCorpsPHL's working with 18–26 year olds who are deeply involved in the criminal justice system,” says Marty. “We've developed core competencies that I didn't appreciate or foresee early on that have enabled us to serve new populations in new ways.”

Marty is certain that EW has made a huge difference to the people it serves and plays a critically important role in community service in the region. And, over and over, Marty has heard — from colleagues, parents, students, and the many volunteers associated with the programs — that the dominant factor for the success of EW is the relationships that staff

and volunteers develop with the students and clients.

Where EW and UUCWC intersect

His labor of love, Marty says, “puts flesh on my UU bones.” Marty's lifelong community service work has both benefited from — and brings benefits to — UUCWC. For example, in “growing” a not-for-profit entity from the ground level, Marty had to learn many organizational systems: finance, human resources, conflict resolution, and more. At UUCWC, Marty has been involved in all of these systems through his work on the board, the Finance Committee, the Committee on Ministry, the Building Committee, and the 5-Year Strategic Planning Group.

Observing the way we have navigated issues within our church community, including our dedication to the welcoming of LGBT individuals, has brought

more depth to Marty's professional work. Listening carefully, letting people talk, and collaboration are qualities and tools that Marty employs both in his work at UUCWC and professionally at EW. Take, for instance, those early days at EW.

“This was the first time I really paid attention to setting up a company calendar and deciding what holidays we should celebrate,” he says. “Some of my Muslim staff



Marty and Jane Friedman beam with pride over their expanding family.

decided to take a risk to tell me that it bothered them when companies made Christmas a day off. I talked to a few Jewish staff, and though they weren't bothered by this, they expressed their preference — given my asking — that EW not make Christmas a company holiday. I learned something from this. To this day, EW does not have any religious holidays, something I often have to explain to new staff.”

How does Marty find balance in his personal life with work that is, without question, all-consuming? Marty works a ton of hours overseeing an organization that employs 378 people and makes a point of being in his Philadelphia office every day — even though EW supports telecommuting. In fact, Marty says, most of his staff feels this way. He is highly efficient, responding to e-mails on the train, at home, and everywhere in between. Problem solving. Taking calls at all hours, which he greets with “anticipation.” Getting a good night's sleep is very important. And, outside of work, Marty's wonderful and expanding family, UUCWC, and his music are his three loves.

We are lucky to call Marty a cherished member of UUCWC.

CHRISTINE PLATEK is an environmental lawyer in the public sector who has a passion for writing.



Marty has played trumpet for more than 50 years. Here, he joined the band at a family wedding.

It's Not Easy Being GREEN



PHOTO BY MIKE DALZELL

But we're all in this together, so the hard work has to get done. The Earth Ministry makes some important high-profile recommendations while working behind the scenes on many more less-glamorous projects. Its work didn't end with achieving Green Sanctuary status.

Story by *Mary Lou Dahms*

When a dozen UUCWC members made the trip to Manhattan last September to be a part of the [People's Climate March](#), it was our own Earth Ministry that led the rallying cry. "It was a very meaningful experience to march with other UUs and thousands of other diverse groups participating in climate events worldwide, to draw attention to this critical environmental and social justice issue," recalls Leslie McGeorge, an Earth Ministry member. "While some significant effects of climate change are already evident, I think we can mitigate more severe impacts for future generations if we recognize the issue and work together to address it."

Being proactive is a hallmark of the Earth Ministry, which was formed out of the Sustainability Circle and Green Sanctuary Committee two years ago. And while mustering participation in the Climate March is an easy call for a group whose work is influenced by Unitarian Universalism's 7th Principle, the Earth Ministry (and its previous incarnations) has never shied away from making tough choices as well. Some of this work goes almost unnoticed, others actively involve the entire congregation. Some projects are big, some are small. All, however are done with love for the church, its grounds, and the earth at heart.

It's hot under the sun

Installing solar panels on the roof of the church? It seemed like the right thing to do, but had our board acted hastily? How could we be sure the vendor was right? What if the estimate was way off? Were the specifications correct? Was the payback projection realistic? Had our board done its homework before we voted to approve this project?

7th PRINCIPLE

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are all a part.



The Earth Ministry coordinated UUCWC's participation in the People's Climate March in New York last September.

These were some of the questions swirling around Marty Friedman in 2006 when he took over as Building Committee chair in the aftermath of a board vote to accept a proposal to install solar panels on the sanctuary roof. The bid from [Advanced Solar Products](#) (ASP) was presented by Philo Elmer on behalf of UUCWC's Sustainability Circle and supported by then-minister Rev. Charles Stephens as a way to cover some of our energy needs in a more environmentally friendly way. At least one board member was beginning to

regret the decision as too hasty and just possibly the vote he most regretted during his tenure.

Why? When Philo first submitted the proposal, there was uniform agreement that installing the panels was a smart move, and Rev. Charles Stephens was very much in favor of the project. Philo and Rev. Charles worked together to submit an application to the New Jersey Board of

“We humans are responsible for saving our planet,” says Parker Cohen, a UUCWC member who joined the Earth Ministry for the People’s Climate March. “I hope that we had an impact on world leaders who can make the big decisions.”

Public Utilities [Clean Energy Program](#), which would cover a substantial portion of the installation cost. Plus, the financial incentives offered to organizations and residential customers who installed solar panels were about to be discontinued, making timing even more important.

The church, meanwhile, stood to benefit by selling any excess energy their panels generated back to the grid. State-certified solar facilities earn one [Solar Renewable Energy Credit](#) (SREC) for every 1,000 kilowatt hours of production. At the time, SRECs were worth about \$600. Selling them back was part of what would help the installation at UUCWC pay for itself.

As Philo said, “It seemed like a no-brainer to move forward with the installation.” He had discussed the installation with his contacts in environmental service companies. They agreed that there was no way this project could generate a loss.

What had changed? Why the second thoughts on the part of the board and others?

The contract to install the solar panels came in at just over \$76,000. The state was going to cover close to \$49,000 of the cost, and UUCWC had to come up the rest.

Even with the state kicking in close to two thirds of the cost, the church’s share was a big number.



The money was requested as a loan from our endowment. Rev. Charles presented a \$27,000 loan request, 20% of the endowment total at the time, to then-Endowment Chair Rich DiGeorgio. Because of the nature and amount of the request, a special meeting was called in October 2006 to present the proposal for a congregational vote. The proposal even precipitated a change to the bylaws to protect the endowment from being used for regular operating expenses or capital expenditures that did not have a clear

and reliable payback plan. The congregation voted to approve the loan after a spirited and sometimes contentious debate.

But the hard work was still ahead.

The members who raised questions presented their concerns to the board and suggested further research before proceeding with the installation. What fol-

lowed was about 9 months of discussions, meetings, and phone calls to weigh the different options. As the chair of the Building Committee, Marty Friedman served as a neutral liaison among church staff, members, stakeholders, and the vendor. Marty researched competing products online, collected references, asked questions, followed up on the questions others had raised, and tracked the project status.

As it turned out, ASP was one of the most highly regarded vendors in the state, with an excellent track record and extensive experience installing rooftop solar panels. The original proposal had been to install the panels on the slanted sanctuary roof because it had more square footage, better orientation to the sun, and no obstructions. There were two key objections to this plan: first, it didn’t make sense to install solar panels on a roof that would probably need to be replaced in just a few years because we would incur the added expense of removing and reinstalling the panels;

second, we didn’t want to drill holes in the roof because we were already dealing with roof leaks, and new holes could only make it worse.

So ASP went back to the drawing board, following up with a proposal to install the panels on the flat roof — an idea that originally had been rejected because the presence of the bathroom vents and the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system reduced the area available for the solar panels. While the new approach was being vetted, more efficient, less-costly panels came out, allowing the same generation potential as the original installation proposed on the slanted roof. Moreover, the new installation did not require any holes to be drilled. The solar panels were mounted on skis and held down by cinder blocks.

A project that had been initiated in a proposal to the board in the summer of 2006 finally became a reality in the fall of 2008, when the [solar panel installation was completed](#) and we received a certificate of approval. Since then, the project has proven to be an unqualified success on a number of fronts.

First, the 6% interest loan from our endowment, expected to be paid back over 5 years, was repaid in less than 4 years.

Second, because money was withdrawn for the solar panel installation, then repaid with interest, our endowment did much better financially than those of many other not-for-profit groups at the time. In 2008, the market took a huge downturn and many investments lost money. In other words, timing was on our side.



Co-chair Al Johnson coordinates Sunday sales of books and other media to raise money for Earth Ministry projects.

PHOTO BY MIKE DALZELL

Third, coming to resolution on the issue was a textbook example of collaboration among members and stakeholders. The combined efforts of those involved yielded a result that was a win-win for all of us, with an outcome that was even better and less expensive than what was originally planned.

Look mom, we’re green!

The earliest major initiative of our Earth Ministry team was solicitation of a Unitarian Universalist Association [Green Sanctuary](#) designation for our congregation. The board voted to support pursuing this designation in 2005, and the congregation ratified this decision at its annual meeting in 2006.

Former member Margaret Walker and Philo Elmer did most of the initial legwork. When Margaret moved to Hawaii and Philo took some time off from active engagement, Al Johnson completed and submitted the application to obtain our Green Sanctuary accreditation. Getting to that point was a culmination of a

UUCWC's 12 Steps to Green Sanctuary

To achieve the Unitarian Universalist Association's Green Sanctuary designation, congregations must embark on a rigorous program that begins with a self-assessment ("are we ready for this?") and a commitment to environmental justice, then progresses to action plans. The action plans are, in essence, the proof this congregational commitment. Once completed, a congregation can apply for accreditation.

At UUCWC, the Green Sanctuary Committee conducted two worship and celebration projects, which included eco-themed services and [Earth Day](#) celebrations; two religious education projects (sustainability lectures for adults and age-appropriate environmental arts, crafts, and readings for children); two environmental justice projects, including work as a founding member of the [New Jersey Regional Coalition](#) to end regional equity contributions, which allowed wealthy communities to avoid providing affordable housing by paying poorer communities to build such housing; four sustainable living projects, one of which was the solar panel installation; and two additional projects.



demanding, 12-step process (see box). By 2010, the Green Sanctuary Program and the congregation had completed these steps, and in 2011, UUCWC received its Green Sanctuary certification from the UUA. Today, one of our Candles of Fellowship is lit at the start of each service to celebrate this achievement and to remind ourselves of the commitment we have made to environmental stewardship and justice.

Work seen and unseen

After UUCWC achieved Green Sanctuary status, the focus of the Green Sanctuary Committee shifted. The committee, which had been formed to develop and implement the projects that would lead to Green Sanctuary certification, merged with the Sustainability Circle to become the Earth Ministry. With a new mission to encourage UUCWC to care for its building and grounds and for the planet in ways that respect our interdependent web of existence, the Earth Ministry works both visibly and behind the scenes.

Chances are, you have seen two of the Earth Ministry's more visible initiatives in the Crossings Room. Led by co-chair Al Johnson, these programs — Sunday book sales and a table where fair trade organic coffees, chocolates, and other products can be purchased — are driven with global and local sustainability in mind. At the global level, the fair trade sales at UUCWC support small businesses that offer products grown without the use of chemicals and pesticides. At the local level, Sunday fair trade sales fund the purchase of the coffee and tea we enjoy during fellowship hours, and both the fair trade and book sales fund environmental and energy-efficiency initiatives on our grounds and in our building.

And that brings us to some of the behind-the-scenes work of the Earth Ministry. The team spearheads multiple efforts to use nontoxic cleaning products, follow environmentally friendly landscaping practices, conserve water and energy, and reduce, reuse, and recycle onsite. All of these efforts are ongoing and require constant vigilance. According to Al, sometimes the extra effort involved in being and staying green "can be un-

derappreciated, and even annoying to others, but it matters — so it's worth it."

One of those under-the-radar efforts with far-reaching importance was led by Leslie McGeorge, with support from Andrew Kidd of the Facilities Management Team: a churchwide energy audit. With the intent of learning how we can reduce costs and use resources as efficiently as possible, the audit was conducted by the Concord Engineering Group through the state Clean Energy Program's [Local Government Energy Audit](#). Fully subsidized by the state, the audit tracks energy usage, recommends conservation measures, and suggests procurement options, among other things. The 58-page report is available for review from the church office. The audit committee met recently to review each of the recommended energy conservation measures and prioritize implementation, using the \$2,000 Endowment grant for energy savings.

The Earth Ministry also shepherded UUCWC's recent participation in the state Clean Energy Program's Direct [Install initiative](#). Through the program, we were able to install new light fixtures and a more efficient HVAC system. The total cost of these energy-efficiency upgrades was about \$109,000, of which the state covered more than \$76,500. Many UUCWC members also made donations toward the cost of the light fixtures. The estimated annual savings in energy usage alone is expected to be close to \$12,000 a year.

Energy audits and light-fixture upgrades involve hard work. They aren't the most glamorous projects around UUCWC, but they are tangible reminders of our congregational commitment to being a Green Sanctuary and are vitally important for upholding the 7th Principle.



Juliet Marlier, Janet Hubbard, and Al Johnson peddle fair-trade coffee and chocolate, proceeds from which are used in part to sustain Fellowship Hour coffee purchases.

It's not easy being green, but our Earth Ministry carries out its mission grounded in the knowledge that we're all in this together — both for us in our own time and space, and for those whose legacy we build each day.

So pass that water bottle to me — but only if it's a reusable one filled with tap water!

MARY LOU DAHMS has been a member of UUCWC since 2003. She has served as a worship associate and currently is a member of the Board of Trustees. She also tutors HomeFront children on Monday nights.

PHOTO BY LOU CSABAY

This I Believe

Coming of Age classes are a powerful experience where teens do the hard work of thinking about what they believe and why. Graduates say COA prepared them for life by shaping their perspectives on the world and on the importance of community.

Story by **Christine Piatek**

The energy in UUCWC's "June Vogel" room is electric. As some of this year's Coming of Age (COA) instructors describe what they bring to the COA program and what they take away from it, their enthusiasm is palpable.

"COA is one of the most important things I have done for the church community in 20 years," says Julie Lambert. Julie describes the COA experience as a rare opportunity for both the 13- to 16-year-olds who participate and the facilitators "to really seek that journey into the self that we all talk so much about." Being part of this journey is a huge responsibility for these youth, she believes — and for her own part, Julie adds, her very participation is the most important contribution she has made.

Scott Drew says he learns as much from the COA group as the students do from him. Being a part of the program has "me doing more reading and thinking to prepare for the topical discussions,"

says Scott, who sometimes takes a contrary position in those discussions to encourage debate and open thinking about difficult topics: death, the mystery of life, and good and evil, to name a few.

Scott Drew and Julie make up half of this year's COA facilitator team; Scott Umlauf and Sallie

Dunner make up the other half. Both Scotts have been teaching COA for at least three years, and Scott Drew has served as a student mentor in the past. Sallie is a first-year facilitator who also has served as a COA mentor and a Youth Group advisor in the past. Julie, who is new to COA, has taught Our Whole Lives (OWL) previously. Together, they guide

young people thoughtfully into the lifelong process of searching for spiritual and personal truth.

A rite of passage, and more

Formally, Coming of Age is a Unitarian Universalist rite of passage that marks youths' transition

4th PRINCIPLE
A free and responsible
search for truth
and meaning.



PHOTO BY LOU CSABAY

Brendon Konopka, Charlie Alt, Stormi Mullins and Carley Yoder vouch for the chili and cornbread they were selling in March to raise money for the COA Heritage Trip to Boston.

from participation in Religious Education to the Youth Group. Informally, COA reflects the transition from childhood to adolescence. The framework of the program — which is offered in most UU congregations — is a yearlong curriculum published by the Unitarian Universalist Association designed to teach participants about Unitarian Universalism and to get them to begin articulating their own beliefs. The curriculum, published in the [Coming of Age Handbook for Congregations](#), was authored by Rev. [Sarah Gibb Millsbaugh](#), a UU minister in Massachusetts. The handbook is broken down into units that explore community building, credos, UU beliefs, spirituality, UU theol-

ogy, justice, UU history, leadership, and the COA service at the end of the church year.

COA "allows our youth to appreciate UU-ism, their own beliefs and values, and how these intersect," says Robin Pugh, UUCWC's director of Lifespan Religious Education. "It enables participants to ask questions in a safe space, it increases their spiritual awareness, and allows them to recognize that as they grow and change, there is a place for them at UUCWC and in UU-ism."

At UUCWC, the program challenges class members to investigate their personal spirituality and encourages them to develop a greater sense of



PHOTO BY LOU CSABAY

Ellen Alt serves up a heapin' helpin' of chili at a COA Heritage Trip fundraiser.

what they believe and why. The curriculum is applied through study, discussion, and perspectives from guest speakers, as well as community service and social action projects. The year culminates with the always-fabulous COA service, which takes place this year on May 17. The centerpiece of this service is students' presentation of their credos, or statements of personal belief, that [each has developed](#) over the course of the program. Students who do not wish to write a credo can express their beliefs in other creative ways, such as dance, music, or poetry. The COA service is "a very emotional and important experience," says Scott Drew.

Scott, Scott, Julie, and Sallie work in teams of two, each of them facilitating classes two Sundays a month. Behind the scenes, Robin provides invaluable organization for the program and is the liaison with parents and with student mentors. She also facilitates fundraising for, and participates in, the Boston "Heritage Trip" (see "Spring Delight: the Heritage Trip," page 18).

An adult mentor who is not a parent of the participant is paired with each class member. The process of matching is a collaboration among Robin, the teachers, students, and their parents. Once a match is made, the mentor and student take the [Belief-O-Matic survey](#) online together to see how the student's theology and beliefs might be classified. Mentors serve as sounding boards for students and assist them with the development of their credos. The mentoring experience is valuable for both adults and COA.

Scott Umlauf thinks COA offers optimism and hope for both himself and the participants. "COA is an antidote to the negative culture that youth may find themselves in," he says, adding his belief that students who participate become great adults as a result of their involvement. Scott, who uses the [Socratic Method](#) with his classes to pose questions that solicit thought and discussion,

enjoys working with this age group and appreciates the students' ability to engage in serious discussions while still having fun together as kids.

Sallie, too, leaves with "much to think about each week" and always with positive feelings. The COA youth "are the future and have much to offer us. They see things with different eyes than us oldsters, and I learn new things from them." Sallie has also been "struck by both the similarities and the differences between myself as a young teen and today's teens.

"It is a privilege to spend time with the COA

classes and it would be wonderful if more of our older congregants would consider teaching from time to time."

All four instructors love working with one another and have come to rely on each other each week in the team approach to COA. They each bring a sense of humor to the experience, employ flexibility in their approach to the curriculum, and refrain from telling the students what they think. It's all about the COA participants and creating a safe space that allows them to discuss, ask questions, and ponder the hard questions of life.

Heavy lifting makes them strong

For students, the hard work of thinking, reflection, and challenging themselves can be transformative. Uniformly, past COA-ers who spoke about their experiences for this article felt that COA was a critical component in their overall development during their teen years.

Alex Dovgala-Carr, now a student at Temple University, says COA was one of her favorite UUCWC activities: "It gave me a community of people my age who listened to and accepted me. It gave me friends with whom I could be entirely myself. I heard about their life stories and perspectives and they listened to mine, too." Alex expresses gratitude for the COA experience, noting that the program "may have been one of the most — or possibly *the* most — helpful and significant change in my teenage years. It brought positive development for my perspective of the world, an improved sense of self, and an incredible building of community for me."

The memory of writing a credo sticks with Casey Quinto, who now studies at Elizabethtown College. "Working on the credo was rewarding and kind of fun. Presenting it was terrifying — but worth it. It's so cool that COA members get to write *whatever* they believe, then read it to their



PHOTO BY MIKE DALZELL

From left, COA teachers Scott Umlauf, Salie Dunner, and Scott Drew talk with the COA class about writing a credo. (Not pictured: Julie Lambert)

Spring Delight: the Heritage Trip

The Coming of Age program includes the highly anticipated spring Heritage Trip to Boston, in which students visit, among other spots, UUA headquarters and the offices of the [Unitarian Universalist Service Committee](#), the social justice organization of the UUA. During the tour of the UUSC, the group experiences the importance of human rights by engaging in an exercise that requires them to relinquish their rights, one by one. Afterward, the group discusses the experience of loss and the critical work of ensuring basic human rights.

The trip also brings the COA class and its chaperones to Walden Pond to reflect on the teachings of Unitarians Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; to two long-established UU churches, the [Arlington Street Church](#) and [Kings Chapel](#); and to a service at a UU congregation. The COA class also visits Boston's North End and Faneuil Hall; takes a ride to Salem, home of the [Salem Witch Museum](#); and participates in a sport unique to New England and the Canadian Maritimes, [candlepin bowling](#).

COA participants look forward to the Heritage Trip. In fact, to COA graduate Jesse Cohen, the best thing about the class was, "by far, the many aspects of the trip to Boston. There are too many memories on that trip to count." Casey Quinto remembers exploring the history of UU on her trip as "very, very fun. Lots of laughs." Keziah Groth-Tuft says she "had spent the year struggling" and that the trip was a welcome way to "get away and learn and grow with my friends and on my own."

The instructors enjoy the experience as well. Scott Umlauf describes the Boston trip as a great bonding experience where, by the end, each participant was part of a cohesive group. Julie Lambert has noticed that during the course of the trip, "deep and personal conversations" take shape, making the trip a very positive experience for all.

This year's Heritage Trip takes place from April 16 through 19.



congregation. Where else would teenagers get an opportunity like that?"

Not only did she love COA, Casey says, she loves listening to other generations of COA present their credos. "I went to the COA service for the most recent COA class, and it's now my favorite service. I wouldn't miss it for the world. COA is a cycle that gives back to the church and benefits all the congregation's members."

Writing the credo proved to be a meaningful experience for Keziah Groth-Tuft, now a student at Dickinson College. "In writing the credo at the end, I was able to look back and reflect on the year, which had been especially challenging," she says. Working on her credo "was a great practice in self-reflection and I was able to conceptualize what I believe in." Keziah's credo focused on the power of community, and she says she "still believes this" and is working to find new and supportive communities as she makes her own way through college.

Jesse Cohen, now a junior at Council Rock High School North, shares that "COA was a good sendoff for the RE program, and it did help with my development at the time. Around that age, it was good to know to be myself and to learn more about how UUism all began." For Jesse, "COA was a good chance for me to realize who I am a bit better. I learned a lot more about myself after the class was over than I did in class."

COA has a ripple effect on all of us who benefit from the ideas, energy, and actions of our young people. As Sallie notes, "Our young people are the future of both our faith and our country." To the participants, COA is equally invaluable, if not for different reasons. Looking back at what she learned, Casey Quinto noted that "The deep topics



Members of the 2012 COA class enjoy a respite during the Heritage Trip to Boston.

we explored — afterlife, mortality, values — don't come up everyday in conversation, but the core aspects of these ideas can guide actions in everyday life. And, when these topics have come up, I have been able to talk coherently about my own opinions and listen to others."

With young men and women like these who have taken part in this cherished UUCWC program, the future of UU-ism is in good hands beyond the walls of our congregation.

CHRISTINE PIATEK has been a member of UUCWC since March 1997.

PHOTO BY KAREN SCHEICK



**Join Us For UUCWC's
Annual Auction!**

GET UP STAND UP

Silent Auction
Sunday, April 19 & April 26
Live Auction
May 2, 2015

Go to uucwc.org for details