

My Social Justice Odyssey

My first five years were spent in Suriname SA. My parents were Americans but my father, an engineer, was stationed there to mine the bauxite resources for Alcoa Aluminum. My twin, older sister and I were raised in part by local servants, whose ancestors were indentured servants from Indonesia. Although I have few conscious memories of those years, I know I was deeply influenced by my black “second mother” Yosha. We then moved to Pittsburgh but in ninth grade, we went abroad again, this time to Jamaica, where my 3 sisters and I experienced life in a third world country again. My personal connections with people of different views and backgrounds had a powerful effect on me. Unfortunately, despite these shared experiences, my family members have rarely shared these views and I found early on that I would always be a rabble rouser challenging the status quo.

I worked for Wellspan Health for 30 years, half of it as a recreation therapist in psychiatric settings. Hearing people’s difficult and often traumatic stories reminded me again and again “There and for the grace of God go I”. The second half of my career I was the physician recruiter, working diligently to recruit a diverse and talented group of providers for York and Gettysburg. I recruited the first of many foreign-trained medical doctors to our area. I worked diligently to help the established medical community and administrators make the transition to a more diverse group of providers. I believe my genuine welcome of over 350 physicians to York and Adams county—no matter what their color, religious or cultural background has had a positive in York and Gettysburg. Recognizing the long-term effects of my efforts to bring diverse medical practitioners to the area, I was proud to be the only white person honored at an annual African American Love Feast.

When I retired I began training and performing with River Crossing Playback Theater, an improvisation theater troupe that invites personal stories from the audience; these are played back in ritual form—an often powerful and healing experience for the person whose story is told and the audience. Our focus is helping people tell their stories and heal often from socially imposed discrimination such as racism and sexism. Some of you may have seen us lead a service here at UUG.

I have explored many cultures through books and for 30 years have volunteered as a teacher of English as a second language. For the past year, three other UUs and I have been teaching ESL at York County Prison to men who are seeking asylum. Very few will be granted instead will be forced back to their home countries facing war, gangs, poverty and often death. Currently my dear husband is providing pro bono legal services to one of my students —Malik is a gay Muslim from Ghana. If granted, I will be asking this community to help support him in his new life in America.

I recently returned from Myanmar, one of the poorest and most isolated countries in the world. I was privileged to travel with Marj, a fellow ESL teacher who taught ESL to the staff of Nobel Peace Prize winner Ang San Suu Kyi. We spent time with four of her students who are now in the first and newly elected democratic parliament. Each of them, like their leader, had suffered in political prison, to help bring forth this change. I was tremendously moved to witness the power of the Buddhist approach to political change. Their leader Ang San Suu Kyi speaks about forgiveness, not retaliation and a humble not boastful move into power. Contrast this to our own American political news and the current uninspiring and distasteful dialogue.

And I have learned one thing in my many travels abroad, the world watches American news. In the past the world has counted on us to be financial, moral and political leaders. This is swiftly changing.

I have been a UU for 30 years. Here I discovered a place where I could engage with like-minded people on creative and social action. I have always found the UU community to be open to new ideas, compassionate and respectful of different ways of seeing the world and passionate about accepting differences. Over the past year we have heard inspiring talks by the Director of UUPLAN our UU social justice advocacy network, members of local Casa de la Cultura, and our fellow members the Mathews who talked about their service in Africa . Today you will hear individual stories of Social Justice Odysseys. One of our challenges is getting the word out about what we are currently doing—hence what I hope will be ongoing services like this—so speak to me if you want to share your story

In a recent survey by our long term planning committee, I was thrilled to learn that even though small, members and friends of this congregation volunteer and work in over 40 different community action organizations. This is Amazing—40 different organizations!.

My dream for UUG is to partner with a larger UU church such as Frederick UU, with whom your board is currently talking. They have many active social justice initiatives—check out their website! I believe we need good paid administrative support to help with so many functions in this community including sharing our stories with each other and the community so that we can work more effectively and grow as an agent of change.