

Meet Barbara Bedingfield Expressing UUC Values as the Waldorf School of Tampa Bay Founder

Sometimes people just know what matters to them, even if it isn't obvious why. Education and faith in humanity are Barbara Bedingfield's twin passions, with choral singing integrated into both. Growing up in Alabama, Barbara "always just went to church," although her family wasn't active. Southern Baptist was the denomination she chose until college and the mid-60s Civil Rights Movement led her to reject Baptists' support of segregation.

It was so powerful an awakening that Barbara joined the Peace Corps and spent 1967-69 as one of 82 teachers serving in Liberia. The bonds forged there among "Group 9" continue today. Even though the California wildfires and the COVID-19 pandemic have forced cancellation of the group's annual reunion, Barbara stays in touch via email, text and zoom.

Committing for the long haul is typical for Barbara. Five ministers have passed through UUC's pulpit since she joined in 1976, along with seven music directors, five RE directors and countless administrative staff. She smiles remembering the early days of her choir membership, when preparation for a Sunday service meant meeting to practice an hour beforehand. Barbara continues to enjoy singing under Dr. David Katz' direction and misses the camaraderie quashed by COVID-19 health and safety requirements. Still, she notes the constant across all these changes is being part of a community that shares a liberal social justice-based philosophy.

Ask Barbara about her proudest achievement outside raising a family and it is being founder of the Waldorf School of Tampa Bay. "It's not just a school, it's an approach to life," she says. The underlying philosophy dates from post-World War I, when the owner of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory asked an Austrian spiritual-scientific researcher, Rudolf Steiner, what could be done to avert future wars. Steiner's response was to teach children in a way that brought out their unique talents while also focusing on shared activities and the arts. The first school opened in 1919 in Stuttgart, Germany.

Barbara discovered Waldorf schooling in the 1980s. After years of developing a local community, the Suncoast Waldorf School opened in 1998 in what is now the Zen Center on UUC's campus. Barbara laughs as she recalls having to "shove the desks against the wall and clear out every Friday." UUC fully reclaimed the space in 2006 and the school moved to a 2-acre oak-shaded property in Palm Harbor. The school's name was changed to Waldorf School of Tampa Bay in 2020, in recognition that its students come from across the US, as well as internationally.

How compelling is the Waldorf approach? One couple wrote, "We attended a wonderful Waldorf pre-K in LA, and then decided to move to Florida. We specifically chose Clearwater because of its proximity to Suncoast Waldorf...and have never looked back. Our daughter celebrates each morning she attends school." Another parent said, "We moved from Miami to attend this amazing school. Waldorf education allows children to grow from the inside out, meaning to cultivate capacities of creativity, social skills and the wonder of play."

Barbara's voice reveals her continuing passion for "igniting a child's desire to learn." At Waldorf, high stakes testing is replaced with annual narrative assessments of each child's progress. Arts of all sorts are vital. Children start knitting in first grade, as well as learning German and Spanish. "Everybody sings and

plays instruments,” Barbara adds. “The arts are vital.” Barbara’s vision is to expand classes through 12th grade, “That’s when you get the full benefits of a Waldorf education.”

COVID-19 has impacted the Waldorf School of Tampa Bay, as it has all schools. Today, the WSTB offers online participation, on-site participation and hybrids tailored to each student’s learning style. Classes are filled through rolling admissions, beginning on a staggered schedule to accommodate each family’s needs. To learn more about this uniquely successful approach to education, go to <https://www.waldorftampabay.org/> - or ask Barbara. Twenty-one years after founding the school, examples of Waldorf’s philosophy, application and successes are something she loves to share!