



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF ARLINGTON VIRGINIA

A Place to Connect, Grow and Serve

Portrait of a Life: Renee Gholz By Betsy Rosenblatt Rosso Part II

"I taught for 41 years—mostly first grade. When I was in second grade, I had a very good teacher and at that time I made up my mind I was going to be a teacher and I was going to marry a teacher. And by golly I did. I taught in eight different states. In all but one of those years, I taught in economically depressed situations, and I often taught kids who didn't speak English. But, then, I had grown up poor and knowing many people who didn't speak English!"

"I've always believed that everyone is equal and should be so treated. While I was teaching in Austin, Texas, I went to a National Education Association meeting, and looked around and there wasn't a Black face in the crowd. I knew that there was a Black school just three blocks away from the school where I was teaching. I stood up, all five feet and a half inch of me and said, 'I will not belong to any organization that doesn't accept everybody who's qualified,' and I stomped out. They were impressed and they took a consensus vote and accepted the fact that the Black teachers should be at the NEA meeting. I integrated the NEA."

"When the schools were integrated, one Black girl came to my first-grade class in Austin. She was a pretty little thing and very popular with the children. The kids are not the problem. You have to be taught to feel superior to the black people. They hadn't been so taught. She was fully accepted."

"Once I had a first grader who was grimy and not clean. I said, 'Don't you have water at your house?' And he said, 'No.' I learned that he lived in public housing. The only water was from a well where they could pump water and carry it to their house in a pail. No wonder he was dirty. He did get cleaned up when I made a point to his mother that the children avoided him because he wasn't clean."

"I found teaching very satisfying. I would have my little first-graders in a semi-circle in front of me. Every now and then one of them would be reading, 'Stop, spot, stop!' And he'd look up and say, 'I can read!' I even taught some of them to like to read before the year was over so they would go to the school library and get books to take home. Liking to read is very important."



"By the time I retired, it had gotten to the point where you couldn't touch a pupil. You had to just talk to them. That was hard for me because I'm a great hands-on person. I like to hold onto their shoulders or their hands while I'm talking to them one-on-one. I think that touching helped them to love me and to want to please me."

Married Life



"My husband was a high school band director. The way to get a better job was to move to a bigger and better place. That's what we did. We went from Minnesota to Nebraska. He served in the Second World War while we were in Nebraska."

Renee and Charles wanted to have children, although Renee had been told after a tobogganing accident at age 17 that she would not be able to conceive. "My husband and I planned when we got married that we'd have five kids so he could have his own quintet. But I had two miscarriages. Then Chico, then the tube pregnancy—and that was twins."

Renee's husband Charles directed bands and danced, too!

Chico was nine months old when Renee developed an ectopic pregnancy. "At the time I was teaching ninth-grade English. I was in front of the class feeling lots of pain and suddenly I collapsed. My students screamed. An ambulance was called. They took me to Hastings, Nebraska, where my husband was stationed. When I was on the examination table the doctor said, 'We have to get permission from your husband because you have to have surgery.' They couldn't get permission because he was out on some kind of military action. I said, 'I'm 28 years old, and in my right mind and I'll give you permission.' Renee's ovarian tubes were removed. She hadn't even realized she was pregnant. "I'd been having pains. I went to the doctor several times and they said I had lead poisoning."

"I felt on top of the world"

"When my dear son, with whom I live, was nine weeks old, I put him in a clothes basket in the back seat of the car. That was before seat belts. We moved to Arizona, then to New Mexico, then to El Paso, Texas, and finally to New Orleans, Louisiana. New Orleans suited us just fine. But Charles didn't go there as a high school band director. By then his voice had worn out. So he went back to school and became a music librarian. He worked at New Orleans University. We heard a lot of music in New Orleans. We would go to Preservation Hall and sit on the floor and listen to jazz. Charles had a heart attack when he was 61, but he lived for 20 years after that heart attack. The doctor said it was because I took such good care of him. I saw to his diet and his medications and kept him as happy as I could. That makes a difference." Charles died November 10, 1996. Renee lived in New Orleans for 37 years, the longest she's lived anywhere.

"I liked the weather in New Orleans. People talk about how hot it is there, but it's just a little hotter than it is here, and there's always a breeze because of Lake Pontchartrain in the north and off the Mississippi River. I

remember when Chico was learning to spell Mississippi when we were in living in Nebraska. I remember a lot of things that don't matter. And I forget things that do."

Renee clearly recalls a great adventure she and Charles had when they were in New Orleans. "We had a sailboat. My husband took all the Coast Guard classes about sailing and navigation and prepared to sail across the Gulf of Mexico and around the Florida Keys. We went out to the Atlantic up the coast to the Bahamas. We were joined by our dear friends Mike and Jeanie Kick. They made their living by sailing charter boats in the Bahamas and Virgin Islands with paying passengers. We would sometimes go sail with them wherever they lived."

"But they made this eight-week voyage with us in our boat, the Flying Spray. The four of us sailed across the Gulf. We had four-hour watches. Everyone did everything on the boat. You steered the boat for four hours. You had six watches in every 24 hours. I loved it when I had the midnight watch. I would be sitting in the that boat at the tiller. We didn't have a wheel. The other three would be asleep. Our boat had bunks for five. I'd be the only one up with the whole Gulf and Atlantic Ocean around me. I felt on the top of the world."

"My husband was the captain. Mike was the navigator. I was the foredeck captain in charge of the sails. Jeanie was very good at steering the boat. In fact, she was better at it than her husband."

"People asked if we ever ran into storms. Sure, we did. You can't go through a summer without storms. When a squall would come up, I could holler, 'Everybody on deck!' I'm not a good swimmer, but I just put on my life saving jacket and worked on the foredeck. Only once did my legs ever go over, but I held onto the anchor chain and pulled myself back and yelled, 'I'm all right!'"

Decades later, Renee's husband has died and Jeanie has died, but Renee still corresponds with Mike Kick.

Taking Care of Chico

In 2003, Renee's son Chico had a heart attack when he was 61, just like his father said. Chico had complications, Renee explained, including pernicious hiccups. "He couldn't eat. They had to feed him through a tube and kept him under sedation to stop the hiccups. When he came out of sedation he said, 'I want my mom.' So I came. He was in ICU and then in a room, and had nurses around the clock. He was very, very ill. Bobbie, Chico's wife, would take me to the hospital at nine in the morning and I would stay with him from until she came at 9:30 at night. He says I was instrumental in his recovery." After four months in the hospital, Chico came home in a wheelchair and had to learn to walk again.

"I took care of him again mostly by keeping him company. He asked if I wanted to live with him permanently. I went back to New Orleans and sold my car and furniture and gave most of my stuff to Goodwill. When he said, 'Let's make it permanent,' he didn't realize how long it was going to be! I had no intention of living this long."

The Makings of a Long Life

Despite her intentions, Renee has led a long life, and continues to fill her days with books, music, culture, and family activities. She attends lectures at the Smithsonian several times a month with her son Chico. She participates in two book clubs, through church and her neighborhood. She doesn't drive, so when she needs a certain book she will call the library to reserve it and Chico picks it up for her. She will read "anything that's

printed,” but particularly likes history, biography, and mysteries. She enjoys good storytelling. Renee is thankful that her vision remains strong. “I can still thread a needle and sew a fine seam. I do the mending and buttons for the family. The only thing that works well anymore is my eyes.”

Renee frequently attends concerts, including performances by the Virginia Chamber Orchestra (in which her daughter-in-law Bobbie plays violin) and the Friday Morning Music Club (in which Bobbie is responsible for a series of concerts at Dumbarton House in Georgetown).

When she’s feeling up to it and the weather is good, Renee goes to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington with her son and great-grandson. Renee discovered Unitarian Universalism when Chico was in high school and was invited by a friend to attend UU religious education classes. “My husband was not fond of the Catholic church and I certainly wasn’t, so we became Unitarians. I liked the fact that they didn’t try to make me feel guilty. The Catholic church does. You have to confess your sins and feel guilty for the least little thing. I didn’t feel guilty! I liked the fact in the UU church that you could believe what you felt was right and do what you felt was right. At the UU church in New Orleans I met Mike McGee, who was the minister there. Mike McGee and my husband became very good friends. When I came to Virginia I sought out the Unitarian Church and when I went in, there was Mike McGee. That was wonderful.”



Renee is now the 101-year-old matriarch of her family. Her son Chico has a grown son and a grown daughter. Chico’s son, Charles Eugene, is a professor of political science at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana and is married to Rose Kelanic, also a professor of political science at Notre Dame. Chico’s daughter, Abigail Renee Khan, runs a horse boarding farm in Leesburg, Virginia and is married to Omar Khan, who owns a construction company. Abby and Omar have two sons, Zachary and Joseph. Chico brings Joseph to UUCA most Sundays to sing with the Chalice Choir.

Last year when Renee marked a century of life, she was well celebrated throughout October. “There were several celebrations between October 9 and October 29. The first was at our church after services. The Day Alliance at UUCA had another one. The Lake Barcroft Book Club, the church book club, and the Lake Barcroft Ladies Club all had parties for me. The band whose rehearsals I go to had a big party for me. I chair the Eating Adventures, which is part of the Lake Barcroft women’s group, and they had a party for me. And we had the family party at Villa Mozart. The family really gathered. I felt well celebrated.”

And deservedly so.