



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF ARLINGTON VIRGINIA

A Place to Connect, Grow and Serve

Portrait of a Life: Renee Gholz

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Part I

Mary Louise Paul Charpentier was just one of the 100 million people claimed by the insidious flu pandemic of 1918, but she was the only one who mattered to Renee, her youngest daughter. Renee was not quite two years old when her mother died, leaving Renee's father, a welder, to raise three girls and three boys on his own in St. Paul, Minnesota.

"My father, Edmond Charpentier, at age 32 was left with six kids between the ages of two and 10, all 18 months apart," Renee recalled. "He was a blue collar worker. He got a job as a welder's helper in the roundhouse of the Great Northern Railroad and he was a good worker. He graduated from welder's helper to become a welder and worked nights. We always had supper at six at night and then he went to work. He'd get home at eight in the morning and get us up and breakfasted and off to school, then he would get a chance to rest while we were at school. I can remember his coming home at eight in the morning and getting me up on his shoulders. He was a good father."

While Edmond was working, housekeepers would take care of the kids, receiving room and board for themselves and their children as well as a little cash. "We had two housekeepers while I was growing up, but I only remember the one who had a little girl who was just about my age. She was there at Christmas time. I can see in my mind's eye the other one who came later but I don't remember her name or her children."

Only once when the family was between housekeepers did relatives come to help. My mother's mother, Grandma Laternal, came one time, but we were not close with our grandparents. My father was the youngest and I was only nine when Grandpa died. I remember seeing Grandpa in the coffin, and I determined that I didn't want to see dead people anymore. After Grandma Laternal's husband died and she married again, she had three boys who were the same ages as my sister and my oldest brother and the next brother. We used to go visit Minneapolis to see Grandma. It was a long streetcar ride from St. Paul, before we had a car."

Siblings: Bernice, Isabelle, Walter, Wilfred, and Clifford

In her mother's absence, Renee's oldest sister, Isabelle (better known as Belle), stepped into a maternal role. "She was 10 when our mother died—eight years older than me—and she was almost like a mother to me. Belle was not academic, she was very domestic. She was very sweet. But she had to repeat eighth grade and finally graduated eighth grade at 15."

And my three brothers—Walter, Wilfred, and Clifford—all played with me too. But they would say, 'You can't do that because you're a girl,' so I would immediately do it. My other sister, Bernice, died just a year after my

mother. I was only three when she died, so I don't have any memories of her, any more than of my mother."

"I know my father was from a little French settlement called Hugo, near Rice Lake. I never knew my maternal grandma till after my mother died and by then she lived in Minneapolis. I don't know where she was from, but I know she never learned to speak English. She spoke only French."

"We spoke French at home. When my youngest brother, Cliff, went to school, he learned to speak English. He came home and taught me English. He also taught me to read. By the time I was five years old I could read first-grade books. I took to reading. By the time I was in second grade, I read on a seventh-grade level. There were examinations every year. I read as well at seven as my brother who was in seventh grade. Reading is what I do." And it's still the case. Even at age 100, Renee belongs to two book clubs.

But young Renee was not one to stay home reading all the time. "I remember doing fun things. I certainly do. There was an empty lot across the street and up the hill a little and I remember we dug it out and made a lovely cave. I was quite a climber. We had a big elm tree in our yard and we would climb up into the elm tree. My dad put up a swing with ropes on one of the strong limbs. We played in the yard. Our yard became the neighborhood playground. I had a lot of friends. Most of my friends lived at the top of the hill and used to slide in winter on sleds. They were children of Italian immigrants who worked on the railroad, repairing and maintaining the tracks."

"Our house was two stories and the middle room upstairs was a playroom. I would sit on the windowsill with my feet hanging out. One time I said, 'I'm going to jump.' Of course my brothers said 'No you can't, you're a girl.' So I jumped. When I landed I broke my wrist. My father said, 'Don't you ever do that again.' He was a strong disciplinarian. He never said, 'You do that or...'. He just said, 'You do that.' He had to be a strong disciplinarian because we were alone so much."

"You get an outside job or you die."

"By that time, we didn't live in St. Paul anymore. My father was by that time a carpenter and house painter, and he developed lead poisoning. They didn't know what it was then. They just knew he had advanced case of jaundice. His doctor said, 'You get an outside job or you die.' My dad sold the house in St. Paul and we went way north to Pine County to Bruno, Minnesota. I was 12 and in eighth grade by then. From the time I was 12 until I graduated at 17, I kept house for my dad and my three brothers while I went to school. My middle brother used to help me some with the cooking. I washed clothes with the tub and the washboard. I did have a wringer. I remember hanging sheets out in the winter and they would freeze stiff before I could get them pinned on. It was cold."

Around this time, Renee met Art Jackman, who lived in Winona, Minnesota, but drove up to Bruno on his motorcycle to go bear hunting in the winter. While in Bruno, when he was about 21 and Mom was 12, he saw her playing basketball and decided that Mom was the girl he wanted. He drove her around Bruno and its environs on the back of his motorcycle, which was considered quite scandalous at the time.

Renee's story to be continued in next week's edition of Connections.