

Testimonial

Hi. My name is Steve Rittenberg. As part of this year's Annual Budget Drive, people are asked to come here and talk about UUCH and what it means to them.

For those who have heard my story before, I will try to be brief. For those who have not, I hope this helps you learn a bit about me. And we can connect in some small way.

I began attending UUCH in August 2015 after my wife, Gina, was diagnosed with cancer. We needed support and people told us they relied on their church family. Having no church family at that time, this Jewish man and his Southern Baptist wife agreed that UUCH could be a middle ground for us. I began sharing Joys and Sorrows on Sundays. Not for me but for Gina. The more people praying for her, the better, I hoped. I met many caring, loving people. Pam Korb asked me not to talk too much about her as to not embarrass her but she was the first person I met at UUCH. I've always felt safe around her. And so many other people. Barbara Hitt always asked about Gina. When Mona Smith wasn't asking about Gina, she was mailing her cards and even knitting a blanket for her. Gina met Reverend Alice when she was at a very low point. I always felt that her presence that night was a divine gift to Gina.

The following spring, we were in Houston for long-term cancer treatment. What to do with our dogs? Other UUs, Rondi and Greg Kelton, agreed to take care of our dogs. Barbara Hitt and John Jeter formed a group to come to our house every day to take care of our cats. I felt very cared for even at a distance.

Sadly, Gina died in September of 2016. There was a Celebration of Life service for her. I wish I had the foresight to take picture of the Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall to remember how they were decorated and how many people came to pay their respects. Those first few days and weeks were terrible. One evening, I was in an especially bad place. A therapist encouraged me to phone a friend. Pam Korb came over. We drank wine and played board games. I couldn't imagine a kinder or more loving gift to me that evening.

As time passed, I continued to attend services. I don't recall the impetus but found myself on the Hospitality Committee. Here was a chance to give back in a small way. Let me wash your dishes while y'all have fun at potluck, or service auction, or chili cook off. I signed up for nearly every service auction dinner that year. My goal was to meet people and try to connect with them. It worked very well, at least on my end. Every new person I met enriched my life.

While at Nancy and Becky's home for Majongg lessons, Shiela Burrows talked to me about a book group she was forming at her house. Going there to see her and Kim each Thursday was the highlight of my week. Just relax and chat with them, Gail Williams, Monica and Denise, and Shiela's friend Susan. I'm poor at breaking into group conversations but that didn't impede the feeling of connection with the group.

My connections with UUs continued to expand. I offered a Game Night at the Service Auction which allowed me to get to know several people I hadn't talked to much previously, including the Bollingers and the Williams. At the Service Auction, I bid on financial organization help from Michelle Clark and organizing from Amanda Schuber. At a comedy night at Stand Up Ale, I saw Lauren Harris-Childers. She didn't perform but told me she was shortly thereafter. I went out to see her perform and was welcomed into a large group of her friends, including Lysie and Mac.

This fall, something divine happened again. Erin Reid invited me to volunteer as a teacher. Why me? I have no kids and never expressed interest in this. Well, if someone special like Erin, who has as much love for children as anyone, trusts that I can help, I feel like I've been given a sacred responsibility.

All of these connections, and far more not cited, help me feel connected to all of you. I feel like I am part of a family. I owe so much to UUCH for all the love I received. Helping on committees and providing financial support as part of the ABD does not repay a fraction of what I received.

Thank you for allowing me to tell my story.