

Lilas Lysne: A Bright Spirit

The first thing that strikes one about Lilas Lysne is her style. At age 85, she is still the best-dressed woman in our church, with colours, jewelry and hats like no one else.

Quickly afterward, we see her other gift – her bright spirit.

Lilas has been a regular at UCE services since she moved to Edmonton in 2012, leaving the village of Forestburg where she had lived for more than 20 years. But her Unitarian roots are very deep and have never left her, no matter where she has lived.

Lilas was born in Alliance, a village near Forestburg, in 1931. Her father had emigrated from Minnesota as a teenager, and ran a butcher shop for many years in Alliance. Little Lilas used to help her dad with his butchering. The memory of him shooting a cow that he was about to butcher has stayed with her – something she thinks left her with a guilt complex.

Her dad was musical, and he formed and led the Alliance Band. As an eight-year-old, Lilas got to march in front of the band, holding the Alliance Band sign, as part of a 1939 parade in Edmonton for the visiting King and Queen. “That was pretty phenomenal,” she recalls. Lilas herself has been a piano player and singer, as is her oldest daughter, Lillias.

After high school Lilas came to Edmonton to study nursing at the Royal Alexandra Hospital. She graduated in 1952. A year before, she quietly married Norman “Chips” Cowper; the wedding was kept a secret from the nursing school, because married women weren’t allowed to study nursing.

Then came five children, starting with Lillias. The family settled in Calgary, except for a year in Barbados and a year in Israel in 1969-70. Lilas remembers holding a “Unitarian bar mitzvah” party for one of her sons while they were in Israel. And Lillias followed up the family time in Israel with a year living in a kibbutz.

Lilas and her husband had found their way to the Calgary Unitarian fellowship around 1960, after returning from Barbados. For Lilas, it was a perfect fit. Even as a 13-year-old child, she didn’t believe in praying or in a “he” god, she says. So finding the Unitarians was a thrill for her.

She threw herself into church work. The Calgary fellowship was still quite small, but Lilas got a choir going – it came up several times to Edmonton to

sing. Over her years at Calgary Unitarian Church, the fellowship grew into a full-fledged church.

Later, Lilas took up the chaplain's role, doing many weddings over the years. She recalls doing one of the first gay weddings in the early 1970s for a gay couple, in her kitchen. "I had many unusual weddings, I can tell you."

When her marriage ended in 1970, she went back to nursing full-time. And she was able to combine her nursing with her church chaplain's role: Lilas spent two years studying to be a hospital chaplain, and helped her fellow chaplains to accept the idea of non-Christian chaplains. She brought her Unitarian values to her chaplain work at the Foothills Hospital.

Lilas has also, for many decades, been a practitioner of Therapeutic Touch and Jin Shin Jyutsu, two forms of holistic treatment.

Also, for four years in the 1970s she was president of the Western District board of Canadian Unitarians.

In 1979 Lilas met farmer Wilmer Oberg at a reunion near her home town and they hit it off. A few years later, she moved to Forestburg to be with Wil. While there she dealt with various health problems, including cancer. She also worked in home care at small towns in the area. Although she couldn't attend church regularly, she never stopped being a Unitarian.

Following the death of Wil, Lilas left Forestburg for Edmonton. Now she's able to come to church whenever she wants. She feels a bit underused in our congregation; she's used to being a mover and shaker. But she's adjusting to this new stage in her long life.

"Now I'm learning to receive and not give, and that's very difficult for me," she says. In fact, Lilas, you give us joy by your bright presence. That's a precious gift.

■ By Susan Ruttan, November 2016