

The Royers: Intense Commitment

One day about 50 years ago, Unitarian minister Bob Wrigley stopped by the home of Don and Elaine Royer for a visit. With him, he brought UCE membership cards.

He could not have known how productive that meeting would be. The Royers quickly become huge contributors to our congregation. In 1983, the couple received the W.H. Alexander Award for their volunteer efforts on behalf of UCE.

As Elaine says, they gave 35 years of intense commitment to the church, and then took a 15-year break to do other things. In the last few years, Elaine has returned to active church life, bringing her expertise with jewelry and her amazing work ethic to our garage sales. Don, who will be 90 in October and has impaired hearing, comes to church less often because of his hearing.

Neither Don nor Elaine had a church-going upbringing. Don was born on a farm near Brooks; there were no nearby churches to attend when he was growing up.

Elaine was born in 1937 in Saskatchewan, and a few years later moved to North Vancouver with her mother. At times Elaine attended Sunday schools, but didn't take to Christian beliefs. As a young teenager she moved to Calgary to live with her father and attend high school. For a time she embraced her dad's Jewish religion, but it wasn't a permanent commitment.

In 1946, after high school, Don took a Southern Alberta Institute of Technology course that gave him a certificate as a radio operator. Shortly



afterward he was hired by Transport Canada, his employer for the rest of his career. He ended up a senior regional manager with 400 workers under him.

Don was working in Edmonton in 1960 when he met Elaine, who had moved to our city after high school and found a job. They married in 1961. Daughter Risa was born the next year, and son Craig was born in 1964.

The congregation that the Royer family joined was busy and lively, with tons of kids and a strong RE program which the Royer children enjoyed. Risa would go on to become one of the youngest recipients of the Alexander Award, in 1989.

Her parents plunged into the work of the church. Don, busy with his career, did less than Elaine but still did a lot – he was board president in 1974, a time when the congregation was embracing gay rights and other social justice causes.

Elaine, besides caring for her kids, worked as church office secretary for several years in the early 1970s. She was the UCE board secretary for some time, and served on numerous committees. Then she moved on to the national CUC board, serving as national president in 1975-76 – a role that Ruth Patrick, Stan Calder and Rev. Brian Kiely would hold in later decades.

From there Elaine moved on to the big Boston-based Unitarian Universalist Association, which was at the time the parent of the CUC. She sat on two committees, chairing one of them. Don often travelled with his wife; he recalls cooking his special stew and biscuits for one such committee in Boston.

Those busy years are full of good memories.

Elaine recalls the first Uni Arts Festival that UCE put on in 1974. There were all sorts of wonderful art on the church walls, pottery on display, little plates of hors d'oeuvres for sale, and minister Rob Brownlie outside the building greeting visitors. "I think that first year there were 1,000 people," she says.

Over its 15 years, the festival did decline in size, says Elaine, but it presented exciting artists like Jane Ash Poitras and Alex Janvier.

Another fundraiser, the goods and services auction, was also lots of fun. Don regularly offered to make tourtieres for people – one year he made six. Bernie Keeler's specialty was curried meatballs, which he would put up in freezer packs.

Yet even in the booming 1970s, says Elaine, there were issues – money problems, personal conflicts, some grumbling about minister Brownlie. She saw the church at that time as made up of two groups, a university crowd and a public service-teacher crowd.

At one point, a group of university people left to set up a campus-based fellowship, called the South Side Group. The group didn't survive, and in 1982 UCE supported creation of the Westwood Congregation south of the U of Alberta campus on 65th Street.

Today Elaine remains a busy person, volunteering three afternoons a week in the Lo-Se-Ca Foundation's thrift store in St. Albert. Don reads at the St. Albert library several mornings a week, and does the shopping, banking and errands. The Royers are planning a European river cruise of the Rhine and Danube in the fall.

They are, as they have always been, deeply committed Unitarians. "We've loved our time in the church," says Elaine.

(Interviewed by Susan Ruttan, 2016)