

Jan McMillan: Mover and Shaker

By Lillias Cowper



We all have wonderful stories about what first brought us to the Unitarian Church, but Jan McMillan's story is really worth mentioning.

When she came to Edmonton as a university student, she missed the church community that she grew up with. About 1970, her curiosity was piqued by a weekly church ad in the Edmonton Journal for a service at our church entitled "The War in Vietnam or How You Can Grow to Hate Your Country". The minister at the time was Rob Brownlie, a transplanted American. When the musical selection during the service was "The Fish Cheer and I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die", sung by Country Joe and the Fish at the 1969 Woodstock Festival, that sealed the deal - Jan knew this was where she wanted to be.

And "be" she is: Jan is everywhere and does everything at UCE.

Her grandparents came from the Ukraine and settled in the Two Hills area, and her father moved to Lac La Biche to work in a family store business. Jan was born and raised there, with many happy childhood times. She attended the United Church which was right across from where she lived, joined CGIT and enjoyed several church camps at Camp Maskepetoon at Pigeon Lake. She especially loved the evening singsongs around the campfire.

Jan married her high school sweetheart Jim, whose father had been her high school principal and teacher. They moved to Edmonton where Jim went through medical school and she became a physiotherapist. That says volumes, as she really is a hands-on mover and shaker at UCE. Jan enjoys her extended family which includes five little grandsons. Jan also loves to golf, and to travel with her sister Donna. Sadly, Jan's husband Jim died in 2015.

As her three children were growing up, Jan was very involved in the church school. She especially enjoyed teaching Haunting House with Edwina Madill. This program for 5-8 year olds started with your body as home and worked through various levels to end as the world as home. At one point, each child made a big cardboard home out of an appliance box. Imagine a classroom chock full of such houses for several weeks! As well, she was a regular at Unicircle, a group for young parents that met for several years.

Jan was awarded the W.H. Alexander Award in 1992, in recognition of her years of service to the congregation. (The same year, she got a hole in one!)

Her love of music was passed onto her children with their involvement in the Suzuki string program. Her grown children now are all busy. Daughter Jill practices law in Edmonton; son David teaches at NAIT and has three boys; daughter Cathy, a bilingual teacher, is busy with two preschoolers that come and visit us at UCE.

When Jan's kids finished their music lessons, there was a void in her life so she was delighted to join the informal 'sup and sing' at UCE with Karen Mills leading the way and Stan Calder as accompanist. That group performed at the installation service for Minister Brian Kiely in 1998 and has evolved into the amazing 50-person-strong choir that is now Chorealism with Gordon Ritchie as co-director. Jan served as librarian and planned workshops and concerts.

In 2007 Jan spearheaded My Song, a concert and then a CD featuring original works of our in-house composer, Gordon Ritchie. The best thing about singing with Chorealism is that there are no divas in the group, only laughter and positive learning experiences at rehearsals.

Besides choir commitments, Jan served on the Ministerial Search Committee which brought John Marsh to Edmonton in 1986. When he later was on sabbatical, she chaired the Church Services Committee for that year. In 2004 she was the local chairperson for the Canadian Unitarian Council Annual Conference and Meeting held in Edmonton that year, and arranged for Lt. Gov. Lois Hole to be our keynote speaker.

Inviting guest musicians to perform at our Sunday services was a delightful task that Jan took on for several years.

She has given countless hours selflessly and often in the background, but the results of her effort and time are very evident - especially the Garage Sale. She is a great promoter and worker at this wonderful event, giving opportunities for all our stuff to find homes, interacting with people in the larger community, discovering unique found objects - like a huge Mexican sombrero - that she displays on herself to promote the sale at church services. Jan describes UCE as a place where you can risk and grow, and her gay abandon in the Garage Sale is truly one of those occasions that benefit so many people.

Her involvement in our UCE walking group is yet another activity where she is a vital member. This is a highly energetic group of troupers that go walking not letting the weather stop them...they truly embrace winter!

Jan describes UCE as a "good feeling place". She can take lots of credit for that good feeling.

What keeps her coming to UCE? She says the people in the congregation have so much to offer and she always learns something from them. The services and programs have enhanced her life in so many ways. She has introduced many people to our congregation who have then become members, including her sister Donna Hamar.

We have all benefited from Jan's involvement and are very grateful that Rob Brownlie chose "Fish" to play at his service!