

A Word from Tracy

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Two weeks ago, I went to my first Junior High Conference. Con for short. What I knew before I went was that the youth who attended the Cons in the past had a super experience, they loved it! I also knew that often the kids came home very tired, which the parents didn't like so much. I knew something else, too, and that is that a Con is a chance for our youth to mingle and get to know other UU youth in the district.

For this last Con, held in Lincroft, New Jersey, we had five Junior Seminar teens go for the 24 hour period. We had trouble finding one youth advisor to cover the whole Con so the parents split up the task. My four hour stint was in the afternoon.

I was fortunate, and I need to add blessed, to be "on duty" for something called the All Con. An All Con is when all of the youth and all of the advisors and staff come together for a shared event. For this particular All Con, each person in the room was given a label to wear on his or her forehead. The label could read *homeless* or *lives in a big house* or *has lots of acne* or any number of other things. The idea was that each person would treat the others as if they actually were the label they were wearing on their foreheads. The treatment was supposed to be stereotypical and exaggerated so that each person could guess who they were based on how they were being treated. We all participated in this game for 20 minutes or so. Afterward, the leader of the All Con led a discussion about the experience.

Here is what struck me about the All Con. All of the youth participated in the game. No one sat around the edges of the room and resisted. And the youth shared their reactions and feelings about the game after it was over. They shared their feelings about being marginalized or picked on. They talked about how to help others who may be in that kind of situation. They shared their own experiences. They talked and opened up and exposed their hearts. And the adults there listened and loved and supported them all.

I was overwhelmed at the depth of sharing by these middle school kids. I was overjoyed and profoundly grateful that our UU youth had such a place to come together as the Con. And I hoped that our congregations serve as such places for our youth every day of the year.

This, I think, is what we strive for in our RE program here: A loving, supportive environment in which to live, learn and grow. In a space such as the Con or here at USR, lives are changed. How we are with each other, what we say and listen to, it all deeply matters. I saw that at the Con. I see it here.

We need people to volunteer in our RE program. We need you. You, who are caring and supportive; you who have been loved here and want to give something back; you who have been touched to the depths of your being, and know that now, the only response is to give of yourself, even in some small way; you who have only recently found this place as your new home. You.

Please volunteer with the religious education ministry of this congregation. The rewards are many. And the lives that are changed, well, one could be yours.