



# The CommUUnicator

Newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist  
Fellowship of Waynesboro

## Pianist and Choir Director Charlotte Shnaider Retires

By Erin Milnes

After more than twenty years as pianist and choir director, beloved UUFW member (and my mom) Charlotte Shnaider has passed the baton. Join us in celebrating her deep contribution to our community, as well as her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday(!), at the service on March 8<sup>th</sup>.



Charlotte has been an active member of UUFW since 2003 and has served on the UUFW Worship Arts team, helping to plan the Sunday programs, for two decades. She also served on the board, as a nursery volunteer, and helped

with countless fundraisers. “For my entire time at UUFW,” said Reverend Paul Oakley, “Charlotte has been a stalwart of our music program... Never once did she complain about having nearly the whole program left at her door. For several years, we couldn’t have had our Christmas Eve service without her at the piano, and Sunday morning would have been musically barren without her delightful and generous contributions.”

Charlotte Slack grew up in Downers Grove, Illinois, west of Chicago. She realized from a very young age that music would play a central role in her life. “I was always attracted to how music lets you work together to create beauty,” she says. Downers had a strong school music program, and Charlotte studied piano, voice and cello. She sang in her high school’s a cappella choir and played first cello in the orchestra, where she met Sherrill Milnes, the first violin.

Both majored in music education at Drake University in Des Moines, and they married after her sophomore year. After graduation, she and Sherrill returned to his family’s farm in Downers and joined the newly formed Chicago Symphony Chorus, performing on stage and in many recordings. By then, Sherrill had shifted from education to performance, and soon after I was born, the family moved to Cresskill, New Jersey, to be near the Metropolitan Opera. Charlotte was deeply proud of her husband’s achievements, was

grateful for the opportunity to rub shoulders with luminaries of opera and literature such as Jon Vickers and Langston Hughes, and relished hearing world-class music. However, the couple’s goals diverged and they divorced.

While raising her kids in New Jersey, Charlotte stayed active with music, serving as assistant conductor of the Ars Musica Chorale, playing bass in the regional orchestra, and teaching private students (including me). And though she had no experience with activism, her dedication to the Golden Rule and civil rights led to her involvement in the ACLU. At a meeting one night, she was introduced to an erudite older man named Borah Shnaider. They married in 1970.

During a trip, she and Borah flew over the Shenandoah Valley, and she fell in love with the landscape. They bought 10 acres east of Harrisonburg with a view of Massanutten. When Borah retired in 1983, they moved there full time. She joined the Shenandoah Valley Choral Society and helped to found Mercy House, the first shelter for homeless families in Harrisonburg. She also joined the Harrisonburg UU, finding in it a supportive community as open to spiritual questioning as she was.

This support became crucial when Borah was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s disease. Over the next seven years, he deteriorated, and she cared for him, often using music to soothe and settle him. He died in 1996.

Borah’s illness was costly, so Charlotte decided to develop her land on Boyers Road into residential lots. She hired a contractor to install the road on the condition that they show

her how to operate the backhoe. She named the development Cullison Creek, in honor of her mom, Edna Cullison.

In 2002, Charlotte moved to Staunton and started attending UFW. The Fellowship pianist, Virginia Edwards, was slowing down, so Charlotte filled in with whatever was needed, playing piano on Sunday and planning music. When Virginia stepped down, Charlotte took over.

The choir, at that time, run by Lorain and Bill Harouff and focused on folk music, was only a few years old. Charlotte brought a big box of music from HUU and introduced classical and other genres to the group. She eventually took over as director and accompanist. Longtime choir member Sylvia Woodworth notes, “With that big beautiful smile and lots of patience, she inspired singing out of us that both pleased the congregation and was enjoyable for us.” She directed the choir until last year and played at services until earlier this year.

As Lorain notes, “It’s hard to remember back before Charlotte was here, she is such an integral part of our group.”



*The big snow and ice event of January 2026 as background for George and Cynthia Thompson’s first granddaughter, Oakley Spurlin, born December 31.*

