



## River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation Story SPARC 2017

### Sharing Our Stories: Michael's Story

#### Introduction to the Story:

The Rev. Jacki Lewis wrote about the power of stories when she said:

*I believe our identities are formed by stories told to us, about us, and around us. We are living texts, formed by multiple, interweaving, competing, and, sometimes, conflicting stories that we receive from our culture via our parents, other adults, our peers, the media, and congregational life. Stories about race, gender, theology, generational differences, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class work consciously and unconsciously to form our identity. Stories also teach us values, ethics, and meaning. Stories help us know who we are and who we are not; they create boundaries, or borders, for us. Identity development can be thought of as the process of refining, editing, and authoring one's own story in conversation with others.*

Today we're sharing stories from our own congregation that invite us to renewed courage even and especially in vulnerable times. The piece of our shared story that we'll reflect on today comes to us from the family of Michael Butvinik, a young man who once led our youth group and sang in the choir here at River Road. Michael died in the midst of a tragic accident this summer when he was just 27 years old and we gathered in the sanctuary to laugh and cry and laugh some more in his memory.

#### Michael's Story: Superman at the Fringe Festival

Joan and Jeff are Michael's parents, longtime stalwart volunteers in the life of our congregation who have laughed and labored with us all through so much. When they were invited to consider the ways the Michael's life exemplified courage, it took a little bit of re-framing.

After all, Joan said, "Michael never rushed into a burning building, never performed CPR in a medical emergency, never scaled a tree to save a stranded cat. No, for him the word needs a more nuanced definition."

In high school, his drama group was invited to attend the Fringe Festival in Scotland and somewhere during the proceedings, news reports hit Edinburgh radio stations about a young man dressed up as Superman standing in the middle of a bridge handing out leaflets.

That was Michael.

As Joan puts it, “He took it upon himself to don a Superman costume,” to advertise his drama group’s production. “Thus attired, Michael soon gathered a crowd and the more curious Fringe-goers soon bought tickets. It was so effective that even cab drivers began suggesting to their passengers that they buy tickets from the roving Superman.”

If courage means risking ridicule for the greater good, then Michael was fearless.

Likewise, if courage is offering kindness to those who are often overlooked, then Michael had it in spades.

When he was just in elementary school, he befriended a fellow second grader, Anna, who was confined to a wheelchair and for most of the school year had a metal halo stabilizing her neck. Because of this, the teachers at school cautioned her classmates to keep their distance so as not to accidentally cause her pain.

Michael noticed that Anna was usually alone at recess so he began going over to her and acting silly to make Anna laugh. It was a simple friendship, but Michael often thought about her and how lonely it must be to not be touched. So in July, Michael decided to invite Anna to his bowling birthday party. The bowling alley had a metal ramp from which a bowling ball could be placed on top and then the ball would roll down the alley. Michael lifted the ball for her and Anna would gently give it a push.

Later Anna's mom said that Michael was the only classmate to invite her to a birthday party that year. But more importantly, when the other partygoers saw how well Anna could participate and how much she enjoyed being at a party, she was invited by other kids to their parties as well. Sometimes courage is as simple as being open to what is possible.

Today, Joan and Jeff and their family continue to struggle with grief every day. Perhaps nothing will change that. Losing their bold, risk-taking, funny and courageous son is the shock from which they’ll never wholly recover. And yet somehow they still draw strength from his character in their daily lives; laughing at the memories of his antics inspires them almost as much as the tangible difference he made in people’s lives.

This vulnerability they live in every day is nothing they ever would or could choose, and yet they too find courage for their own journeys, drawn partly from the fearless model of their son Michael, whose Twitter bio simply read: “Just a kid trying to make the world a happier place.”

## Questions for Reflection

- 1) How do you think Michael's story exemplifies both courage and vulnerability?
- 2) Share a time in your life when you did something that required both courage and vulnerability.
- 3) Tell about an experience of courage and vulnerability here at River Road?
- 4) How could this community help you to live and act with courage and vulnerability?

