

Portrait of a Life: Renee Gholz
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October 2017

Mary Louise Paul Charpentier was just one of the 100 million people claimed by the insidious flu pandemic of 1918, but she was the only one who mattered to Renee, her youngest daughter. Renee was not quite two years old when her mother died, leaving Renee's father, a welder, to raise three girls and three boys on his own in St. Paul, Minnesota.

"My father, Edmond Charpentier, at age 32 was left with six kids between the ages of two and 10, all 18 months apart," Renee recalled. "He was a blue collar worker. He got a job as a welder's helper in the roundhouse of the Great Northern Railroad and he was a good worker. He graduated from welder's helper to become a welder and worked nights. We always had supper at six at night and then he went to work. He'd get home at eight in the morning and get us up and breakfasted and off to school, then he would get a chance to rest while we were at school. I can remember his coming home at eight in the morning and getting me up on his shoulders. He was a good father."

While Edmond was working, housekeepers would take care of the kids, receiving room and board for themselves and their children as well as a little cash. "We had two housekeepers while I was growing up, but I only remember the one who had a little girl who was just about my age. She was there at Christmas time. I can see in my mind's eye the other one who came later but I don't remember her name or her children."

Only once when the family was between housekeepers did relatives come to help. My mother's mother, Grandma Laternal, came one time, but we were not close with our grandparents. My father was the youngest and I was only nine when Grandpa died. I remember seeing Grandpa in the coffin, and I determined that I didn't want to see dead people anymore. After Grandma Laternal's husband died and she married again, she had three boys who were the same ages as my sister and my oldest brother and the next brother. We used to go visit Minneapolis to see Grandma. It was a long streetcar ride from St. Paul, before we had a car."

Siblings: Bernice, Isabelle, Walter, Wilfred, and Clifford

In her mother's absence, Renee's oldest sister, Isabelle (better known as Belle), stepped into a maternal role. "She was 10 when our mother died—eight years older than me—and she was almost like a mother to me. Belle was not academic, she was very domestic. She was very sweet. But she had to repeat eighth grade and finally graduated eighth grade at 15."

And my three brothers—Walter, Wilfred, and Clifford—all played with me too. But they would say, 'You can't do that because you're a girl,' so I would immediately do it. My other sister, Bernice, died just a year after my mother. I was only three when she died, so I don't have any memories of her, any more than of my mother."

“I know my father was from a little French settlement called Hugo, near Rice Lake. I never knew my maternal grandma till after my mother died and by then she lived in Minneapolis. I don’t know where she was from, but I know she never learned to speak English. She spoke only French.”

“We spoke French at home. When my youngest brother, Cliff, went to school, he learned to speak English. He came home and taught me English. He also taught me to read. By the time I was five years old I could read first-grade books. I took to reading. By the time I was in second grade, I read on a seventh-grade level. There were examinations every year. I read as well at seven as my brother who was in seventh grade. Reading is what I do.” And it’s still the case. Even at age 100, Renee belongs to two book clubs.

But young Renee was not one to stay home reading all the time. “I remember doing fun things. I certainly do. There was an empty lot across the street and up the hill a little and I remember we dug it out and made a lovely cave. I was quite a climber. We had a big elm tree in our yard and we would climb up into the elm tree. My dad put up a swing with ropes on one of the strong limbs. We played in the yard. Our yard became the neighborhood playground. I had a lot of friends. Most of my friends lived at the top of the hill and used to slide in winter on sleds. They were children of Italian immigrants who worked on the railroad, repairing and maintaining the tracks.”

“Our house was two stories and the middle room upstairs was a playroom. I would sit on the windowsill with my feet hanging out. One time I said, ‘I’m going to jump.’ Of course my brothers said ‘No you can’t, you’re a girl.’ So I jumped. When I landed I broke my wrist. My father said, ‘Don’t you ever do that again.’ He was a strong disciplinarian. He never said, ‘You do that or...’ He just said, ‘You do that.’ He had to be a strong disciplinarian because we were alone so much.”

“You get an outside job or you die.”

“By that time, we didn’t live in St. Paul anymore. My father was by that time a carpenter and house painter, and he developed lead poisoning. They didn’t know what it was then. They just knew he had advanced case of jaundice. His doctor said, ‘You get an outside job or you die.’ My dad sold the house in St. Paul and we went way north to Pine County to Bruno, Minnesota. I was 12 and in eighth grade by then. From the time I was 12 until I graduated at 17, I kept house for my dad and my three brothers while I went to school. My middle brother used to help me some with the cooking. I washed clothes with the tub and the washboard. I did have a wringer. I remember hanging sheets out in the winter and they would freeze stiff before I could get them pinned on. It was cold.”

Around this time, Renee met Art Jackman, who lived in Winona, Minnesota, but drove up to Bruno on his motorcycle to go bear hunting in the winter. While in Bruno, when he was about 21 and Mom was 12, he saw her playing basketball and decided that Mom was the girl he wanted. He drove her around Bruno and its environs on the back of his motorcycle, which was considered quite scandalous at the time.

Renee's companion in academic pursuits was her brother Cliff. "My brother Cliff and I went through high school together," she recalled. Cliff graduated from high school and went to work building roads through President Roosevelt's WPA program. Renee was the only one of her siblings to go on to college, at Winona State Teaching College. "Wally graduated eighth grade and that's as far as he went. Wilfred—we called him Bill—worked as an electrician's apprentice. He became very good very quickly as an electrician, and that's how he earned a living. Clifford was the first one to go to high school. He was just 18 months older than me."

"I'm going to date that girl"

When Renee graduated from high school and was accepted at Winona State, a neighbor named Al Rupp drove Mom to Winona in his pickup truck. Art Jackman wanted to drive her to school, but he only had a motorcycle. All freshman females at the college had to live in a woman's dormitory. "I earned my dormitory fees washing and ironing shirts for 20 cents an hour for Art Jackman's mother, who ran a boardinghouse. That was back in the days when you starched white shirts. I washed the shirts, dipped them in starch, dried them, sprinkled them with water, and wrapped them up before ironing them. It was hard work. In addition to doing people's laundry, Renee worked in the reference department of the library to put herself through school.

When Renee was a sophomore, she participated in a pageant to welcome incoming new students to the university. In the audience that day was Charles Gholz. Charles had spent his freshman year at Iowa State University, but transferred to Winona State his sophomore year. Musician and conductor Hal Leonard, who Charles knew from his hometown, suggested Charles could work his way through college as an assistant director of Leonard's band, which was based near Winona State.

"I was on stage in the pageant, and Charles said to the man seated next to him in the audience, 'I'm going to date that girl,' and Bernie said, 'You can't, she's my girl.' He was right. I was Bernie's girl—very seriously. I had been introduced to his family. I was the sponsor for his younger sister's confirmation. I'd been dating Bernie for a year. But Charles was a very enthusiastic suitor."

Charles and the rest of the Hal Leonard Band played dances almost every Saturday night around Minnesota and nearby states. "He used to say he could make music on anything that had holes. He played clarinet, flute, and saxophone. I played clarinet too. That's how my husband and I got to be together all the time. My husband taught clarinet at Winona State Teachers College and I started from scratch. Fortunately, I could read music, but I had never played an instrument before."

"We were poor, but everybody was those days. It was during the Great Depression. So we did a lot of walking for our dates. I remember Hal went by us while we were walking one time and he sang, 'I Need Thee Every Hour.'"

Keeping a Secret

“I was Catholic back then, but by the time I was nine years old, I could not accept the Catholic beliefs. They didn’t make sense to me. But of course I was living at home so I went to Catholic church. I used to go to the Methodist Church when my family wasn’t around.

When I met my husband, he was Methodist and I was Catholic, and he was willing to become a Catholic so I would marry him. He went to the Catholic church for six weeks to study and he said, ‘Renee, I’ll become a Catholic, but I don’t believe this stuff.’ I said, ‘Don’t.’ We’ll just go elope and get married. We couldn’t be married in the sanctuary of the church because he wasn’t catholic but we were married in the sacristy of the church instead.”

“We met in September we were married the next June,” Renee said. Renee and Charles were both 19 at the time. “But we had to be married secretly. We eloped. We went to Wisconsin to get married because in those days a married woman was not allowed to go to a state college. I never knew why. So we didn’t tell anyone we were married. The band played all over Minnesota and Iowa and one of the times they were going to play in the next town past my husband’s hometown of Worthington, Minnesota. They were going to play in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. By that time, they had a big bus to sleep in. I went with them because they were going to stop in Worthington and Charles wanted his family to meet me. I had never met them before we were married, so I was happy to meet them. When we met them we’d been married for a year. When my husband told his family I was his wife, my father-in-law assumed I was pregnant, but I wasn’t! My family didn’t find out until the following summer.”

Renee and Charles were determined to keep their secret until Renee earned her teaching degree and found a job. “It really mattered to me because I wanted to teach, and I did.

Her former suitor Art Jackman was stunned when Renee married Charles Gholz instead of him. He thought that Renee had come to Winona specifically to marry him.

“I find teaching very satisfying”

“My first job was in a one-room school where I had everyone from five-year-olds to eighth graders. It was in hill country—Oak Ridge, Minnesota, eight miles up from Winona. I had 21 students. I had to teach the five-year-olds who would turn six during the year to read and I had to prepare the eighth-graders for state exams. In Minnesota, you couldn’t graduate from grade school without passing state exams. Teaching so many levels required organization, and I used my students to help. A sixth-grade girl was pretty good at listening to the first-graders read, and the second- and third-graders often had things together. I was a very strict disciplinarian. My advisor at Winona had said, ‘Renee, you go ahead and take that job but you’ve got to be a strict disciplinarian.’ And by golly I was.”

“I taught for 41 years—mostly first grade. When I was in second grade, I had a very good teacher and at that time I made up my mind I was going to be a teacher and I was going to marry a teacher. And by golly I did. I taught in eight different states. In all but one of those years, I taught in economically

depressed situations, and I often taught kids who didn't speak English. But, then, I had grown up poor and knowing many people who didn't speak English!"

"I've always believed that everyone is equal and should be so treated. While I was teaching in Austin, Texas, I went to a National Education Association meeting, and looked around and there wasn't a Black face in the crowd. I knew that there was a Black school just three blocks away from the school where I was teaching. I stood up, all five feet and a half inch of me and said, 'I will not belong to any organization that doesn't accept everybody who's qualified,' and I stomped out. They were impressed and they took a consensus vote and accepted the fact that the Black teachers should be at the NEA meeting. I integrated the NEA."

"When the schools were integrated, one Black girl came to my first-grade class in Austin. She was a pretty little thing and very popular with the children. The kids are not the problem. You have to be taught to feel superior to the black people. They hadn't been so taught. She was fully accepted."

"Once I had a first grader who was grimy and not clean. I said, 'Don't you have water at your house?' And he said, 'No.' I learned that he lived in public housing. The only water was from a well where they could pump water and carry it to their house in a pail. No wonder he was dirty. He did get cleaned up when I made a point to his mother that the children avoided him because he wasn't clean."

"I found teaching very satisfying. I would have my little first-graders in a semi-circle in front of me. Every now and then one of them would be reading, 'Stop, spot, stop!' And he'd look up and say, 'I can read!' I even taught some of them to like to read before the year was over so they would go to the school library and get books to take home. Liking to read is very important."

"By the time I retired, it had gotten to the point where you couldn't touch a pupil. You had to just talk to them. That was hard for me because I'm a great hands-on person. I like to hold onto their shoulders or their hands while I'm talking to them one-on-one. I think that touching helped them to love me and to want to please me."

Married Life

"My husband was a high school band director. The way to get a better job was to move to a bigger and better place. That's what we did. We went from Minnesota to Nebraska. He served in the Second World War while we were in Nebraska."

Renee and Charles wanted to have children, although Renee had been told after a tobogganing accident at age 17 that she would not be able to conceive. "My husband and I planned when we got married that we'd have five kids so he could have his own quintet. But I had two miscarriages. Then Chico, then the tube pregnancy—and that was twins."

Chico was nine months old when Renee developed an ectopic pregnancy. “At the time I was teaching ninth-grade English. I was in front of the class feeling lots of pain and suddenly I collapsed. My students screamed. An ambulance was called. They took me to Hastings, Nebraska, where my husband was stationed. When I was on the examination table the doctor said, ‘We have to get permission from your husband because you have to have surgery.’ They couldn’t get permission because he was out on some kind of military action. I said, ‘I’m 28 years old, and in my right mind and I’ll give you permission.’ Renee’s ovarian tubes were removed. She hadn’t even realized she was pregnant. “I’d been having pains. I went to the doctor several times and they said I had lead poisoning.”

“I felt on top of the world”

“When my dear son, with whom I live, was nine weeks old, I put him in a clothes basket in the back seat of the car. That was before seat belts. We moved to Arizona, then to New Mexico, then to El Paso, Texas, and finally to New Orleans, Louisiana. New Orleans suited us just fine. But Charles didn’t go there as a high school band director. By then his voice had worn out. So he went back to school and became a music librarian. He worked at New Orleans University. We heard a lot of music in New Orleans. We would go to Preservation Hall and sit on the floor and listen to jazz. Charles had a heart attack when he was 61, but he lived for 20 years after that heart attack. The doctor said it was because I took such good care of him. I saw to his diet and his medications and kept him as happy as I could. That makes a difference.” Charles died November 10, 1996. Renee lived in New Orleans for 37 years, the longest she’s lived anywhere.

“I liked the weather in New Orleans. People talk about how hot it is there, but it’s just a little hotter than it is here, and there’s always a breeze because of Lake Pontchartrain in the north and off the Mississippi River. I remember when Chico was learning to spell Mississippi when we were in living in Nebraska. I remember a lot of things that don’t matter. And I forget things that do.”

Renee clearly recalls a great adventure she and Charles had when they were in New Orleans. “We had a sailboat. My husband took all the Coast Guard classes about sailing and navigation and prepared to sail across the Gulf of Mexico and around the Florida Keys. We went out to the Atlantic up the coast to the Bahamas. We were joined by our dear friends Mike and Jeanie Kick. They made their living by sailing charter boats in the Bahamas and Virgin Islands with paying passengers. We would sometimes go sail with them wherever they lived.”

“But they made this eight-week voyage with us in our boat, the *Flying Spray*. The four of us sailed across the Gulf. We had four-hour watches. Everyone did everything on the boat. You steered the boat for four hours. You had six watches in every 24 hours. I loved it when I had the midnight watch. I would be sitting in the that boat at the tiller. We didn’t have a wheel. The other three would be asleep. Our boat had bunks for five. I’d be the only one up with the whole Gulf and Atlantic Ocean around me. I felt on the top of the world.”

“My husband was the captain. Mike was the navigator. I was the foredeck captain in charge of the sails. Jeanie was very good at steering the boat. In fact, she was better at it than her husband.”

“People asked if we ever ran into storms. Sure, we did. You can’t go through a summer without storms. When a squall would come up, I could holler, ‘Everybody on deck!’ I’m not a good swimmer, but I just put on my life saving jacket and worked on the foredeck. Only once did my legs ever go over, but I held onto the anchor chain and pulled myself back and yelled, ‘I’m all right!’”

Decades later, Renee’s husband has died and Jeanie has died, but Renee still corresponds with Mike Kick.

Taking Care of Chico

In 2003, Renee’s son Chico had a heart attack when *he* was 61, just like his father said. Chico had complications, Renee explained, including pernicious hiccups. “He couldn’t eat. They had to feed him through a tube and kept him under sedation to stop the hiccups. When he came out of sedation he said, ‘I want my mom.’ So I came. He was in ICU and then in a room, and had nurses around the clock. He was very, very ill. Bobbie, Chico’s wife, would take me to the hospital at nine in the morning and I would stay with him from until she came at 9:30 at night. He says I was instrumental in his recovery.” After four months in the hospital, Chico came home in a wheelchair and had to learn to walk again.

“I took care of him again mostly by keeping him company. He asked if I wanted to live with him permanently. I went back to New Orleans and sold my car and furniture and gave most of my stuff to Goodwill. When he said, ‘Let’s make it permanent,’ he didn’t realize how long it was going to be! I had no intention of living this long.”

The Makings of a Long Life

Despite her intentions, Renee *has* led a long life, and continues to fill her days with books, music, culture, and family activities. She attends lectures at the Smithsonian several times a month with her son Chico. She participates in two book clubs, through church and her neighborhood. She doesn’t drive, so when she needs a certain book she will call the library to reserve it and Chico picks it up for her. She will read “anything that’s printed,” but particularly likes history, biography, and mysteries. She enjoys good storytelling. Renee is thankful that her vision remains strong. “I can still thread a needle and sew a fine seam. I do the mending and buttons for the family. The only thing that works well anymore is my eyes.”

Renee frequently attends concerts, including performances by the Virginia Chamber Orchestra (in which her daughter-in-law Bobbie plays violin) and the Friday Morning Music Club (in which Bobbie is responsible for a series of concerts at Dumbarton House in Georgetown).

When she's feeling up to it and the weather is good, Renee goes to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington with her son and great-grandson. Renee discovered Unitarian Universalism when Chico was in high school and was invited by a friend to attend UU religious education classes. "My husband was not fond of the Catholic church and I certainly wasn't, so we became Unitarians. I liked the fact that they didn't try to make me feel guilty. The Catholic church does. You have to confess your sins and feel guilty for the least little thing. I didn't feel guilty! I liked the fact in the UU church that you could believe what you felt was right and do what you felt was right. At the UU church in New Orleans I met Mike McGee, who was the minister there. Mike McGee and my husband became very good friends. When I came to Virginia I sought out the Unitarian Church and when I went in, there was Mike McGee. That was wonderful."

Renee is now the 101-year-old matriarch of her family. Her son Chico has a grown son and a grown daughter. Chico's son, Charles Eugene, is a professor of political science at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana and is married to Rose Kelanic, also a professor of political science at Notre Dame. Chico's daughter, Abigail Renee Khan, runs a horse boarding farm in Leesburg, Virginia and is married to Omar Khan, who owns a construction company. Abby and Omar have two sons, Zachary and Joseph. Chico brings Joseph to UUCA most Sundays to sing with the Chalice Choir.

Last year when Renee marked a century of life, she was well celebrated throughout October. "There were several celebrations between October 9 and October 29. The first was at our church after services. The Day Alliance at UUCA had another one. The Lake Barcroft Book Club, the church book club, and the Lake Barcroft Ladies Club all had parties for me. The band whose rehearsals I go to had a big party for me. I chair the Eating Adventures, which is part of the Lake Barcroft women's group, and they had a party for me. And we had the family party at Villa Mozart. The family really gathered. I felt well celebrated."

And deservedly so.