

My name is Erica Bartlett, and I'd like to share my experience with the Religious Education, or RE, program.

I was lucky enough to go through RE here, starting when I was 9, and it was a sharp contrast to the Catholic Sunday school I'd experienced up until then. At the Catholic church, I'd formed an impression of a god who was judgmental and wrathful, an old bearded white man in the sky watching everything I did to see if I had sinned. I didn't like that feeling.

So you can imagine my surprise and relief when my family came here. Suddenly Religious Education was simply that - an education. It wasn't about judgment or penance.

I remember being blown away when we learned about other faith traditions, and they were given the same weight as Christian faiths. I especially enjoyed visiting other churches to see how different religions did things, something our Junior Youth Group is doing this year. And here at Allen Avenue, we even celebrated some pagan holidays, and no one talked about going to hell.

All of this was deeply comforting to me. I didn't have to worry anymore about being judged for having the "wrong" beliefs.

Even better, I met other kids who shared my concerns about the environment and social justice issues. That wasn't always easy to find where I grew in up Lake Region, and I always looked forward to the more expansive worldview when I came here on Sundays.

All of that contributes to why I now volunteer with RE.

I don't have children, but I know first-hand how important it is for kids to have this alternate viewpoint. To have adults other than their parents who they can talk to about big, important questions. To learn and explore what it means to be a moral person, regardless of what god they believe in, or if they believe in any. To have a safe place to be themselves.

And the education goes both ways. I get the chance to learn what the kids are thinking about and how they see the world, and those kids never fail to impress or inspire me. It's also a good opportunity to revisit some of life's big questions, and how to live our Unitarian Universalist principles. Exploring with the RE groups always gives me new perspectives and hope - and it can also be a lot of fun.

That's why I look forward to volunteering when I can, because I know it helps the kids - and it also helps me.