

## Courtney Hayes-Jurcheck

*Courtney is in her 40s and with her partner, John Jurcheck, has two boys, Oliver (9) and Luca (6). The family was delighted to find First Unitarian two years ago and began to sink roots into the community. They lived in Congress Park, the heart of Denver for 15 years where they were avid bike commuters. Both their industries shut down with COVID in March 2020. The parents packed both boys into a van and hit the road for the duration, intending to return...*

Courtney and her partner John Jurcheck have two boys Oliver (9) and Luca (6). At the start of 2020, John was an actor and associate producer at Curious Theater Company in Denver and Courtney ran The Day-Of, a socially responsible wedding and events planning business. The boys were unschooled and following their individual interests into classes and activities like drum lessons. John had just been named children's choir director at FUSD.

“Both our industries depend on live people. Both imploded with the COVID shutdown in mid-March.” Courtney reports, “I had booked 22 weddings in 2020. My one and only actual event took place at the end of February. We had the chance to reevaluate what was next for us.”

Courtney and John had long flirted with the idea of packing up and being nomadic, world schooling their boys by living different ways in different places and meeting different people. They considered what would be required to back out of conventional lives. Courtney had made a down payment on a 1987 VW Vanagon (about the size of a minivan) in January to be delivered in June for no specific timeline, just a one-day kind of notion. When COVID arrived, the couple decided their moment had come to take their show on the road.

The refurbished van arrived in mid-August, by which time the family had downsized their belongings (by a lot!), rented out their house to generate a small monthly profit. In two days, they packed the boys and what they thought essential to life into the van.

“We hear a lot of *How could you decide to do this?* We don't feel like we decided. The universe decided (COVID!) and we decided to jump into the river. Now we are being pulled along, flowing where the river takes us, and enjoying it.”

While the initial idea was to rent out their house for a year and then return to their lives in Denver, Courtney says they don't at this point see themselves coming back. “That is the cause of some heartbreak. We found FUSD just two years before we left, and we were making connections there. But we have come to realize that we might love this barter lifestyle. We're finding purpose in what we're doing, finding community and family all over the place, and we are falling in love with New England. (Oh, the moisture!)”

So far, the family has been in 25 states in nine months. Navigating their course chiefly through Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), the adults exchange their labor for room and board and learning on organic farms and homesteads. The work itself is varied. “We've done everything from clearing a path through two feet of snow in Vermont to cutting trees and managing forests; going through old barns and decluttering for an older couple in New York, to tending baby goats and chickens. We came to Martha's Vineyard for the fall harvest.”

How did theater performers and an events planner acquire this range of skills? “We didn’t start with any of them! We are learning on the fly. However, through the WWOOF organization we’ve learned what we know so far and are getting more proficient as we go. We started at a farm in Ohio and our first class was to dig a 4’x8’ trench for a root cellar in the hot August sun. The next place was a flower farm harvesting flowers for farmers’ markets. We spent about a week learning how to build a commercial grade greenhouse. Each farmer or homesteader knows that they are getting people who need to be guided and taught. Learning by doing is tremendously empowering and enriching.”

The family frees time to follow other interests, as when they drove to Georgia to spend December ahead of the January 6 special election. In Georgia, they built outdoor bathhouses and volunteered to cure ballots in the senatorial elections. “Being able to be there and put our efforts toward that task felt like a real contribution in a critical moment.”

During May 2021, the family was working two sites on Martha’s Vineyard: One a 1920’s commune where an early luminary in the ACLU was a member before her death. The other is an old organic farm that volunteers are helping to revitalize. “Seeing the projects last fall and now seeing our farm families again this spring has been wonderful. We park our van, pick up fresh food from the markets, and enjoy the community.”

While the adults work, the boys do independent study and spend a lot of self-directed time. “We travel with workbooks. They do a lot of reading. The hardest thing for us is how few books we can carry in our van. But they have library cards for states along the way. They have created their own natural rhythms. We ask them to do 30 min to an hour of chores with us each day. For example, whenever there are animals, they help with that care. In Vermont, they bundled up and used a handsaw to cut down trees. Sometimes they run barefoot through the fields and explore ponds.”

Courtney thinks the experience has been invaluable to her boys: “They learn to interact with different types of people, mostly adults, and to go into new situations and locations with ease, being polite, trying new foods. It has really been an amazing journey. Now, we are on a farm with three other boys who happen to be here, so they are all out exploring together. We have never been big fans of screen time for them, and we didn’t want them to do screen school. Experiential learning feels more valuable. It is important to learn life skills. How to farm, care for animals, build structures. We live simply in our van, but they are getting a diverse and rich education that we could never have provided to them in Denver. We are teaching our boys and ourselves how to create and be responsible for our own lives.”

Courtney says that what started as self-focused reasons for the lifestyle change transformed over the year. Now the family centers more on being of service to others who desperately need help. Cleaning up clutter. Running errands for people who need medications. Cooking meals together. “Being the one who lifts two cords of wood and stacks it for my elderly farm host gives me so much joy. It is empowering to know we can contribute our strong able bodies, powerful minds, and great spirits to helping others. We stay socially distant but share joy and laughter. Having the energy of children around when people are missing their own grandchildren is healing. It has

turned into a mission to continue to support people and build community wherever we are.” All while intentionally trying to move off a money exchange and replacing it with a love and time exchange.

This unconventional life offers the family much that they love: An authentic connection to the earth. An opportunity to adapt, which is useful in the face of the real impacts of climate change. A chance to be outside every day and meet new people. It has been good.

Sounds idyllic? Maybe not always, Courtney acknowledges.

“Our 1987 van posed major hurdles at the beginning of the journey. We broke down more than we were moving for the first month and had to install a new alternator and exhaust system. Bad gas had us waiting seven hours in a parking lot in Alleghany State Park in PA. for the tow truck that could tow us 70 miles out of a forest. The experience taught us to not expect anything. To be okay with telling the boys, ‘We don’t know.’ And to feel gratitude when things go right.”

Managing COVID through 25 states has been challenging. “We are aware of and very cautious of COVID. Every state handles it differently. Nebraska and Georgia were nerve-wracking. They had a lot more COVID and far fewer precautions. The unapologetic blatant racism was also more prevalent. “We didn’t feel comfortable going further south and scurried back to New England where we felt evidence of a lot more of the progressive values that we connect with. BLM sign and Rainbow flags and free testing for COVID signs are all over the island. We are movement people.”

“We’ve had incredible conversations with people of many different socio-economic circumstances. It has been eye-opening, seeing how everyone is handling this time. Some people we meet greet us as modern-day troubadours, *Come, tell us how the world is while we are sheltered in place*. Others have called us modern-day prophets, spreading the word, and being of service to others. The experience has been real for us. We feel this is the way that we can make best use of who we are during this time of upheaval.”

Oliver, the oldest son, has declared he’s content to live on the road forever. His parents know that could change in a few short years. But Courtney says they’ve been given a gift of very focused time together, a precious pause in life to be with their children. “Before COVID I worked all the time. John was gone evenings with theater. The time we had to spend as a foursome was limited. Now, the four of us are together almost all the time. That has been valuable, strengthening, and important for communication.”

Courtney says that the year has been a intentional practice in releasing fear. “Our mantra has been *Fearlessness is not the absence of fear, it is feeling afraid and doing it anyway*. We are trying to lead a fearless life.”

“If anyone else is struggling still, I’d love to share with them what we’ve discovered: I’ve come to realize that stuff isn’t what makes us happy. The most joy and satisfaction in life comes from being outside in Nature and being of service to others. Pain shifts and we begin to heal both the global trauma and our personal trauma when we volunteer to be of service and find ways to take

care of our planet. I want to be able to talk about our experiences more, and guide people towards that healing.”

John and Courtney ask to “pass on our gratitude to the FUSD community we hold so dear.” (If you would like to follow Courtney, John and the boys on their journey, link to Instagram: @theotherhighway).

**IN MEMORIAM:**

John’s grandmother died in April, 2020 and in the era of COVID, there was no service. Her name was Louise Brandon (94) of Adams County. May she live in memory.