



# **Reflections on 2021 Faithful Fools**

Submitted to  
Our Board  
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## **Carmen Barsody**

To bring to a close 2021 and enter 2022 with a team of committed, experienced and talented individuals can only be described as a gift. I look around the circle and feel grateful as I pay attention to our conversations, to each one's insights grounded in experience, and each one's genuine care for our mission, as well as for the communities in which we are living it out. There is a strong life force beating in me that for awhile had waned in these COVID times.

### **Organizational Development:**

A primary focus for me continues to be bringing forward and sharing the many aspects of the work and the relationships that I have carried over these 24 years. Leah's work on organizing and transferring data into Network for Good has given us an opportunity to share who our donors are and make notes that will allow people beyond us to know how they came to be connected to Faithful Fools. I have so appreciated working and learning with Leah through the development of the new data base. I have valued supporting the work she has been doing with Anton and Daisy to write down the procedures and processes for accounting. It is a valiant work that serves us now and, I trust, for years to come.

I continue to listen carefully and pay attention to what is required for us to grow, not only beyond founders, but also as an organization begun by two women who came out of predominantly white systems. I personally have lived through the pain and struggles of being a women-founded organization in a white male world, being excluded, dismissed, undervalued, and considered naïve. Our staff and volunteers over the years, and currently, lead out of personal experiences of being homeless, struggling with mental health, and experiencing fear, violence and job loss due to not fitting in the gender norms. As Faithful Fools we are now being called do the work of racial and economic justice. We were founded as a charitable and educational organization and our work personally and organizationally is one of always learning.

### **Walk 'n Roll:**

A highlight of this year was celebrating my 60th birthday with Walk n' Roll. It was a wonderful gift to walk with so many folks and to see how people throughout the world engaged with Sam's brilliant idea of Flat Carmen. Leah was stellar in keeping track of many details and inspiring our social media posts. Sam brought to life the blog on our web page to share pictures of the real-time walks and of Flat Carmen showing up in many places. Thank you to

everyone who was a part of this grand endeavor, including Ade Kroll, Sharon Weld and Jackie Hider who helped us in thanking people. We exceeded the goal of \$60,000!!

### **Accompaniment:**

Beyond the overall organizational and administrative work, the accompaniment work has been primary. As COVID continues affecting us all, we see its consequences in various institutions and in people's lives and situations. We continue to work with and be mentors for people who have been connected with us for many years, as well as working with new people who have reached out to us. We often muse that our days are directed by the knocks on the door. That often is what happens. We are here in the community, close to the ground and more accessible to community members who need support. Sometimes the knocks on the door have led to getting engaged in very complex situations with people who are being threatened with evictions or need someone to help untangle a relational and/or systemic mess. Some, it is a one-time moment of listening or assistance with a phone call. For other people, we serve as a secure place to leave important documents or copies of ID or birth certificates to be easily accessed when needed. We continue doing lots of one-one-one work in people's rooms, and have become a reliable moving company for people getting into housing or moving into better housing. There are no resources in the city that offer moving support, neither paying for it or doing the actual moving. We engaged our long-time friends and Fools, Thomas Brown and Alex Darr to help us move one individual who had lots of furniture and boxes which required a moving truck.

Some community members are struggling with severe and terminal illnesses which requires close and frequent accompaniment to medical appointments and serving as liaisons with medical providers, as well as helping them manage daily needs of shopping and food preparation. Also, some folks have been vulnerable to theft and phone scams and that has required many hours of helping setting up new bank accounts and assuring that their social security benefits get redirected, not to mention the unwieldy world of new usernames and passwords and verifying one's identity.

Our accompaniment work is team work and requires coordination and communication with each other. We have weekly meetings to talk about the individual needs and talk through situations, as well as clarify who is with whom on any given day. We are grateful for Meg Mcguire who continues to volunteer once a week, as well as the gift of Amy Westphal who volunteered with us for the Fall. I am grateful for Linda's companionship in this work throughout the year and the long-time relationship she has with so many people, not to mention her skills and healing presence. Though Silena will have

a focus on our educational work, the experience and connections she brings in terms of access to city resources and contacts, as well as getting people into housing, addressing issues of eviction, etc. is invaluable. She already is deep into the accompaniment work. Leah is available to assist wherever she can, and that is a wonderful support. Leah will work with the accompaniment team to help track what it is we do, with whom, etc. to make more visible the many kinds of work, the variety of people, and the many ways we invest in individuals through daily accompaniment. Such information can be used to apply for grant and other forms of funding.

### **Nicaragua:**

It has been a painful year in Nicaragua with the ongoing political situation, as well as the death of Heidi Meza, the founder of Colegio San Francisco, the school we help support. Her husband, Max, and her niece who was her office assistant, are carrying on the work of the school. Mercedes Gonzales, the leader of the community work, continues providing support to neighbors and Faithful Fools in Managua and Condega. There has been much illness and death. It has been difficult not to be able to travel to Nicaragua due to Covid and the political situation. It has been three years this month since any of us have been able to visit our Nicaraguan Fools.

I am able to connect with some of them through Zoom calls and Whats App, which has been important to all of us.

### **Holidays:**

We are being proactive at taking advantage of natural days off by observing national holidays. At the same time, we have recognized that we need to stagger our time off, always having one or two people on call. There are people who count on us and for whom we are emergency contacts, thus we cannot all be gone at the same time. We have been able to ask some neighbors to check in on each other, and Jesse comes to the Fools' Court to feed the fish.

### **Fools' Court:**

It is a historic moment to end the year with the Fools' Court being completely paid off. The last loan was held by the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls. In December I received an e-mail from Sr. Carolyn Law, our treasurer, who let me know that my community had forgiven the remainder of the loan and also reimbursed us the payments we had made from October 2021 onward. The whole story is one of trust and generosity and we will work on telling it. I also hope that we can gather on April 1st this year to burn the

amortization schedules. It would be grand to invite some early Faithful Fools who still walk upon this earth who were a part of those early days. Stay tuned...

The building not only serves Fools, but also neighbors and other organizations who need a place to gather or do zoom calls. Currently Skywatchers is using our building as their meeting place for staff meetings and their ensemble. They now use our address to receive their mail as they do not have a place of their own.

**Grateful! Grateful! Grateful!** is what I feel, for every being who keeps the Fools strong and relevant in very challenging times. Thank you is what I say to you all. We are two dozen years old as an organization and we move boldly toward our 25th anniversary in 2023!

## Leah Laxamana

When I joined the Fools team in late 2020 at the height of the pandemic, we did not know what to expect for 2021 but we knew what we hoped for and did our best to be attuned to what was happening and respond in the best way we could. Fast forward to now and I would not have been able to predict how the year unfolded. For one, our budget was way off...but in a good way! We projected income conservatively and planned for a deficit but the pennies seemed to have extra magic as we ended 2021 in the positive. A significant amount of donation came from unexpected sources with one funder even giving multiple times, just because. The Walk 'n Roll campaign hit a plateau at one point making it seem unlikely to reach the \$60,000 goal, but the donations suddenly kept flowing in and we made close to \$72,000 and counting as we got a couple of folks to opt to start giving monthly!

The abundance also came in the form of jugglers who graced the Fools with their presence and gifts at critical times, none of them really planned in advance. Julian from Colombia helped for a few months at the Court with anything that entailed a hammer or a paintbrush. Bianca and Marvin visited during the summer at a time when accompaniment became extra intense. Anton became a pinch hitter when we faced software challenges and continues to help us update accounting and finance procedures and provide training. Last year ended with Silena joining the team, greatly enhancing our capacity with her skills, wisdom, and life experiences. All this support brings to mind when Carmen and Sam finally got ceilings for their bedrooms earlier in their year – this to me is a metaphor for all the pennies and people that gave much needed cover for the Fools during an extra challenging time.

Having spent a full year and some change at Fools, I've experienced the ebb and flow that manifested in various ways. The previously mentioned coming and going of jugglers also happened with our neighbors - one person we accompanied heavily ultimately traveled back and forth to Reno to be with relatives to take care of her health, while others left the Tenderloin upon securing better housing, being moved to assisted living, or passed on to another realm altogether. As familiar people transitioned, new folks found us whether on a list for community service options, through Homeless Outreach Team referral or just knocking on our door. There were also the countless community calls mobilizing around COVID response, new resources, and various calls to actions that have tapered down, as well as the stark difference on our sidewalk going from one of the densest areas in the neighborhood to feeling like a ghost town due to new community safety policies being enforced (a question that looms in our head is whose safety exactly is being prioritized by this action). The state of the physical and mental health of people all around us have become the

indicator of how volatile these times are going from crisis to stability and back again. But with the ongoing changes, Fools have remained an anchor amidst them all.

Even when faced with a difficulty or even a tragedy, I've experienced how Fools draw from each other and its community of supporters what is needed to regain stability and keep going. This fortitude, I believe, comes from the thoughtfulness and deliberateness with which Fools choose to be and move about in the world. Being flexible with details of the "what" of the work, but being solid on the "how" or the values we are grounded on I think makes a world of difference and perhaps explains the good karma that we continue to experience as a community. A powerful moment I had amidst a tedious and prolonged process of importing data into the Fools' new database was realizing the extent of the faithfulness of multiple givers over the years. As I reviewed donors' giving history, it was a delight to see the same names come up again and again, some of them being the very neighbors we accompany or peers we collaborate with in the Tenderloin. This gave me a better appreciation of the cycle of generosity that has fueled the Fools' presence, allowing us to extend the same steadfastness to the community.

In the beginning of this new year when the pandemic continues to rage, political divisions ensue, and a new, yet familiar sense of uncertainty and vulnerability loom as the Tenderloin is placed in a state of emergency, I will choose to focus on the positive and the small things I can act on instead of being overwhelmed. Even within and from the Fools Court, there are plenty of opportunities to do meaningful things - cultivate learning, refine systems, find treasures in the archives, and strengthen relationships with the team, board, and other community members. I look forward to providing my own form of steadiness to help the team flourish in their respective areas - from continuing to help manage the flow of pennies, finding answers to Karrol's multiple inquiries a day, amplifying the Fools' stories online, and providing ad hoc services from refilling pill cases, appointment drop off/pick-ups and decluttering SROs. And in between all these important things, I'm very motivated to help continually make space for creativity, stillness, reflection and laughter! Because what's the point of being a Fool when there is no joy that comes with living in truth all the time?

## Linda Chrisman

Reflecting on these last 6 months, my head spins, words vanish, and my mind stops. There are too many changes big and small, within the Tenderloin, with the people around me, and personally to recount. Instead, I'm reminded of Carmen's counsel that as the world around us becomes more frenetic, it's wise to move more slowly, to take time to discern what is vital.

What is the real need? What are the available resources? What does the person I'm with want? Am I imposing what I would like to see happen onto the situation? These are some of the questions I continually ask myself as I grow in the art of accompaniment. These questions also extend to the Fools presence within the Tenderloin community. What does the community need? What are our resources as Fools? What other resources exist? What does the community want?

Most of my time these past months has been with accompaniment. There was a period when it seemed that everyone we knew in the community was facing a health crisis. Now the dominant concern seems to be safety and housing. Some people have been able to move out of an SRO and into new apartments in different neighborhoods. Others are actively trying to move. There are also several people I (and others) regularly accompany who continue to live with debilitating pain, illness, and addiction.

I'm reminded of the words in the Fools mission statement "we are called to a life of presence."

Again and again, I see the difference that our presence makes in someone's life and in the community. Both as an organization and as individuals we offer a still point, and an affirmation of "each person's incredible worth." We are advocates both through presence and action.

Personally, I'm appreciating the deepening of relationships that can only happen over time. It's because of my 13-year relationship with one woman that she now allows me into her room to help with the clutter clearing the hotel manager is demanding. And, there are some conversations that only Carmen can initiate, based on 2 decades of knowing someone. Trust grows slowly over time with consistency of presence.

As of January 3, I am a three quarters time employee of the Fools rather than a consultant. This change enables me to be more consistently available for the people I currently accompany and to expand my relationships in the community. I'm excited by this change since I have long wished to more involved with the Fools



Silena Layne

## **A new kind of program director role here at the Fools**

On October 18th 2021, an abrupt transition into a new role here at the fools emerged. After spending the last five years in organizational leadership and management as a program director with leading agencies in San Francisco and in the Tenderloin neighborhood, combating the housing crisis and supporting families impacted by homelessness... walking around the corner, across the street, and up the stairs to join the Faithful Fools Team of Three... in a full-time capacity felt too good to be true. Though leaving my role at a family shelter was terrifying, sorrowful and unpredictable, the warm and loving welcome to join the Faithful Fools Team was exciting, loving and filled with mystery.

Traditionally, where agency structures and policies are presented to a new hire, my newly founded role at the Faithful Fools and the job title for the position was unscripted and not the priority during the onboarding process here at the fools (seriously, the topic is still up for discussion).

My prior position required that I work in person and more intensely than ever before due to the health protocols and CDC guidelines of the pandemics sheltering in place mandates that started in March 2019. As director my responsibility to keep the safety and wellness of everyone housed and working at our shelter became imminent and keeping COVID exposure limited to non-existing was the top priority each day. This reduced onsite staff to only working 2-3 days in person, daily COVID screenings, monthly calendar revisions for case management meetings, less services and support for families, fewer housing and employment options for our community members and a ton more work for me. The work week instantly grew to 6 - 7 days onsite, testing for COVID twice a week, strongly recommending folks (repeatedly) to get vaccinated and coordinating daily food and medical resources for more than five dozen children and adults who were sheltering in place and trusting me to keep them safe. This work exhausted me and there was no end in sight....

Through frequent calls to and onsite dinner dates with Carmen, Leah and Sam over the last year, coming to the Fools ready to work in the community and dive right in was a no brainer. During my first week, there were repeated reminders from the team to "rest" and remember that the work will still be there and will get done.

We were also in the final weeks of the Flat Carmen Walk 'n Roll Birthday Fundraiser so I took the advice of my wise and foolish colleagues and exhaled. I spent the onboarding time in the first few weeks writing thank

you notes, meeting new community members and old friends of the Fools, cleaning units, assisting residents with accompaniment to appointments and learning more about the educational leg of the Fools' ministry and how I can contribute. With each knock on the door, I was able to form new relationships with Tenderloin residents that requested support, stopped by to just say hello and I welcomed the new adventure. We've had two street retreats and resurrected three school immersion partnerships for 2022 since my arrival. I learned that you can start a sentence with "this shit is crazy" and it actually ends with a loving compliment to the Fools Team for standing in solidarity and marching to City Hall to protest the Containment Zone in our neighborhood that, simply put, moves drug dealers from one block to the next. My few short months being onsite at the Fools has been rewarding and worthwhile in so many ways. I love relearning the traits of the Fools that I remember seeing, hearing and feeling when I was first introduced by Kay in 2011. We laugh, comfort, love and be...without judgement and with our whole hearts. Our Fools Team is made up of a collective group of educated warriors, hopeful spirits, worthy and worthwhile skills, personalities and gifts...I am so honored to be welcomed and sharing in this space after never knowing it in a work environment before.

When I think about how the pandemic is impacting my life, the people and communities around me and the world, I can say with certainty that my heart aches at the unprecedented yet inhumane way in which many are being treated. The scientists, politicians, and policy makers have remained the loudest voices at the forefront of the discussions, news feeds, zoom meetings and presentations on "the solution" all over the planet. While as a person who is still very much "in touch" and able to be in community, the matter seems clearly best resolved by sitting, listening and engaging with the individuals who are seeking our support.

I am truly thrilled to be here at the Fools in this season, in COMMUNITY. The most exciting part of joining the Faithful Fools as a staff person (not just as a board member) is the liberating and direct ways I am able to connect with many people, in many places and in many situations. Nonprofit organizations have lots of "red tape" that allow us to provide "a service" and not necessarily build a relationship that is trusting and sustainable. It has been exciting to share parts of my story without fear of backlash, call a community member on my personal cell phone without breaking an agency policy and speak candidly with a person about a joyful or painful experience and just listen. The exchanges are humbling and humorous, they challenge me and remind me to chill out too. From picking up mail and police reports to cooking meals and caring for cancer patients... our work and ways of connecting with the community is invaluable. One of my expectations and aspirations for this new journey with the Fools is to stay aligned and in tune with the spirit of community. I love being a fool and will remain faithful to the work for as long as they will have me.

Now, though the title and the timing of my arrival to the Fools is still “a work in progress,” my reason for being here aligns wonderfully with what we as Faithful Fools truly believe, “we seek to meet people where they are” and though this is a service and resource we offer to countless community members...Carmen, Sam and the Fools Team has generously and faithfully offered up our mission to me as well.

In service and community,

Silena

## Sam Dennison

And now my first 10 years with Faithful Fools are just about completed.

In February 2011, Carmen and I met at Sabbath House on Portland Ave in Minneapolis. I was looking to move away from administration and assessment in higher education in order to grow creatively and find greater meaning in my work. My career had been divided between teaching at the University of Minnesota and working in the for-profit sector of higher education. Both were challenging and satisfying. It had been a good career, but it was time for a change, and a change I found. By August of 2011, I was moved into the Fools Court and starting a new chapter of my life. It seems appropriate given the multitude of forces bearing down on the Tenderloin and the Fools to take this moment to reflect not only on the last 12 months, but on the last 10 years.

As the path I walked became apparent over the following months and years, several facets of the Fools' founding acted as compass points for me. The first was the fact that Faithful Fools is incorporated as a "charitable and educational" institution. Carmen and Kay both expressed a longing to deepen the educational aspect of the Fools' charter. Learning as a way of life was important to Kay and learning through engagement was second nature to Carmen. The Fools had been a classroom for Richard Kamler of USF and for Rob Neilson's Nine at Night project. The library surrounding the kitchen was and is a testament to the Fools' love of learning and respect for engaging with the wisdom and discovery of diverse thinkers from around the world. The time was ripe to broaden our work in this area.

So within a few years, we applied for and got funding to formalize our educational activities as the Institute for Street Level Learning. We grew our relationships with a variety of learning institutions from middle schools to medical schools. We also focused more attention on how we learn and how we support learning among the many different people around us. From reflection to street retreats and think tanks, we have created a wide variety of venues for all of us to become and remain life-long learners. To me, this is a manifestation of the call to "acknowledge each human's incredible worth." One of the most fundamental human rights we can name is the right to have our talents nurtured and valued. In our commitment to learning, collaboratively and equitably, we committed ourselves to the realization of this precious human desire to become fully who we are.

One cornerstone of our pedagogical practice is to ask ourselves, "How is my wellbeing bound up with yours and the people around us?" Whether we are discussing street level drug dealing or trauma theory, we center this question so our inquiries remain concrete . . . as solid and concrete as the sidewalk

and curbs that define the streets. Abstraction is essential for understanding the larger social forces that shape our lives, but it also has the potential to separate us from the human consequences of what we do or espouse. An important example of that looms large for us these days in the recent Mayoral State of Emergency Declaration. That declaration defines the health crisis of drug overdoses on the streets as the tragedy that it is. But surrounding the declaration, there is also a great deal of confusion about what a public health response could or should look like, with many officials (including the Mayor) falling into coercive and carceral language.

The distinction between understanding street conditions as a criminal rather than a health crisis is abstract in some ways, but the consequences of pursuing criminal remedies rather than public health strategies is devastating for both individuals and the community. The difference between enforcement strategies and public health strategies becomes urgent when we envision those whom we love going to jail when they need to find low barrier health resources. It makes a big difference to all of us if our neighbors are treated as unique individuals who deserve good health and wellbeing instead of inherently dangerous people who are prone to criminality. This is not an “academic” debate; our wellbeing along with our neighbors depends on which point of view prevails.

Our organizational purpose is to “foster awareness and analysis of deteriorating social conditions in the United States and the world at large, seen from the level of the streets, and to facilitate individual and collective responses thereto.” This purpose is the second facet of the Fools’ founding that guides me. It grounds our educational activities in our work as advocates. What we study and investigate has to mean something, it has to be grounded in this purpose of analyzing and responding to deteriorating social conditions. Learning on its own is not enough. It is a beginning point. Just as reflection is a beginning point but it must be engaged with action recursively or it tends towards the kind of individualism that perpetuates the status quo. That is why learning must change how we engage in our community and how we engage in community must foster our desire to learn more.

A specific case in point is our relationship with anti-racism work. In the earliest days of the Fools, the communal focus on each individual’s incredible worth created programs and activities that brought people together as artists and activists, allowing race, class, and gender to be part of the relationship but not the whole of it. I believe that as a community founded primarily by people shaped by white institutions and cultures, there was an awareness of racism but not a clear articulation of how racism functions or influences us. When I came ten years ago, the Fools were just beginning a relationship with Micah Fraiser and out of that relationship over a 3 or 4 year period of time, we began

to understand how and why we have to keep racism, especially anti-Black racism, central to our analysis and response to what is happening around us. We have continued that work through our relationships with people like Bianca Huerta and Marvin Fourte as well as through our work with Skywatchers and UCSF. We are challenging the systems and assumptions around us even as the people around us are challenging us to question our own assumptions about how racism shows up in our lives. We are continuing to learn, and our learning is strengthening our work as advocates for justice.

And here there is the convergence between my personal path and that of the Fools. Ten years ago, I arrived having done a fair amount of work around diversity and inclusion, but I wouldn't say I understood how those two things are different from confronting racism. In fact, I don't think I even understood that diversity and inclusion are not enough if we don't engage with the history and reality of racism. I didn't have a sense of systems and institutions. When I first arrived, I spent a lot of time thinking about why so many people living on the streets of the TL are Black, but there was much I just couldn't understand. I knew about systems of segregation, but not systems of oppression. I knew about racial bias, but not how deeply it shapes every facet of US culture. Then people like Yeilbonze Johnson and Jesse Johnson taught me ask who isn't in the room, and people like Micah Fraiser and Dr. Camara Jones taught me to look for the barriers that keep people out of the room: How to do the visible and invisible systems function in our daily lives?

It's humbling to learn and then relearn how entrenched and resilient structures of oppression are. It's even more humbling to discover in oneself the very thoughts and structures that make oppression so intractable. But it is in community that we can experience being humbled without being humiliated, and we experience learning as growth. The work of anti-racism begins when we notice how racism is functioning—who is left out, but noticing isn't enough. We have to confront the policies that perpetuate racism and we have to be committed to dismantling institutional practices of oppression. My own commitment and energy for this work has grown over the last ten years. As a community, Faithful Fools is also growing in its commitment to changing and confronting personal and institutional racism.

With that work under way, the time was right to hire Leah and then a year later, to hire Silena. These experiences of learning and acknowledging our own failures prepared the ground for us hire new people. We were ready to pay living wages and to adapt our working conditions to promote wellbeing. As Fools, we should acknowledge that this is the slowest hiring process that anyone could ever imagine. Not only did it take us years to imagine who we needed and what skills. It took just as long to be ready to support and grow with the people we so very much wanted to work with. It took a long time, but we did it

and we couldn't be more fortunate or more grateful for these two unique and precious Fools. Preparing ourselves to welcome new people also prepared us to expand our relationship with a long-time Fool. As so it came about that Linda, too, came more fully into our daily lives.

That process of getting to know Leah, Linda, and Silena over the course of years, and in turn, for them to know the Fools over a long time gives us all of room to be human and to figure out how we fit together. No, it's not an efficient process, but it is how community grows and we like that. The trust and relationships we are building are giving us a chance to be open with one another. Race, gender, class, age, experiences of implicit and explicit violence, different forms of trauma . . . we have begun to talk about these things. It's not always easy but I can tell you that these conversations are changing us, and changing us for the better.

To go back to Octavia Butler and the quote we have on the Fools Fables from 2015, "All that you touch, you change, and all that you change, changes you." We are building a community of Fools, conversation by conversation, day by day, moment by moment. We are touching each other with our life stories and we are being changed by what we hear and what we speak in the company of our fellow Fools.

In doing this, we are creating possibilities for deep social change while experiencing deep personal change. I believe that is that we Fools are asked to do in this life. I am grateful for these last 10 years and I look forward to all the years I have left to be part of this emence and grand adventure at street level.