



Faithful Fools: Parish of the streets

Rev. Kay, Sister Carmen's ministry crosses social boundaries, links rich with poor

BY BRIAN RINKER

IN the heart of the Tenderloin is Faithful Fools Street Ministry. The two-story purple building at 234 Hyde St. is in an area affected by drugs, homelessness and poverty, but Faithful Fools is a place of hope, healing and love. Co-founders Rev. Kay Jorgenson and Sister Carmen Barsody are trying to change the world one person at a time.

The Fools is a parish of sorts. Its mission statement reads: "On the streets we find our common humanity, through which celebration and healing occur."

It offers yoga, meditation, Bible readings and discussion groups. However, the Faithful Fools' most famous programs are their street retreats, where people from outside the neighborhood can experience living on the streets. The retreats begin with one-day outings that end in the evening, followed by a reflection and discussion session. The one-day retreats are in part to ready participants for a weeklong experience when they go out alone and fend for themselves. They start on the steps of Cathedral Hill and descend into the Tenderloin.

"Walk toward the pain. Befriend it, and you will be healed," Rev. Kay says.

Each retreat costs \$45 to \$200, with a sliding scale for affordability. All other programs are free. The Faithful Fools is supported by donations and grants, pretty much operating day to day, hand to mouth.

Jorgenson, 80, and Barsody, 50, named their ministry Faithful Fools because the fool is a link, able to cross boundaries between rich and poor. The fool is always in between.

"We are the fools," Jorgenson says. Their goal is to create a community without boundaries or class.

The Faithful Fools' programs include writing, poetry and artist workshops. People can come in off the street and relax or talk with someone. The Fools' No. 1 priority is building personal relationships. Yet, sometimes people bring their street attitude inside and situations get heated.

On a recent Friday morning, Jorgenson was upstairs in the library drinking coffee. An argument erupted in the discussion room. The rising voice of Stone, a homeless man who is a frequent visitor, could be heard booming down the hall. Stone was yelling at Jorgenson's 52-year-old daughter, Andrea, who helps out.

"You can't tell me to leave! You don't even live here. You live in a big house in Diamond Heights!" Stone roared. Standing in the middle of the room yelling, he is wearing a long dirty blazer, ball cap and dark aviator sunglasses. His face is tanned. His beard is unkempt.

Jorgenson gets up and shuffles down the hall. Short, she walks hunched over, making her appear more diminutive. Her presence may seem meek, but the woman exudes compassion and strength. Into the discussion room she went, and her presence commanded respect. Without a word she looked disapprovingly across the room at Stone. Instantly he stopped his tirade, heaved his cloth grocery bags full of knickknacks over his shoulder and made ready to leave. But not before apologizing to Jorgenson.

For people who live in cramped SROs, and for people who don't have a room, the streets become



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Rev. Kay Jorgenson (with microphone) and Sister Carmen Barsody greet an overflow crowd at the Faithful Fools to celebrate printing of the fourth edition of the Tenderloin anthology, "Living in the Land of the Dead."

their living room. Sometimes tensions are strained and people get frustrated. But no one has ever been violent or stolen from the Fools, they say.

"Space is a privilege," says Barsody, referring to life in the Tenderloin. "We provide the space and encouragement, and allow people to find their own potential."

In mid-July, Faithful Fools released its fourth anthology of creative writing and visual arts titled appropriately, *Living in the Land of the Dead*.

"The arts are a primary source of connecting," Barsody says.

Richard Kamlar, chair of the visual arts department at the University of San Francisco, is a Faithful Fools regular. He teaches "artist citizenry," a collaborative effort between an artist and the needs of a community. Every semester for 12 years, Professor Kamlar has brought his students down to the Faithful Fools from USF, another rich institution up on a hill. Kamlar says artists think outside the box, they have the imagination to solve problems that seem insolvable.

"The students begin to understand the need for art in a range of communities," says Kamlar. The students then reflect on their experience at the Faithful Fools, and overall, he says, his students consider it one of their best experiences ever.

Jorgenson belongs to the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco and was the Unitarians' social justice minister from 2002 until she retired in 2006. In 2009, the Unitarian church bestowed on her the title of minister emeritus.

Rev. Fred Rabidoux, Unitarian minister for pastoral, said the church is very supportive of Jorgenson and Barsody's work. Many church members have gone on retreats and some have interned at the Fools.

Rabidoux, a member of the Fools' first board of directors, found the Fools' retreats enlightening and profound experiences.

"It is amazing to think that this ministry has existed this long affecting people's lives," said Rabidoux. "It's remarkable."

Barsody, a Franciscan nun from Little Falls, Minn., spent seven years in a convent in Managua, Nicaragua. Living among the poverty, gangs and domestic violence, she learned firsthand what it felt like to be in the middle of the action. She saw strength and commitment in people who didn't have their basic needs met yet still got up and celebrated life every day.

"The human commitment to life inspired me," said Barsody. From that moment on, the struggles of the impoverished would be her struggles too.

Both women, though dedicated members of religious organizations, maintain that the Faithful Fools is not a religious organization, but a charitable and educational tax-exempt nonprofit.

Both are from Minnesota. They formed their alliance in 1998 on the streets of the Tenderloin. Jorgenson had come out West from Minneapolis, where she had been a minister in a Lutheran church and a member of a mime troupe before that.

Barsody was on sabbatical, living in the Berkeley hills, when they were introduced. Both were concerned about the great divide between rich and poor and that chasm's attendant prejudices. They wanted to do something about it.

"We needed to put our faith where our mouths are, so to speak," says Jorgenson.

April 1, 1998, they declared the founding day of the Faithful Fools Street Ministry. Yet it took two more years of walking the streets and conducting countless street retreats before they decided it was time to house their parish. In 2000, over teriyaki chicken inside their makeshift office at All Star Donuts and Burgers on Golden Gate Avenue and Hyde Street, Rev. Kay and Sister Carmen threw their fate to the wind. They walked outside, took a right on Golden Gate and wandered around, only taking right turns, until they were standing outside their present-day location. At the time it was a copy shop owned and operated by Ramesh Patel, a Tenderloin star of old.

Patel already knew who Jorgenson and Barsody were, and he offered them his business and building for \$650,000. Patel didn't want a down payment, only a handshake, but the pair gave him all the money they had, a whopping \$500. A neighborhood businessman who found out about the deal offered Patel \$100,000 more, but he refused, says Barsody. She remembers Ramesh's response, "Greed tempts, but my conscience is clear." Patel trusted them and was patient.

During the next seven months after the Fools and Patel made their deal, Jorgenson and Barsody managed to scrape together \$150,000 from donations and low-interest loans from Catholic nuns. Now the Fools have only \$100,000 left to pay, they say.

Since the beginning, Jorgenson and Barsody have lived at The Fools, but recently Jorgenson has moved in with her daughter to make room for someone new.

Throughout the years they have embraced and accepted the community for what it is. They understand the duality of human nature and try not to judge.

"Our lives are simply a response to the needs that present themselves," says Barsody.

And as long as there is person with a story to tell, there will be someone at The Fools wanting to listen. ■



PHOTO BY BRIAN RINKER

Sign outside Fools' building.

TENDERLOIN STARS



THERE are 30,000 of us in the Tenderloin, each unique in special ways. Central City Extra's new regular feature, *Tenderloin Stars*, captures the personality, humanity and, often, strangeness of our remarkably diverse populace. These are the people who make our neighborhood great.



Brian Rinker writes for The Guardsman at City College.