

Street retreats raw drama for haves, have-nots

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K.J.: That's a good way to put it. The crux of what we do is the street retreats, usually two or three a month. More than 1,000 people have been on retreats now.

S.C.: We begin the retreats on Cathedral Hill at the Unitarian Church so that we're consciously walking down from where the majority of us come from, which is a place of privilege and concentrated wealth. Walking down the hill, we're forced to become more attentive to that fine line between wealth and poverty.

K.J.: If it's a one-day retreat, everybody separates and does the retreat on their own. If it's a four-day retreat, people group together, and often some of the homeless become our guides. Those who have lived on the street teach us something that is not just statistics. It's a very different inside look.

S.C.: We work with what comes to us [on the street] — moving toward the hospital with somebody, or giving food to Carl out on the sidewalk. We move with the need that the person presents.

K.J.: We feel that peace comes from real experiences, which also give us a more authentic voice when we move into advocacy. When we confront City Hall, we know that the

truth is that some people are unfairly treated. There isn't enough housing. The city's responsibility for its citizens isn't being met, and we know that not from what we've read or heard, but from our real experience with people. We use that truth to confront those in power.

Bowers: So you're trying to give more privileged people a visceral experience of what it may be like to live on the streets, and street people a chance to know that more privileged people are actually human beings who can possibly care about them. So this is like an educational institution?

K.J.: We're charitable and educational. We're not a religious entity in any way.

Bowers: You appear to be influenced by Zen.

S.C.: Keith Walker, who is a Fool, practiced Zen for many years. He came to us through the street retreat, drawn by an article on us in the Chronicle, and he said, "I'd like to begin sitting here. . ."

K.J.: And that's the way things start — not us projecting a particular vision or goal, but being an open place for people looking for meaning in their lives, or wanting to work out where they are with the world. As Sister Carmen said, the street retreat has become for some people a spiritual practice.

S.C.: Visceral was a good word. You learn viscerally what it's like to be pushed to the edge.

K.J.: Last year, there were 14 people who spent four days on these streets without money having to find places to eat, sleep, pee, whatever they had to do. Then eight of us from that group went down to Nicaragua where Carmen had her ministry and spent 10 days living in the barrios. That's when you begin to see the economic relationship, that we are not isolated, and that we are truly dependent on one another globally.

S.C.: When you know human beings and you know their names, you begin to care if policies are being made that are detrimental to their lives. Some people say, "Care not cash, who cares?" So we sit here and watch the effects of that on people. Or the effect of laws, such as if you have a felony then you can't get food stamps. If someone wants to turn his life around, he is excluded from an important piece in rebuilding his life.

K.J.: We try to keep the continuity going in order to take people over to the next step.

S.C.: We knew one young man who lived in Golden Gate Park and carried our phone card in his pocket. When he hung himself, the authorities called us, and we ended up

being the connection with his family in Alaska. We really become a link at many levels. We become your mother, brother, sister, which is what St. Francis said to his brothers. Some call us grandmothers, others call us aunts, and some call us godmothers. They all give us names depending on what kind of place we filter them.

Bowers: What part does your copy shop play in this?

K.J.: The Copy Center is our relationship with our neighbors. Eventually, it would be wonderful if this shop could become a place where the spoken and the written word for this neighborhood could be heard for writers and poets.

S.C.: We could create the Fool's Market Press. We open our hands as something calls you in your life. It's about trying to make possible what some people think is impossible.

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I'm a writer. I trust little that is not beyond words when it comes to making an impression on my soul. These two foolish angels have the right idea, and the only thing standing in their way of helping some shipwrecked sailor on these streets is himself, who often is lost to himself and confused.

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On Saturday, May 23, I got to the Unitarian Universalist Church at 1187 Franklin at 8:30 a.m., ready to embark on a one-day Faithful Fools Ministry street retreat. Most of the dozen people participating were American Buddhists. I studied Zen and Tibetan Buddhism for years, so this retreat was especially interesting to me.

I took a seat in the meeting room and, in my capacity as a responsible journalist, began grilling the participants who showed up. Name? Background? Why are you here today?

Then Sister Carmen — stocky with short black hair and loving eyes, just the type of woman I would have trusted as a child — entered the room. She asked me to confer with her in private. I sensed alarm in her eyes. I haven't remained alive in the Tenderloin this long from lack of intuition.

I thought, "What have I done now?"

She gently explained the ins and outs of the street retreat. It was a spiritual exercise, and if I exposed myself as a journalist, I would affect participants like a camera lens, altering their behavior and perceptions and making them self-conscious. That made sense, I said.

But I asked her what I was supposed to do. I live in the Tenderloin, walk around there all the time. I've got a wastebasket full of Tenderloin spiritual experiences. I write short stories about the Tenderloin. I'm working on a novel. I might as well be on a permanent street retreat. What do I do? Have I only me to write about?

We returned to the meeting room. I was suffering a minor anxiety attack, figuring my career in journalism was over. People were asked to introduce themselves, and when my turn came, I kept a low profile, concealing my notebook. I said I lived in the Tenderloin and if they went out there, they'd better watch themselves. I'd been mugged, I told them, threatened with a claw hammer, my wallet stolen. If you hang out on a street corner too long, I added, someone will ask you what you want, and they're not offering you a spiritual experience.

Sister Carmen's alarm bell sounded again inside the pupils of her loving eyes.

She very sensibly cut my 100 proof vodka with water, and assured the participants that all would be well.

Then we sang a few uplifting songs, I think, but I don't quite remember. I tend to have a stroke when people ask me to sing uplifting songs. Actually, I've never been involved with any decent organization where, at some point, I didn't have to grind my teeth

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Copy shop — karma for Fools



PHOTO BY CARL ANGEL

Ramesh Patel takes his own picture on the shop's copier.

The Faithful Fools Copy Shop has been a neighborhood service since 1985, when it was United Copy Service and operated by Ramesh Patel. Crazy spiraling rents had driven Patel from his 1135 Market shop, a thriving, 10-year-old business serving mid-Market and Civic Center customers.

"Some of them came along when I moved," recalls Patel, "and some were a little put off by the new neighborhood, but business was always good."

Patel is an unusual businessman: engaging, self-effacing, generous to his customers. While on Market Street, he served many nonprofits from the Grant Building. He let them run a tab. He never demanded to be paid, even when the tab ran on for months.

United Copy was more of a community service than a conventional business.

In 2000, Patel decided to retire and began looking for someone to take over the copy shop.

When he met Rev. Kay and Sister Carmen, he knew they were the right people. "It was a match made in heaven. They were community-oriented and perfect for all my nonprofit customers. I knew they'd keep up the tradition," he says.

And they have. The copy shop also keeps the Faithful Fools grounded, says the Rev. Kay Jorgensen: "It's part of staying with the business of life, not becoming esoteric or holier than thou."

This summer, Patel is back at the shop, helping out. "I guess I'm only semi-retired," he says. "That's the problem — my heart is still here." ■

— Marjorie Beggs