

SISTERSPACE AND BOOKS

Woody Blue from an interview with Faye Williams¹

It was 1989. Cassandra Burton, urban planner and founder of Cassandra's Consignment, opened a consignment store for Black women in Washington, DC. Faye Williams was in charge of the marketing for the store. As a feminist and a former self-help educator, she couldn't help noticing that a few of their customers were coming in with mental health issues, bruises, swollen eyes, and poor health. It is okay to buy a dress and feel alright. However, isn't it more important to psychologically and sisterly invest in a woman while she is making a purchase? How do you approach a woman who is in pain and shopping is part of her relief?

Faye's answer was to provide workshops with local speakers and to provide a book section. She placed a little shelf strategically in front of the store with self-help books, Black herstory/history books, and popular feminist authors. Within two to three months, Faye arranged a few chairs in front of the store and invited women to sit and talk a bit. A customer suggested that they have a small forum about healthcare. They did it! Ten women attended, and the next month they had another forum on hair. More forums followed on sexuality, financial literacy, employment/unemployment. It occurred to Faye that they needed a newsletter. She created a newsletter and called it *We Walk By Faith, Not By Sight*. The word was out, and sisters gathered at Cassandra's Consignment every Saturday from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. It got a little cramped, with thirty-five to forty women.

When the space next door became available, the forums, workshops, and speakers moved there. One of the workshops was about dreams. Faye's dream was to own and operate a

bookstore. Sisters applauded, and Faye moved forward. Her first stop was the library. The librarian found a directory for her with phone numbers of all the publishers and marketers of books, about two hundred phone numbers. Faye didn't have good credit, but she called the numbers anyway, starting at the top of the list, about twenty a day.

When she dialed Random House, she got a "brother" on the phone. It was very rare to get a Black man on the phone. His name was Manning Barron. Faye said, "I'm trying to open up a bookstore. Can you help me?" He told her she would need \$50,000 and hung up. Faye called him every day begging for help. By the third week, he agreed to help her get \$50,000 credit. Now she could buy books. With established credit, other publishing houses extended her credit. She stocked her store with many books. Sisterspace and Books was born.

With books on the shelves, she tried to get authors as speakers. Instead they spoke at White establishments. The publicists refused to put her store on their publicity lists. One day when Nikki Giovanni was speaking at the Library of Congress, Faye went there and spoke to Nikki directly. When she understood the situation, Nikki sidestepped the publicity department and made her own book signing arrangements with Faye. The rest is herstory!

Sisterspace and Books launched new books by nationally known authors like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Maya Angelou, and bell hooks, as well as local authors, such as Carolivia Herron, Julianne Malveaux, Judith Witherow, Connie Briscoe, Beverly East, and Bridgette Rouson. Soon White women authors, like Barbara Ehrenreich, asked Faye to sell their books at Sisterspace events. These arrangements became a major source of revenue for Sisterspace and Books.

Faye rented out larger spaces for the speakers. She charged a \$10 entrance fee or free admission when you bought the book from her store. If the book came from Amazon or an indie White store, the guest would have to pay the \$10. She never turned

¹ See also *Feminist Bookstore News* interview with Faye Williams, Winter 1998, available online at <http://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independent/voices>.

anyone away for lack of funds and some paid extra to keep the effort going.

Judith Witherow and Susan Lenaerts were her strongest White women supporters. They exemplified feminist politics for Faye by attending events, buying T-shirts, and bringing their friends. They and other White women helped Faye get on equal footing. Some White women were ambiguous about supporting Faye's business because they were not personal friends with her. But a business owner cannot be friends with everyone who walks in the door. Despite these social snags, Faye continued to build the business, creating a feminist space where community could grow through education and discussion.

The store was located at 1515 U St., five blocks from the White House and government buildings, and had a subway stop nearby. It was easy for tourists and visitors to the DC area to find Sisterspace and Books, a unique Black-owned feminist bookstore. The magazine rack at the front of the store included lesbian and feminist newsletters such as *off our backs*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Maize Magazine*, and other feminist and women's papers. It generated many discussions and arguments during a time when lesbians and feminists were controversial and often taboo subjects among many Black gatherings and churches.

When the AIDS epidemic spread throughout the country, Sisterspace and Books distributed pamphlets and educational materials. This did not sit well with a Black preacher in the neighborhood, who visited the store and made disparaging remarks to Faye on more than one occasion. One day she had had enough of it. She marched to Sunday service at his church. Once the crowd had settled in, she stood in the aisle and told the preacher she would "out" him if he ever came by her store again. The congregation scratched their heads over that one, and after the service made a beeline to her store.

Though it was difficult for Faye, a Black woman, to confront a Black preacher in his church, Faye explained why she did it. By

standing up to that preacher, she had discouraged other preachers in town from condemning her, the LGBT community, and the store, from their pulpits. Meanwhile, she chided the other Black churches for attacking her rather than concentrating on the AIDS epidemic.

Faye had opened the bookstore in 1994, but there were a few problems with the landlord. Faye was paying \$2500/month, but the air conditioning and heat didn't work properly and needed repair. The landlord refused to fix it. After two years, Faye began to put her rent into an escrow account. The landlord filed suit. It took five years to come to court. Three nationally-renowned law firms represented her pro bono, and Faye continued building her business.

Faye was well prepared and kept the paperwork in a storage unit next door with other extra books from the store. Shortly before the court date, the storage unit flooded and most of the documentation was destroyed.

The judge was sympathetic and remarked that he would have to regretfully rule against her because of inadequate documentation. "You will have to leave," he said, "though I know you are doing a good job."

"You'll have to throw me out, because I'm not leaving," retorted Faye.

"We will throw you out," replied the judge.

The day of reckoning came while Faye's mother was visiting on vacation. When the marshals drove up, Faye sent her mother to sit on the rocking chair next door with the money from the store. Then she called the local radio station, WPFW 89.3 FM, the indie station, and asked them to send help. They put the call out and within a few minutes, the street was blocked with people coming to help.

One of the marshals, a Black woman, refused to evict Faye. Instead, she got in her car and drove away. Faye refused to walk out, so they dragged her out. Surrounded by the crowd, they were

afraid to arrest her. The marshals went to the day laborers on the corner to get help moving Faye's stuff out. The day laborers refused. The marshals found more day laborers.

Meanwhile, Faye called for trucks and boxes. When Sisterspace and Books supporters arrived, they packed all the boxes and moved them to a storage area. Despite being evicted that day, Faye had an event to attend. It was a book signing for Charles Ogletree, the lawyer for Anita Hill. Faye, four volunteers, and her mother, Mrs. Ruby Williams, sold three hundred books!

Sisterspace went out of commission for a few months while Faye regrouped. But the eviction of Sisterspace and Books from that prime piece of property intimidated the whole neighborhood. Buildings that had been part of the neighborhood were snatched up quickly as gentrification happened throughout the neighborhood.

Faye found another building near Howard University on Georgia Ave. in 2009. It was a good location, but there was no parking, no nearby subway station, and only 400 square feet of space. She still had the conventional bookselling but could not get speakers. Times had changed. After two years, she closed the doors on Sisterspace and Books and moved back home to Gainesville, FL.

Faye now lives in Gainesville in Porters Quarters, the African American neighborhood in which she was raised. She is in the process of opening up a community center called M.A.M.A.'s Club—Music, Art, Movement, Action. She is organizing to fight the gentrification of her neighborhood by the University of Florida. She led the relocation of a Confederate statue.

BLUEPRINT FOR A FEMINIST BOOKSTORE FUTURE—A PERSONAL HISTORY OF CHARIS

Errol "E.R." Anderson, Charis Circle Executive Director

The first thing people usually say when they enter Charis Books and More is how homey the space feels, how "safe." It is, in part, this feeling of warmth, of respite in an increasingly fractured world, that has kept customers and program attendees returning to Charis for more than forty-four years. I cannot write about Charis in an objective way because Charis raised me and made me so much of the person I am today. I came to Charis through the young women's writer's program run by Charis co-founder Linda Bryant in 1998 and have grown up within the walls of 1189 Euclid Ave., honing my politics and my writing, making friends, finding my love (Charis Books co-owner Sara Luce Look), and ultimately finding myself, as I have worked my way through many different roles and jobs within both Charis Books and Charis Circle.

Because we have survived when many other feminist and independent bookstores have not, people want to know how we do it. As I write this in March of 2019, Charis is preparing to embark on a once in a lifetime move to begin a partnership with Agnes Scott College, adding a third arm to our existing for-profit/non-profit hybrid business model. We will retain our for-profit, independent, feminist bookstore, Charis Books and More and our non-profit programming and fundraising arm, Charis Circle, and add Charis at Agnes Scott College, a school store serving the needs of the Agnes Scott College Community. This is our story