

The Sand in the Oyster: Retiring Board Member Sharon Gary Smith

by Holly Pruett

Though Sharon is retiring from the Board, she will become our first Board Member Emerita.

Sharon Gary-Smith is not one of those *sit-on-the-letterhead-do-nothing-Board-members* some organizations are plagued with. If you've been anywhere near Western States Center in the past dozen years, you've probably fallen into her gravitational pull.

She's too well-bred to steal the show when M.C.ing for the likes of Cornel West and Michael Moore — but she very nearly does. If a workshop is threatening to derail, count on Sharon to step in calmly and change the course. And if you're in search of the best rib joint in town, she's the one to see.

But the larger issues of accountability are where Sharon truly gets busy. "I want to be in a world where we give each other the benefit of the doubt," she says. "But I'm not a Pollyanna" — her melodic diction takes on a hint of gravel — "I can kick ass when it's called for."

Born in Northeast Portland but reared in Southeast after the African American community was fractured by urban removal (a.k.a. renewal), Sharon proudly introduces herself as a native Oregonian African American female. She admits to being "vertically challenged" but says "I always thought I was tall because I was raised to have a high opinion of myself."

Valuing herself and everyone else came naturally to the eldest daughter of well-known community leader Bobbi Gary and the late Frederick Douglas Gary. "I didn't know activism was an elective," Sharon says of her childhood. "My mother taught us that it's the price you pay to be human."

It's a way of being that Sharon has passed on to her own cherished daughter, Mariotta. "From a young age I've formed my own opinions and been clear about my rights and responsibilities," Mariotta says. "It's a wonderful treat to be her daughter."

For Sharon, those rights and responsibilities have played out in progressive organizations from Atlanta to Oregon. Like the sand in the oyster working on a pearl, Sharon has brought her diplomatic form of transformational irritation to countless groups.

Growing up one of only twenty students of color among over 2000 classmates at Cleveland High School, Sharon says "I had to figure out how to cross bridges and build bridges." She applied those same social engineering skills to Western States Center when she joined the Board of Directors in 1992.

"Back then, Western States was expert in what I call informational activism," Sharon notes, recalling that the Center's reputation for quality research and analysis was part of what attracted her. At the same time, she pushed for more on-the-ground application for "the people on the streets."

With her trademark talent for seeking commonality, and inborn commitment to "fight for all of us," Sharon stayed with the Center through two terms as President and almost a decade on the Board because she wanted to see her work towards greater inclusivity take hold.

"Two years ago at Menucha we made the decision to teach racial and gender justice by being a model ourselves of how hard it is. It was like birthing a child." For all of the pain and struggle involved in getting to and sticking with that commitment, Sharon says "It's a gift to be a part of that legacy."

Retiring from the Board doesn't mean Sharon's letting up.

"Maybe my career is to be willing to constantly struggle," Sharon says, voice confident but unmistakably weary. "I'm praying we find a way not to burn ourselves up in our activism. It is never going to be over. All we can do is stumble and fall — and try to get there anyway."

