

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

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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

The Charis Story, 1974-1995¹

Charis began as a general bookstore in 1974 with a gift from a twenty-one-year-old philanthropist named Edie Cofrin that allowed a high school English teacher named Linda Bryant to fulfill her dream of being "surrounded by books that would encourage and enlighten people." Linda and her cofounder Barbara Borgman started without a business plan, or business experience, using an owner-operator setup, in a neighborhood that was then more run-down than revolutionary. Over the years, they were joined by co-owners, and an ever-evolving flow of community booksellers. Together they developed their business and bookselling skills through the Feminist Bookstore Network (FB-Network) and the *Feminist Bookstore News*, a journal that not only helped feminist bookstore owners and workers around the world curate radical, impactful book collections for their stores, but also modeled feminist accountability structures built from lesbian ethics and antiracist praxis (see Rose Norman's bookseller story, this issue). Led by FB-Network, feminist booksellers all over the country joined other independents to survive major changes in publishing and the onslaught of big box bookstores. One unintended consequence of feminist bookstores joining the mainstream fight against the publishing industry's collusion with the big box stores was that it siphoned off a great deal of energy from the grassroots work of being "revolutionaries in a capitalist system" to the extent that many simply became capitalists.

¹ For more about our first thirty-five years, see Saralyn Chesnut, Amanda C. Gable, Elizabeth Anderson, "Atlanta's Charis Books and More: Histories of a Feminist Space," *Southern Spaces*, November 2009. Online at <http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2009/charis/1a.htm>. Founder Linda Bryant tells her personal story of Charis in "Personal History of Charis," Charis Books and More website, July 2009, <http://www.charisbooksandmore.com/personal-history-charis-linda-bryant>. See also Saralyn Chesnut and Amanda C. Gable, "'Women Ran It': Charis Books and More and Atlanta's Lesbian-Feminist Community, 1971-1981," pp. 241-284 in *Carrying On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York UP, 1997).



Photo courtesy of Sandra Lambert

Charis staff, about 1988. Liz Hill in front of Sandra Lambert, Sandra using wheelchair, and behind her (l to r) Dee Liston, Linda Bryant, Carolyn Mobley, Jill Marsh, and Sherry Emory. Bryant, Emory, and Lambert were worker-owners at that time

In 1995, Phillip Rush, a gay community activist and philanthropist, counseled Charis cofounder Linda Bryant to consider looking at the bookstore's events and programming in a new way. She realized that Charis had, for more than twenty years, done the work of a community center and activist gathering place, which could fall under the auspices of a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization in the IRS code. Linda Bryant then founded Charis Circle in 1995 to create an economic structure within which Charis could continue to do its stated work of "envisioning and building a world free from all forms of oppression."

The innovative for-profit/nonprofit hybrid model, created at what would in hindsight prove to have been the height of the feminist bookstore movement, would serve Charis well in weathering the economic and cultural changes of the next two decades.

"Big Charis" (Charis Books + Charis Circle), 1996–2006

Linda Bryant was able to effectively fundraise from diverse communities to support the work of Charis Circle and build its formal program structure to include standard bookstore fare like open mics and author events, but also women's sexuality programs, a thriving girls-to-women mentorship program called Gaia Girls, a young women's writing group that launched the careers of many teen writers, and a number of events around faith and feminism. The Circle hired an executive director, programming staff, and additional fundraising staff at various points through this ten-year period and was assisted at all times by a board of directors made up of a racially and economically diverse group of women, who identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or straight. One of the primary benefits of this hybrid model is the way it invites community members to engage with feminist ideas in a variety of contexts and modes. A casual book browser who wandered in off the streets in Little Five Points might discover that Charis Circle offers support groups or events that help them solve a problem, make new friends, or build community. During the first five years of this period, Charis Books employed four full-time staff members and had its highest grossing sales year ever. But eventually, competition from big box stores and Amazon.com, plus the cooling off of feminist and leftist activism in Atlanta after 9/11, as well as major staffing changes and the planned buyout and retirement of Linda Bryant, ushered in another ten-year period of challenges and innovation.

Surviving New Technology and the Economy, 2007–2017

In 2007 two major technologies impacted the bookselling industry in ways previously unimagined: that year saw the release of both the iPhone and the Amazon Kindle. These two technologies dramatically changed the way people read and communicate, and their advent hit all bookstores very hard. Charis was affected in a very specific way. Since the 1970s, rural lesbians from around Georgia and the deep South made Charis a destination on road

trips and summer vacations, and when stopping through Atlanta on business if possible. Rural and suburban women from all over the South filled the store on Saturdays and Sundays and often walked out with armfuls of books from lesbian publishers like Bella and Boldstrokes, books to read and pass along to other lesbians in their communities. The advent of the iPhone and the Kindle introduced a new ease and accessibility for rural readers of these lesbian presses. They no longer had to drive all the way to Atlanta (and fight traffic!) to browse the books they loved. Now they could easily download them to their phones and Kindles straight from the Bella website or from Amazon. What was gained in convenience and privacy was lost in community. Seemingly overnight, huge swaths of Charis' most loyal customer base simply stopped coming, or came only once a year instead of six times a year. The loss was immediate and painful.

At almost the same time, we had the world financial crisis and the Great Recession. The last decade has been incredibly difficult and close-to-the-bone-scary for all of us who work day in and day out to hold Charis in trust for the community. So much of our survival has been based on luck, geography, and an instinct to fight for our "home" even when it didn't look like a smart decision on paper. That, as of this writing, we are finally in a place that looks like success has as much to do with luck as it does with love and hard work. To pretend otherwise is to do a disservice to all those brilliant, creative, hardworking, feminist booksellers who decided for myriad reasons that it no longer made sense to go on. It is also a disservice to the exciting new feminist and radical bookshops opening around the world each year who need an honest blueprint.

With hindsight, it is comforting to see that the economic struggles we experienced at Charis as deeply personal map neatly onto the timeline of the downturn and recovery from the Great Recession of 2007. Our cofounder Linda Bryant retired at the end of 2006, and the leadership transition was especially difficult for Charis Circle, as a nonprofit's ability to fundraise and build effective

programs is only as good as its network. The combination of some of Linda's network departing with her and the recession constraining our constituents' ability to make as many philanthropic gifts as they once could was devastating and took about seven years to recover from. Although strong fundraising associated with our thirty-fifth birthday in 2009 allowed us to hang on, we continued to struggle economically, as well as in building back the relationships that had weakened since Linda led the Circle.



Photo by Bonnie Palter. Courtesy of E.R. Anderson

Charis staff today (l to r, back to front) Charis co-owner Angela Gabriel, Charis Circle Board Chair Susana Morris, Charis Circle Board Member Nora Lewis, Charis Bookseller Amanda Gable, Charis co-owner Sara Look, Charis Circle Executive Director E.R. Anderson, Charis Circle Assistant Director Dartricia Walker. This photo was taken at the forty-third birthday party in 2017

At the end of 2012, after three years as program director, I became executive director of the Charis Circle. Because of my long history at Charis and my deep relationships with so many people

in the community, I was able to rebuild some of the lost relationships with longtime donors. From 2013 through 2015, Charis Circle and Charis Books engaged in a listening tour and explored partnerships for Charis' financial sustainability that included talking to other nonprofits and community organizations, land banks and co-ops, alternative lending communities, a bakery, a coffee shop, and finally several colleges and universities, including Spelman College and Agnes Scott College.

Agnes Scott and Beyond, 2014–2019

When Agnes Scott College women's studies professor Beth Hackett casually suggested over lunch one day in 2014 that it would be really cool for Charis to be the official bookstore of Agnes Scott College, I thought it sounded like a really nice fantasy. Still, at Beth's prodding, Sara Look and I wrote a proposal to then-college president Elizabeth Kiss about a new kind of bookstore partnership where Agnes Scott students could, of course, buy books and T-shirts, but also learn about feminism in community with people of all ages and backgrounds. We were also clear that we didn't want to be a traditional textbook retailer.

President Kiss was a longtime fan of Charis and saw it as a visionary possibility, and so in 2015 Charis Books and Charis Circle began the formal process of creating a partnership with Agnes Scott College. The end product, a jointly renovated historic home on S. Candler St. directly across from the contiguous campus of Agnes Scott College, shares many of the homey, warm feelings of the 1189 Euclid Charis House. Like so many things in the history of "Big Charis," undertaking the renovation of a historic building with very little experience in capital projects fundraising ended up coming together with a lot of help and a lot of faith and hard work. Because the space would greatly increase Charis Circle's daytime programming space and functioning, the Circle was able to fundraise for the majority of the building. Agnes Scott will own the building, but Charis Books and Charis Circle will have a joint lease that is expected to renew in perpetuity.

That Charis Books/Charis Circle is one of the most deeply and historically interracial, intergenerational, multi-gendered, radically inclusive feminist bookstores in the country is due most clearly to the unique history of Atlanta: its majority Black city center with the historically Black Atlanta University Complex, as well as Atlanta's reputation as a destination for the LGBTQ South. For decades, Atlanta has drawn LGBTQ people from small- and medium-sized towns and cities in Georgia and in neighboring states. That Charis Books and Charis Circle have been able to survive and thrive in such a radically diverse city is due mostly to our community's ongoing commitment to use feminism as a tool for growth, which necessarily includes mistakes, failures, heartbreaks, and new starts. The current co-owners of Charis are both white lesbians, and I am a white queer transmasculine person. Our board of directors is majority Black women. We thrive in part because we stay in struggle rather than shy away from it, and because we reject the politics of disposability. We keep coming back to the table and trying to bring people along in the work. Charis has struggled with racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, and more, but that struggle has been the key to its longevity. Because Charis is an institution in the living and breathing world, it is only as good as the people who call it home. Charis has been most successful when its leadership and community members have tried hard things, had painful conversations, and kept going with vulnerability and a commitment to feminist antiracist ethics. That commitment includes the ongoing building of a succession plan that seeks to build Black leadership within both Charis Books and Charis Circle so that the next generation of leaders are not white. What Charis might offer other bookstores and other nonprofits is a model that suggests that if an organization is clear in its values and vision (even when the popularity of those values and vision waxes and wanes) it can weather the tides of an unjust economic system.

Charis Books and Charis Circle opened at 184 S. Candler on April 1, 2019, and will celebrate its forty-sixth birthday in November 2020.



Charis moved from a storefront on the main street of Atlanta's Little Five Points, to a house nearby, to this remodeled house on the Agnes Scott campus

Photo by E.R. Anderson