Photo courtesy of Sofia Van der Dys.
Carolyn Farb: Fundraiser Extraordinaire
A conversation with Carolyn Farb and Bob Boudreaux

The world perceives my friend Carolyn to be a bold, innovative, striking, commanding, and dedicated civic leader whose impressive commitment to helping others through philanthropy approaches legendary status. All these are appropriate, applicable, and deserved. But as a friend for over three decades I know the lady to possess an indomitable spirit of a true romantic; a Renaissance woman of the highest order; a sweet, caring and loyal friend; a person of unquestionable courage in the face of personal adversity, tragedy, and heart-break; and a lovely soul blessed with great abundance, beauty, and clever wit.

While often seen as a trendsetting, highly visible member of what others would denote as “High Society,” I know Carolyn to be a simple Houston girl who would, by her own admission, rather have a burger and a glass of wine at some local restaurant with a close friend, than to dance in a designer gown in the spotlight of a major gala, which she more than likely organized and chaired. Or most preferably, spend quiet time with her beloved pets.

One does not so much “know” Carolyn Farb as one “experiences” Carolyn, for she is akin to a force majeure: in constant motion with brain circuitry continually pushing near overload at all waking hours and, most probably, beyond. She appears to be in a constant state of planning, either for the next gala event (which she always says will be her last) to organizing ideas for her next book, or researching for an art acquisition to add to her magnificent personal collection. Her network of friends and well-earned contacts is expansive and covers the globe in all professions, from European bluebloods to Hollywood movie stars; from international leaders to business legends; from renowned artists and famous authors to just plain folks as myself.

She has an amazing intellectual capacity to discuss any and all subjects with informed, well-thought and articulate opinions, often spiced with a rapier wit that will leave you chuckling; and she does not suffer fools lightly. I know. And those who know her well will tell you that she is not the type of person who takes “no” for an answer.

Having been her companion at numerous public events over the years I saw firsthand how others responded to Carolyn with a genuine sense of respect, appreciation, and admiration bordering on occasional awe. She took all this in gracious stride, moving about in total control of whatever room she entered as an almost automatic center of attention. She is one of those people whom you will know is there, even if you don’t immediately see her, because someone will tell you. It was and is always a memorable night to head out anywhere with her.

I have been multiply blessed in knowing her. Although she is as busy as a one-armed carpenter, she will find time for her friends. Always. I know that, too. She cheered me when I needed a cheerleader, she extended her hand to help me when I needed help, extended her arms to give me a shoulder to cry upon, opened her home to me, included me in her many events, opened her heart to my friendship, and kept me in her thoughts and prayers, as I have her, even as we have been separated by oceans and time. I am most grateful to call her friend and honored to have been asked to offer these few introductory words for her.

She is a special person and Houston and the world are not likely to see her like again. God bless and keep you, sweet Carolyn.

Bob Boudreaux | Prague, March 2016

**BOB BOUDREAUX:** Describe your earliest childhood memories and relationship with your family.

**CAROLYN FARB:** I felt as though we were a typical American family. I was the eldest of three children. Although now I ask my brother Bobby to say he is older. We grew up in West University in a charming two-story red-brick home with a wonderful backyard on Amherst Street. I have fond memories of magnolia and pecan trees, wonderful neighbors, touch football, dogs abounding. It was all rather idyllic. My siblings and I would walk to school without a care or caution, visit the neighborhood Village Theatre on Saturday mornings for the Fun Club, enjoy skinny burgers and Tex-Mex food at the late, great Felix’s — I’m still a devotee of all that. I fell in love with my first dog Charcoal, who had sparkling green eyes and a shiny black coat, at the pet store. I took my dad, Nathan, to look at that doggie in the window. On Saturdays, it was fun to ride the bus downtown and go to Sakowitz for lunch with my friends and cousins and catch a fashion show in the Terrace Room. We all felt very grown-up.

On the weekends, we would visit both sets of grandparents. I loved them all for different reasons but especially my paternal grandfather Jakie, who was and still is my mentor. He affectionately called me “Tissue Paper” as he said special things came...
It was fun to go on business trips to Los Angeles with my grandfather. The Sands had its reservations office at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, where we stayed. When he was busy, he would have someone take me shopping at Lanz or on an excursion to the farmer’s market.

One of my hobbies was collecting autographed movie star photos, so the studio secretaries provided me with quite a selection. I had visions of becoming an actress and later studied briefly with Sandy Meisner at Desilu Studios, which was owned by Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. I suppose I needed a stage mother, which in that era would have been most helpful. My mother, Ruth, sang and danced with Ann Miller on the radio.

B: How and why did your grandfather become such a dominant influence?

C: Everything I have accomplished in my life was to make my grandfather proud of me. He was my mentor, encouraging me to be all that I could be. He gave me the courage to dream and the wings to fly. He introduced me at a young age to the glitzy world of celebrities and philanthropy and was best known as a pioneer Las Vegas hotelier and high-stakes risk-taker. He had the warmth and charm of a Maurice Chevalier and favored ten gallon hats, cowboy boots, and specially designed western clothes. He was larger than life and people knew him as the “Little Man,” which was how he referred to himself. He belonged to an inner sanctum of Houston powerbrokers that included John Mecom Sr., Judge James Elkins, and wildcatter Glenn McCarthy. I loved my grandfather’s Will Rogers-like sayings that were both funny and wise. He used to say, “In politics the winner will forget you but the loser never does.”

One of the more important lessons that I embraced in Las Vegas, a city of big contrasts — broken hearts and tender hearts — was the importance of sharing and giving.
No one who came to my grandfather for a loan ever went away empty-handed. He would clothe poor families, set them up in business, send children of employees to college, or help a bankrupt publisher’s newspaper survive through tough times. I respect that he was self-made, original, witty, compassionate, and with a fierce individuality that is rare. When I left the University of Oklahoma, I thought Los Angeles was the place to go because it was close to where my grandfather lived when he was alive. If you ever had an acting bug, California was the place to be. It was fun to whiz through the Hollywood Hills on the back of a motorcycle with no helmet. You can see that I was a bit of a daredevil.

B: You mentioned being attracted to volunteer work even as a teen. What did you do to begin that work?

C: I began my volunteering as a teenager at Texas Children’s Hospital. The Medical Center was in its infancy. I was always inspired by the beautiful portrait of a horsewoman named Joan Robinson Hill that hung in the lobby across from the snack bar, which was my territory. It made me sad to see young children so ill and how helpless their families felt. Being a positive young lady, I took pride in making pimento cheese sandwiches in the snack bar and bringing cheer as a candy striper. Whatever you do in life, you should always give it your total commitment.

B: When you left L.A., you went to New York. Why did you move there and what brought you back to Texas?

C: I wanted the experience of living in a big city. My grandfather had passed away, and I was still somewhat adrift. Most of my friends wanted to get married, have children, and live happily ever after — and they did. Now that I reflect on it, it wasn’t such a bad idea. New York was very exciting for an adventurous girl from Texas. I had a dream opportunity working for Norman Rosemont Productions. Our offices were on the top floor of the Plaza Hotel. At times, one could detect the mood of the day by the way the door slammed and the chandeliers shook. Even if you didn’t know everything, you had to pretend you did. This was great training that helped me embrace challenges and think on my feet. During this time, I did some volunteer work writing articles for the Catholic Digest, published by the New York Foundling Hospital. I mostly wrote about the children who I met there and hoped that they would all find a family and be well.

B: You had one child. Who was he and what was he like?

C: When you have a son who has your heart from the moment he comes into the world like Jake Kenyon Shulman, you are truly blessed. He was very kind-hearted, brilliant beyond his years, with a devastatingly electrifying personality. I have never accepted nor will I ever get over his leaving so young and before me. I can only imagine and think about him with every breath and wonder what he would have contributed in life. I miss the grandchildren that I would have had, as he loved children. When I was raising funds for the two Playgrounds Without Limits in Memorial Park and the West Gray Multiservice Center, I always tried to honor Jake, whether it was a plaque or a stone with a quote. When people ask me how his unexpected death affected me, I can only say that I lost years — it felt as though I was hit by a train.

B: How do you honor him and remember him?

C: To immortalize Jake Kenyon would be impossible. I try to remember him whenever and wherever I respond to a calling that changes a life. I can see him smiling down from heaven because he felt I took on too many projects. He would always tell me I wasn’t Wonder Woman. I honored him with the beautiful Beloved Immortals memorial site, which took three years to conceive and create, at Glenwood Cemetery. That side of the cemetery with the beautiful hill was less occupied then. Only Howard Hughes and a few others were there. I felt that Jake wouldn’t mind if I moved him from another resting place at another location, as he had great admiration and respect for Hughes. It was quite an undertaking. I had to learn so much as I was involved in every aspect of its creation — the selection of the stone, the color of the mortar, the design of the sarcophagus, the
landscaping with the cypress trees, the watering schedule, the width of the stairs and more — I wanted it to be my greatest artistic expression for my greatest love, my son. The site looks to the sky for the sun and to the stars at night. It took me a long time to commission the beautiful Annunciation Angel, who points to the heavens and watches over Jake Kenyon.

B: You noted your grandfather as an influence on you. Is there anyone else who stands out?

C: I loved the independent spirit of the late Nina Cullinan, patron of Houston arts and parks, and how she quietly parted the waters of matters that she strongly believed in. Nina always did her due diligence, irrespective of its popularity, when she undertook a project. She held everyone in great respect for their contributions to helping others, whatever their roles were.

I first met Nina when I chaired the Houston Ballet Ball Soiree on the Sewanee in 1979/1980. Having limited space at the Houston Country Club, I introduced the concept of the “silent auction” to the event, which raised $100,000 of the record-setting $200,000 evening. I changed all the light bulbs in the chandeliers to pink, creating an atmosphere of warmth without the cost of additional lighting, brought in Peter Duchin’s New York orchestra, and had walking sticks as favors for the gentlemen. I can still remember Harris Masterson and his wife Carroll leaving with a handful of walking sticks. The women received ivory fans adorned with gardenias in keeping with the theme. Later, I chaired an event honoring Nina Cullinan when the archives were housed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Sissy Farenthold inspires me because of her trailblazing, maverick style in giving women a voice. She is not intimidated by anyone. She courageously ran for governor and was the first woman seriously considered for vice president of a major party in the United States. Sissy is still a champion for human rights, and I served with her on the Rothko Chapel board.

Another inspiration is Dominique de Menil, whose achievements and gifts to our city were many. We both shared a passion for art and philanthropy. I worked with Dominique on several projects for The Menil Collection — one with artist Robert Rauschenberg — and another, the Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum, which was designed by her son Francois de Menil. The glass and wood chapel is within a museum where the Madonna and apse were housed until 2012 when they were returned to Cyprus, as part of an agreement.

I’m inspired by people who are brave, pioneering, social and political activists, creative and unique — Gloria Steinem, the magnificent crew of the Challenger space shuttle and their families, Dr. John Mendelsohn and Dr. Ron DePinho for their leadership at M. D. Anderson, Nelson Mandela and his sacrifices to end apartheid, Clint Eastwood and his dedication to his craft, architect Philip Johnson, fashion designers Jimmy Galanos and Bill Blass, Olympians like Carl Lewis and Mary Lou Retton, artists like Frida Kahlo and Robert Rauschenberg — these are all people who have played a part in my life.

B: How do you choose your causes to support?

C: I’m never at a loss on what to do or what’s next. Some days I barely have a moment to breathe. There is so much need for solutions to problems that I wish I could wave a magic wand and solve everything. I select causes that speak to my heart.

B: Of the hundreds, of which events are you most proud?

C: The Houston Ballet Ball Soiree on the Sewanee, the Quest for Excellence benefitting the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at the University of Houston, M. D. Anderson Cancer Center’s Marvin’s Million Dollar Dream, My Heart Belongs to Daddy benefiting the Neurofibromatosis Foundation, the Stars of Texas Gala benefitting the Ms. Foundation for Women, An Evening of Hope benefitting the Bering Community Service Foundation, the Rice Design Alliance A Step Back in Time 15th Anniversary honoring the College of Architecture's dean, A Renaissance Evening benefitting the Museum of Fine Arts with commemorative plates featuring a Buck Schweitz drawing of Bayou Bend,

A passionate art collector, Carolyn Farb poses in front of Carolyn's Flower, a painting by Dorothy Hood that hangs in Farb's home. For three years, Farb has worked to raise $500,000 for a Dorothy Hood retrospective at the Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi and an accompanying monograph by curator Susie Kahil so that people will know the importance of Hood’s work and life’s dedication. The exhibit, Dorothy Hood: The Color of Being/El Color del Ser, opens in September 2016.
the Challenger Learning Center benefit concert establishing the center, and A Night at The Alhambra benefitting the Houston Grand Opera. This also includes twenty years organizing events for UNICEF such as a 2004 concert and gala with Erykah Badu raising $450,000 for programs benefitting AIDS orphans, a concert and gala in 2005 honoring George H. W. and Barbara Bush that netted $500,000 for Tsunami Emergency Relief, and a 2006 gala and fashion show with Jane Seymour, raising $350,000 for AIDS Programs in Africa.

It's hard to say what event I am most proud of as they are all important in my life. They are my art — created with rationale and relentless devotion.

B: Do you consider yourself to be adventurous, daring?

C: William Shakespeare’s quote “The world is your oyster” suggests that you can achieve anything you wish in life. I embrace challenge and do not adhere to the status quo. Another adventurer was Walt Disney who believed that, “If you can dream it, you can do it.” When I first set a fund-raising goal of a million plus for M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, I was the first person in Houston to price gala tables at $100,000. I dreamed it and did it. I went to Galveston to meet Don Henley (he was doing a book signing) and asked him if he would donate his talent for the evening, and the same for Lyle Lovett. Don's beloved mother-in-law and Lyle's father had both been touched by cancer, as had I. It was a room filled with 1,200 supporters, who had been directly or indirectly affected by cancer, who gathered at the Hyatt Regency in Houston. Everyone donned their blue glasses in homage to honoree and legendary Houston television personality Marvin Zindler. My philosophy is “you don’t have to spend money to raise money.” This is my zero-budget philosophy. All 1,200 pairs of the sunglasses were donated. Sadly, too many people have made a business of philanthropy. Too much money goes to pay for items that could be in-kind donations. People are generous and would gladly give if only they were asked.

B: Do you consider yourself political?

C: I’ve supported a variety of candidates. I believe in crossover, and this year 2016 is certainly an example of when you will see that happening. Kinky Friedman was my candidate when he ran for governor and later for agricultural commissioner — the odds were long. I was the campaign manager for Kim Ogg in her first run for district attorney, and I believe she will be our next district attorney in 2016. She recently won an eight-year battle that made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Also, I supported Kathryn J. Whitmire when she was mayor and now Mayor Sylvester Turner. I also co-chaired the President’s Dinner when Ronald Reagan was president. My friend J. P. Bryan and I supported Bob Dole when he ran for president. It is about the candidates and what they stand for. I’m not afraid to take up complicated and unpopular causes such as AIDS in the eighties or neurofibromatosis.

B: Are you concerned that the art and heart of philanthropy is being lost?

C: I feel that the spirit of volunteerism is being lost. Former UH athletes, Houston Rockets center Hakeem Olajuwon (left) and Olympian Carl Lewis (right) with Carolyn at the Tribute to Excellence Reception at her home preceding the fundraising event at the River Oaks Country Club to benefit the University of Houston Athletic Department, giving scholarships in honor of Mary Cullen and Lucile Melcher, August 2, 1989.
erased by our jet-fueled technological lives. The human spirit is not reigning supreme. You need to touch the hearts and passions of individuals in order for them to become ignited. Put yourself in their place to see how you would respond to an impersonal outreach from a non-profit. Philanthropy has become a business to many individuals without passion or commitment who want to get on a social bandwagon without proper qualifications, intentions, due diligence, and volunteer experience. It has to be about more than money. People enjoy the touch of a bid sheet at an auction rather than a pager that vibrates like an order at a fast food restaurant. Volunteers need to commit 100 percent to every task of their roles and are vital to the success of any event. They are the goodwill ambassadors of any organization. People shouldn’t commit to serve on a board if they don’t plan to give of themselves, their funds, reach out to others, and advocate the cause. It should be a team effort! I was very pleased that 450 people came to the annual Volunteer Houston luncheon, where I was honored with the Impact Award, presented by Neil Bush.

B: You must have developed some special secrets to fundraising. What are the basics?

C: As a volunteer, you have to be passionate about your cause when fundraising. To quote E. M. Forster, “One person with passion is better than forty people merely interested.” In my book, *The Fine Art of Fundraising*, my best advice is to answer your calling. My moral compass has always directed me to the world of philanthropy. If you believe that you can make a difference, that belief brings about change. Giving is a belief in optimism, ideals, and principles that elevate individuals and offer hope.

B: How have you developed such a keen eye to recognize emerging artists?

C: Some gifts are innate, and I am blessed with the sense to understand and nurture young artists. Before Frida Kahlo became the artist that she did, I acquired her work *The Wounded Deer – La Venadita*. I traveled the world with her for twenty-one years so that people would have the opportunity to see and feel close to this iconic work. There are paintings and artists that you will treasure that may not even emerge as significant during your lifetime – think of Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Claude Monet, El Greco, Johannes Vermeer. To quote Daniel Grant of *The Huffington Post*, “an artist is only appreciated after he is dead.”

B: How and why did you become a lover and protector of animals, especially dogs?

C: It may have begun with my grandfather’s Harlequin Great Danes. Sonny Boy was our favorite. My grandfather loved Al Jolson and named Sonny Boy for the song Jolson made famous. Sonny Boy used to roam around my grandfather’s Houston estate called the Domain Privé. I mentioned my dog Charcoal earlier, who tragically was hit by a school bus. Dogs have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Bogie, my beloved Shih Tzu, lived eighteen years and waited a year after my son died to stay with me. Growing up, the story of *Black Beauty* was my favorite movie, and I have a soft spot for all animals as they touch people’s hearts in one way or another. I now live with two enchanting gentlemen, Lucas and Maximillian — a father and son, respectively. I’ve actually written a children’s book, *Lucas Comes to America*. He has an app as well.

B: You once stood against development in historic areas, putting you at odds with some of your neighbors. Are you sensitive about what people think of you?

C: One can always be sensitive to the opinions of others, but they must be true to themselves. You’re probably referring to the glorious John Staub home that was located on Pine Hill. Gayle Bentsen and I protested against it being taken down by two brothers from a prominent family who wanted to build two homes on the property. They never built their homes, maybe they had a change of heart. Now, we only have the memory of the great Spanish Colonial home that once stood there.

Carolyn Farb received an honorary doctorate degree in humanities from Northwood University, Midland, Michigan, on May 23, 2003.
Also, we have the River Oaks Theatre that does need a rehab with an escalator, paint, carpeting, and bathroom renovations. We were and are still trying to save so much of Houston’s rapidly disappearing history, whether it’s the buildings or their original names — the ones to whom the buildings were dedicated.

B: If you were on a different path of life, what else would you have liked to be?

C: I might have chosen to run a corporation, a small museum, and perhaps mentor others in the Fine Art of Fundraising (my second published book) in a more formal way. I have no regrets for the spirit of service I’ve followed.

B: Describe a day in the life of Carolyn Farb.

C: My days are very active. My Lucas Terriers and trusted companions, Lucas Jr. and Maximilian generally go to bed early and like to wake me up at 5:00 a.m. or earlier. Max has a high pitched bark so he sounds the alarm and we go out in search of lizards and other things in the yard. Then we have breakfast and cookie rewards for the boys. I like to have a cup of coffee and watch the news. After I’m dressed, I go up to the office and see what’s new on Facebook for a little fun, check the progress with my various projects, and look at email to keep connected.

Recently, I was an honoree for the Blue Cure Benefit Dinner with Dr. Dean Ornish and later this year I will receive an award at the John P. McGovern Museum of Health annual gala. When one is an honoree, board chair, event chair, I believe one must be committed to the mission. Plans that go into these non-profit fundraising events require full participation from those they honor as well as their board.

This year I was deeply honored to receive the Daily Point of Light Award, which originated in 1989 under President George H. W. Bush and is given to exceptional volunteers who go above and beyond in their call to service, and the Impact Award from Volunteer Houston. I give my time and energy, meeting with people asking for advice (i.e. nonPareil Institute and other groups working with autism, arthritis, stem cell therapeutics) on how to reach out to people that I have previously worked with and for my ideas and experience.

The stewardship of funds is the responsibility of any volunteer who asks others to support an effort. Fundraisers should make certain the funds they raise are properly channeled – be it to educational programs, venue tours, installations, or travel arrangements. Funds can be misused without proper stewardship.

After my day’s work comes to an end, I enjoy dinner with friends, going to art exhibits, theater, concerts, or just staying home with the boys.

B: What are your tastes in fashion? Do you consider yourself a trendsetter?

C: I like to think I have my own sense of fashion because it is creative and represents me. Everyone always asks questions about what I’m wearing. Usually, I redesign, add things to complement articles of clothing — i.e. a necklace, a dress with a petticoat. You don’t have to spend a fortune — you can create your own aura, get ideas from designers and combine those with yours. Don’t be afraid to think outside the box. If we all wanted to look alike, we could wear uniforms. It’s important to have your signature look.

B: What would you like people to know about you that they don’t know now? How would you like Houston to remember you?

C: I want Houston to remember me as someone who gave her all to her native city and beyond, leaving a positive footprint. To quote co-founder of Northwood University Dr. Arthur Turner, “Service to humanity is the best work of all.”

Carolyn organized a protest when the owner of the River Oaks Shopping Center threatened to take down the River Oaks Theatre, helping it avoid the wrecking ball. She explains, “Our vigil was heartfelt toward this historic neighborhood theater and not destroying places that people treasure.”

Photo courtesy of Jim Oliver.

HOUSTON HISTORY Vol. 13 • No.3 9