

# The West.Indian American

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Leon Fraser

There are many strands of development in the psyche of an individual. This is the concept of communal living whereby younger individuals, in any society, usually imitate that which is observed and shown to be the protocol of older influential individuals at a particular time and place, and the guiding ideals are passed onto children.

A developmental program that aims to teach social values through music has made a crucial connection in the town of West Hartford, CT. In this cosmopolitan destination town the program is known as *Music Together*. It caters to the creation of a space for families to begin the journey of learning about the power of music together.

## Music Makers In West Hartford

The program has created a space in the calm interior of St. James' Church, just one block from the town center. A discussion with the director Catherine Denmead revealed that she had always envisioned herself teaching others the value and joy of music ever since she arranged her dolls in a formation as

she played music to them, imagining herself as the instructor. This drive and passion led her to Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York where she completed her undergraduate and graduate studies in music, exiting with a master's degree.

After graduation when

she discovered the purpose and flexibility of the franchise of *Music Together* and things seem to go in the direction of a preparation meeting opportunity. With foresight she joined the existing location and then, over a period of time, another, both in West Hartford.

At the location of St.

James' I met Denmead and we spoke about her early foresight and where she is at this point in time. She emphasized, "[C]lasses are purposefully mixed age and designed for children from birth to age five, although children older than five have been

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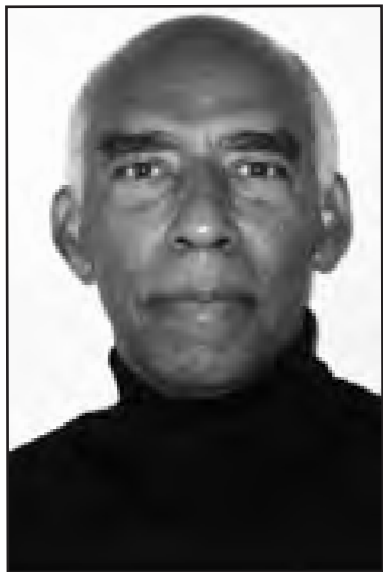


Catherine Denmead, Director  
*Music Together*



Power of Music: Parents and their children in *Music Together* Class at St. James's Episcopal Church

## Nurses: From Bedside To Halls Of Congress



Jim Z. Daniels

On a recent visit to Washington, DC and before COVID overtook our country, I met Congresswoman Karen Bass in the Cannon Office Building on Capitol Hill. Karen Ruth Bass is an American politician serving as the U.S. Representative for California's 37th congressional district since 2011. A member of the Democratic Party, Bass previously served for six years in the California State Assembly, the last two as Speaker.

In conversation with Congresswoman Bass, I posed a question: "What about nursing prepared you for service in Congress?" Her response was quick: "Good bedside manner." But she has had only five terms so far to hone those skills to propose, advocate or deliver legislation that impacts the field of nursing and more.

During my visit to Capitol Hill, I gained fresh perspectives on her passion and experience, and I came

away seeing how committed she is to the service of her district and the nation. It was time that had moments of serious reflection on her work and the condition of the nation and moments of laughter and some funny stories.

There are politicians who are committed, credible and caring about the issues that impact the ebb and flow of national and local issues, and are seasoned at building coalitions and taking independent positions that affirm their bedrock principles. Bass can be counted as one of those.

Congresswoman Bass attended San Diego State University School of nursing and graduated as a licensed vocational nurse (LVN). She is a graduate in Health Sciences from California State University Dominguez Hills and the University of Southern California's Keck School of Medicine Physician Assistant Program. For nearly a decade she worked as a Physician Assistant and during that time she also served as a clinical instructor. Prior to serving in Congress, she made history when the California Assembly elected her to be its 67th Speaker, catapulting her to become the first African American woman in U.S. history to serve in this powerful state legislative role.

The daughter of a mail carrier, Bass grew up in a middle-class section of west Los Angeles and developed a love for organizing and community issues at a young age. Bass is the first Physician Assistant ever elected to the Congress and the first African American and woman elected as

Speaker of any legislature in the US. I asked her whether this gave her a sense of pioneering. Her response was that it did not. "Rather it gives me a sense of enormous responsibility. I am happy to step up to that responsibility, but it definitely is a big one."

Bass leaped pass nursing to obtain credentials as a PA. Asked why she did and what drew her to the role of the PA she said, "When I was a nurse, the pathway to be a Nurse Practitioner was very, very long. I was a licensed vocational nurse. The pathway to be a PA was much more direct. And in those years I had originally started out to be a PA. But the PA profession was very new (so) you had to be employed in another profession first."

I inquired: "Looking at your nursing and PA careers, how do they inform you to be an effective legislator?" "Well, you know bedside manner can apply in a lot of different places. "And," she continues, "bedside manner in the political context is called diplomacy. That certainly has been very helpful."

"As a PA I worked in the emergency room when I was a nurse. I worked in acute care both life and death areas and that type of responsibility and pressure seem a lot easier because no one is bleeding in front of you. So it gives me a level of calmness in the sense of crisis that other people might not share. But when you've been in life and death situations you have a different perspective."

There are six nurses in Congress who collaborate or find common ground on both sides of the isle. "Republican Representative

Diane Black and I have been working on child welfare issues. We are both co-chairs of the Child Welfare Caucus. We know each other! It might not be nursing issues, per se, that we are working on but it certainly is human service issues," Representative Bass states.

I then asked her to tell me about her work on behalf of the foster care issue in the country.

"This is one of those issues that brings Republicans and Democrats together, and the basic premise is that when there are kids who do not have families or don't have parents, then it becomes the responsibility of government to take care of those kids. And we should take care of those kids as we would take care of our own. Those are the values that underlie the work that I do on child welfare."

Are there Republicans who believe that this is just another government over-reach?" "No, no, I don't at all. This is an area where members of Congress come together because most of the members of Congress are parents. Where I might have difficulty is when I am talking about juvenile delinquency, that's another issue. When it comes to juvenile dependency, however, kids who are without parents are a lot more open."

I asked Bass to tell me a little about her work on behalf of Africa and whether she sees a movement towards democracy and the establishment of democratic institutions?

"Absolutely. As a matter of fact, Africa has 54 countries and most of them are peaceful and have democratic processes. They might not be to the sophistication of ours but ours have problems too. Yes,

there are plenty of examples of that. So, there are peaceful transitions and there are problems in countries where they are not so peaceful. But the big issue in Africa right now from the perspective of minority nurses is the reason why the Ebola crisis happened," Bass said.

"Ebola happened because the health infrastructure in those particular countries was so weak that it got out of control, whereas in countries like Nigeria where they had a few cases they were able to bring it under control. I think one of the biggest issues for the continent of Africa right now is making sure its health infrastructure is strong enough so that when an epidemic happens it is not catastrophic. In terms of healthcare, it is to ensure that reforms stay strong," Bass added.

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Congresswoman Karen Bass



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# Trinity College: Contactless Tax Preparation Services

**Hartford, Connecticut:**  
For the third year, Trinfo.Café will host a Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) clinic, but this year clients will have a contactless service with drive-up and drop-off assistance available. Trinfo.Café, which is located at 1300 Broad Street, on the campus of Trinity College in Hartford, altered how it aids in tax preparation services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The service, which prepares both federal and state income tax returns for Hartford residents at no cost, will launch on Thursday, February 11, and IRS filing services will be available Friday, February 12.

The VITA clinic will offer new contactless procedures for dropping off tax documents and conducting client sessions by phone. Clients can schedule an appointment through [www.211ct.org](http://www.211ct.org) or by calling 2-1-1. Upon arrival, clients will confirm that they have the necessary documentation to file their taxes and then drop off the paperwork. A VITA volunteer tax preparer will then prepare the federal and

state tax forms and file the taxes within seven days of drop-off. Generally, VITA serves those who make less than \$57,000 a year, persons with disabilities, and taxpayers who speak limited English.

“We worked really hard to provide continuity of VITA services at Trinfo.Café,” said Serena Laws, senior lecturer in political science at Trinity and the IRS-trained Trinfo VITA clinic site coordinator. “This year is a hybrid model of in-person and virtual services. We want to provide tax services as safely as we can.”

Each year, Laws’ students in her “Tax Policy and Inequality in Hartford” course gain hands-on experience through a training program to become certified VITA volunteers; they then volunteer at Trinfo.Café with Laws overseeing the work being done.

This semester there are 18 students registered for her course. They will handle basic tax preparation and get a greater sense of tax policy issues and social inequality. A weekly seminar allows for students to learn practical training but also contextualize what they do in the clinic through

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enjoying online classes with their younger siblings while they may be attending school remotely,” Denmead said. She also explained another feature of the program:

“We also have a Musical Parenting for Babies Class, for parents/caregivers of infants less than nine months. “In this class we teach ways to make stimulating musical experiences part of everyday life and to set the tone for a life rich with family music-making from the start.”

To give another range of ages, Denmead said, “Lastly, we have a class for children ages four through eight called *Rhythm Kids*, which is essentially the “next step” for preschool/early elementary-aged children, leading them toward greater independence and confidence as a music maker.”

After Denmead completed her undergraduate and master’s degree in cello performance, Denmead has made West Hartford her hometown. This has helped her in making the selection of this town as a place to grow the franchise of *Music Together*.

Her love for the art form pushed her to connect with the predecessors of the program that was going on at the Congregation Beth Israel on Farmington Avenue in 2005.

Realizing this was the thing she sought, she was invited to give instructions and eventually to teach in 2007. Her penchant for purpose and with drive and passion became the force that propelled her to become the director in 2010.

When asked about the rate of turnover among instructors she said, “We have had a number of beloved teachers over the years. The teacher that has been with us the longest and has developed quite a following amongst our families is our dear Miss Lexi. She forms such a beautiful rapport with both the children and adults in her classes, and there are quite a few families that have been consistent members of her classes for years.”

The class sizes are usually comprised of 12 families, but with the covid-19 pandemic the class size reduced to about eight families to accommodate for social



Parents and Children Making Music Together

distancing. In the summertime, classes are held outdoors on the lawn of the church.

The process entails parents beginning the journey and relating in a particular way. “We also have a Musical Parenting for Babies class for parents/caregivers of infants under nine months old. In this class, we teach ways to make stimulating musical experiences part of everyday life and to set the tone for a life rich with family music making from the start.

“Lastly, we have a class for children ages four to eight years of age called *Rhythm Kids*, which is essentially the next step for preschool/early elementary-aged

children toward greater independence and confidence as a music maker.”

I asked about the need to have a themed seasonal class to which Denmead said: “Our song collections are rich and varied, and rotate each semester (12 in total).

So families can participate in the *Music Together* program for three years before repeating songs. With the breadth of musical genres and cultures represented, the songs themselves provide us with many themes, activities, and applications. We rarely need to focus on themes such as holidays!”

The case of covid has changed the landscape of business. In terms of how the business is

doing Denmead said, “I was very fortunate to have inherited a wonderful existing relationship that has continued to blossom over all these years. The same is true for our relationship with the staff and community of St James’s Episcopal Church, Mandell JCC, and Spotlight Art, Dance & Wellness. Of course, our normal operations are tentatively rearranged, but we look forward to returning to in-person classes at all of our class locations as soon as it is safe to do so.”

Music together is a good way for families to “feel the vibes” as they travel along the highway of social interaction with the primary objective of making Music Together.

Nurses

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Representative Bass is heavily engaged in pursuing answers to this vexing problem and there is now light at the end of this tunnel as the numbers of COVID infections in the United States continue to decline because of the availability of the vaccine.

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academic reading and assignments.

In early 2020, the VITA clinic processed 199 returns for a total of \$448,859 in refunds, despite ending the clinic’s services in mid-March due to the pandemic. The year prior, during its pilot

phase, 161 returns were completed for a total of \$224,217 in refunds. Laws hopes that as the clinic and her students continue to build Trinfo’s reputation as a place to get quality tax preparation free of charge, more clients will spread the word about the services offered.

In addition to free tax preparation services, a free tax

return printing service will be available at the Trinfo VITA site. This service will allow clients who had their taxes prepared at one of the VITA clinics in the Hartford region to print their returns at Trinfo-a needed service that is important to many in the community, said Laws. She said the service helps many of the neighborhood clients avoid

challenges of finding a place to print and potentially exposing themselves to COVID-19 by going into a store location.

The VITA clinic hours will be 10 a.m.-2 p.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays through April 15. For more information about VITA in Connecticut, go to [www.united-wayinc.org/myrefund/](http://www.united-wayinc.org/myrefund/). Contactless



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