

# A FORCE OF NATURE

*Written by Carrie Edelstein*

*Photography by Jennifer Silverberg*

Karen Kalish's home is indicative of her essence: colorful like the Agam painting in the front room and multi-tiered. Her vibrant eyeglasses blend right in with the bright walls that create a gallery-like setting, museum worthy art descriptions included. Everything in the early 19th-century Clayton structure broadcasts her individualism.

A graduate of Clayton High School and Saint Louis University, Kalish started her career as an elementary school teacher in Washington D.C. She moved to television as an on-air consumer reporter and was recognized as an activist during the consumer movement in the 1970s. She took a similar job in Chicago in the late '70s, then returned to Washington to work at "Entertainment Tonight." In the early '90s, after years of heading her own media consulting company, Kalish had what she calls a "V8 moment" while watching a morning talk show.

"The African-American majority whip [William Gray III] on Capitol Hill had started a program with a Jewish guy [George Ross, managing partner of Goldman Sachs] in Philadelphia called 'Operation Understanding,'" Kalish says. "It was for a small group of black kids and Jewish kids to teach them about their own and each others' race, religion, culture and history, and I was just, 'Oh my gosh.'"

Within a week, she met with the organization and asked if she could start a similar program, Operation Understanding D.C. Twenty-two years later, it is still operating.

"That was my first nonprofit, and I did everything wrong," she says. "I had no idea how to start a nonprofit; I had no idea about leadership."

Five years later, at 54, Kalish left the Operation Understanding D.C. in the hands of its board so she could earn a master's degree in public administration at Harvard University, tacking on classes in leadership, community organizing and nonprofits.

In 2001, she made her way back to St. Louis. She has spent the ensuing years focusing on her favorite causes: promoting literacy and providing assistance to low-performing students to help level the playing field in education.

Kalish, now 70, also founded "Books and Badges," a program where St. Louis police recruits help city students struggling with reading. She got the idea during an uneventful police ride-along.

She knew from research that children who aren't reading by the end of third grade have a much greater chance of ending

up in the criminal justice system. After spending time with the police, Kalish came up with an idea of having recruits read to and work with slow readers in the schools. "It was just an idea and I took it to the police chief and he bought it," she says. More than a decade later, she is still fine-tuning the program, checking in at the schools and making adjustments. She wants to spread the program across the nation.

Her next nonprofit was Cultural Leadership, a year-long program for high school students that originally included only African-American and Jewish students but now involves students from all walks of life.

"The kids apply, fill out essays and have face-to-face interviews," she says. "They meet on Sundays, they have retreats and they take a three-week trip in the summertime to New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Atlanta, all over Alabama, all over Mississippi, Little Rock and Memphis, to learn about civil rights, social justice and democracy in this country. It's really a niche program for kids who want to change the world."

But Kalish also recognized a need to build relationships between schools and parents. That program, called HOME WORKS!, pays teachers to visit families where education is not a priority.

"We just keep learning how to be even more effective to get to these kids who are below grade level, who have attendance issues and behavior issues and tardiness issues," Kalish says. "They're in homes where the mom gave birth and she thinks school will take care of it five years later. There's very little reading and talking and valuing education in these homes. Many of them are just working their hearts out to keep the lights on and put food on the table. How do we create a future for these kids?"

A master networker, Kalish finds young professionals and hosts meet-ups, asking only that attendees have a college degree and the right mindset. It's all part of her plan to spread her vision to younger generations.

Kalish also loves to promote philanthropy, particularly when it comes to HOME WORKS! "I love asking people to support giving kids a future they wouldn't otherwise have," she says. "This one is so important, and it's going to take generations. It will go into more school districts and states, and it will help get kids education. We need them in our workforce." 



Karen and her dog, Fannie Lou Hamer Kalish