

This is the letter Donna shared with the Children First community on March 14, 2024.

Dear Children First Community,

I love Children First. If it were possible to freeze something in time –to do essentially the same thing, in essentially the same way, into eternity –Children First would be the place and the work and the community I would choose.

And of course, in the array of multiple-choice answers humans are given as we consider the future, changeless eternity is not one of the options on the table.

As many of you know, and some may not – the Children First board set a policy after the “change process” of 2001, when, after a community-wide process of research and reflection, we shifted our structure from full-time child care to part-time preschool. That policy leaves me with the final decision about the year-to-year existence of Children First. Obviously, my decision for many happy years has been “Yes. please – one more year.” And, over those many years, I’ve also been weighing options for the long-term. I’ve done that thinking with various configurations of the board; with Sarah; with my family; and with every source of wise guidance I know how to access. And now I’ve reached a decision that I’m ready to share with the Children First community.

I’m going to start with the basics of the decision. Then I want to offer some grounding perspective about the plan. Then I’ll take you back in time a bit to share a bit more about how I got here. And then I’ll say a few things – both practical and aspirational - about how we imagine this decision playing out.

The Decision

Barring anything unforeseen, Children First – with Donna and Sarah as full-time co-teachers – will remain open for three more years – 2024-2025, 2025-2026 and 2026-2027. After graduation of 2027, we will close the school. After that, for at least a while, we will maintain the non-profit organization, as we allow some space and time for exploring what else might happen in our physical space and with our archives.

Some Grounding Perspective

Back in the summer of 2022, I heard Krista Tippet interview the brilliant social activist adrienne maree brown. Their conversation turned to endings – Krista was about to end her weekly radio show, and adrienne maree brown was reflecting on the many non-profits she’s known that seem resist their own timely and natural endings.

Krista said, “It’s a cultural... bias and sensibility that we have, that if something dies or ends ... that it’s failure... But actually –I know it’s just time, right? And it’s an ending and it’s a beginning — it’s vitality. And vitality has endings in it.

And adrienne maree brown answered, “What you’re speaking to is the life force, right? Everything dies, but that’s kind of good. It makes for a very rich world. All the richness, all that fecundity, all that beautiful miracle of life, it happens because we live in cycles, not perpetuity. And it’s trying to hold onto stuff and not let it die that actually puts us in precarious positions, even for our species. This is actually one of our biggest issues right now... we’re so scared of death. And so we think about how do

we make people live forever, and how do we look young forever... instead of being like, Oh, no. How do I get good at dying? How do I get to where I'll be at peace when my time comes?"

I share this conversation because one of my aspirations for this ending – this ending which we will have time to plan for; to grieve; to celebrate; and to imagine about – is that it can be a time of rich learning and practice for everyone in the Children First community. Practice in loving with our whole hearts, and grieving with our whole hearts, and moving forward buoyed by memory and with enduring connections.

This place was founded in a wholehearted spirit of love, joy and curiosity - and with a deep belief that something beautiful is possible. And it deserves to live every second of its finite life with that same energy – not the energy of grinding on through burnout, or clinging to a ledge with our fingertips because we're afraid of falling. Likewise, it deserves an ending grounded in love, joy and curiosity as well.

A Little More Backstory

I'd like to share a little bit more about how I got here. Mostly I want you to know that there is nothing sudden or impulsive or provisional about this decision.

First, I want to talk about myself - to – as we encourage the kids to do every day – “say what’s true for me.” And then I want to talk about what I believe is true for Children First.

What’s True for Me

I've been thinking about the “future Children First” question for as long as I can remember. But there was a moment a few years ago that woke me up to some home truths about myself. Heading into winter vacation – this was December 2020 - Sarah’s Mom was in rapid decline, and as we prepared to re-open in the new year, she was actively dying. Sarah would need some time away, and I would need to handle things here until she was able to return. That was life happening – and I've been in those “step it up” moments many times before – including the year Sarah was in treatment for cancer.

But this time, I was struck by two things. One – when I went looking to muster my energy to do what was necessary in Sarah’s relatively brief absence, there was noticeably less energy to be found. I felt my age.

And two – I recognized with absolutely clarity that no matter what staffing arrangements were in place at Children First - I was always going to feel this same deep sense of responsibility to make sure things here were OK. Children First - in every detail – was always going to matter to me in a bone-deep way. I was never going to be the person I'd once imagined I might become –that mythical relaxed and grandmotherly figure serenely trusting Children First to the care of other teachers.

And believe me - I am aware that other teachers in my position COULD evolve, shift roles and let go. AND, I know that I absolutely cannot. If Children First were ever struggling or suffering or floundering, I would be struggling and suffering and floundering, too.

So, that’s what’s true for me. I am getting older and eventually I will die. And I am not willing to spend any part of the rest of my life worrying that Children First is not OK.

What’s True for Children First

And now I want to say what I believe is true for Children First. Because in that moment of realization about myself, and in the years of reflection since, I have come to see the fallacy in a metaphor I've often used to

think about the future - – the idea that Children First is like a child growing toward independence, who won't need my "parenting" anymore.

Now that I have actual independent adult children –full-grown humans who live their lives without much help from me and Kevin - - it's more obvious why this metaphor doesn't work. Children First isn't actually changing the way that Josh and Cara and Anna have changed.

I now realize that Children First is less like a developing human, and more like an architectural assemblage – an arrangement of spaces and materials and artifacts; of policies and principles and practices; of history and tradition; of rituals and routines; of paperwork and play structures. It's an assemblage held together with ties of friendship and mutual obligation between and among children, their families and their teachers. It's an imperfect and beautiful structure, and it requires – as every one of us knows – a heck of a lot of maintenance. And its foundation –it's very foundation - is built on the steady attention and committed labor of its long-time teachers. And shoring up THAT foundation is the sturdy support of the King-McClain family. Children First lives and thrives to the extent that it is part of this deep and faithful co-habitation. That's what we learned as a community back in the 2001 change process, when we thoroughly explored the possibility of moving the school somewhere else – or of having my family move somewhere else and leave the school behind – and ended up with the policy that says, "Children First and Donna are a package deal, and what happens here will be her year-by-year decision."

During these years of discernment, as I've asked myself over and over and over again – at times, desperately – about what I think is possible for my own future and for Children First itself – I've come to trust that this policy was wisely made, born of clear-eyed realism. And no matter how much I might want to cling to my role, and to this place, and to this life that I have loved beyond reason – the fact remains - Children First needs what it needs, and there will come a time when I am at the end of my capacity to meet those needs.

This is Not Just about Me

I may be the one making this decision, but I want to acknowledge that I am far from the only person affected by this decision. Children First has been built, supported, nurtured, and grown by literally hundreds of people, many of whom love this project with a fierce and loyal love. If you are reading this, your fingerprints are all over this place. People have given to Children First generously- with their time, their thinking, their professional expertise, their creativity, their money, their labor, their trust and simply by showing up here, as the unique people they were and are. People have invested in Children First, in every sense of the word.

And now, some people in this community have babies who won't graduate from Children First. Some Children First graduates are now young adults, and they've had long-held fantasies of sending their own children here – at times, my own children have had that fantasy – and now that won't happen either. I think often of the little sitting area we call "Maureen Landing" – and I imagine that those of you who knew and loved founding parent Maureen Soper will mourn the idea that her space will no longer be a gathering place for lively preschool conversation and storytelling. Every person will have their own version of something lost to this change, and every person will get to have their own feelings about this ending.

For so long, my desire to ward off other people's sadness and disappointment shaped my thinking about what I owe to the future of Children First. It took a lot of time and a lot of growing to arrive where I am now – to trust that Children First is enough, and has been enough, without lasting forever.

And - maybe thanks to 33 years of Children First grief practice – also known as Graduation - I've also come to trust that anyone with the capacity to wholeheartedly love something like Children First is also made to wholeheartedly grieve the loss of that beloved thing. To believe, as four-year-old Maryam said to me a few weeks ago – "Oh! I can be sad AND still have a good day!"

And I want to say this, too. I sense something more than sad inevitability about this ending. I sense that I was born as much for the work of gracefully and mindfully and intentionally bringing this project to a close as I was born to the initial task of birthing it. I think there are beautiful, powerful and important possibilities waiting to be realized here in these three years of living toward the ending. And we're not talking about a lame-duck winding down kind of ending here. We're talking all-in, bucket-list, grateful for every minute, excited to keep learning, presence, playfulness and joy.

Meanwhile, I know that any one of you may wish I was making a different decision and that I would at least consider doing things that I'm choosing not to do. I get it, I really do. And I can promise you this - I AM prepared to welcome whatever arises in each of you and in this community - - to hear you and see you and be with all the feelings, right alongside you – as we live into these next three Children First years- all-out, all-in - AND then into whatever follows.

And what about that – what happens after the three years?

Task # One. To not know yet! To take a breath.

Task #Two. To invite ideas from everyone connected to this place...what else could happen here that would contribute to "putting children first?" To allow for imagining. To play with possibility.

Task #Three. To experiment with ways to sustain and nurture our larger community. Open playground times? Monthly pizza potlucks? Old Friend parent discussion groups? Camping weekend, of course! Old Friend birthday letters, for sure!

Task #4. To remember, reflect, and tell the story. To harvest and share what we've come to know.

For now, I'm right here, and so is Children First - and I'm happy to hear from you if you have thoughts or feelings or anything else you'd like to share.

With so much love and gratitude,

Donna