

INSIDE THE GNOME FOUNDATION



With the Gnome desktop now going from strength to strength, the role of the Foundation has never been more important.

Over the last 12 months, a lot has changed for both the Gnome desktop and the Foundation that supports it. There were reports of financial difficulty, and the continuing struggle to bring the new desktop up to functional parity with the previous desktop. But the Gnome team is winning the war. The latest releases have been well received and Gnome has just become the default desktop for Debian, a sure sign that its usability and functionality problems are in the past. The Foundation itself has been able to improve its financial situation, while at the same time helping lots of other projects beside the Gnome desktop we all love. We caught up with Karen Sandler, a member of Gnome's board of directors, to find out where it all went right.

This time last year, Karen was at the helm as Executive Director of the Gnome Foundation, having taken up the role in 2011.

After she stepped down as Executive Director she put herself forward in the elections to the board of directors, and was elected to the board of seven with the most votes in the contest – a real affirmation of her leadership during what must have been some of the most challenging years at Gnome.

So why give up one role only to take another? "I think Gnome is a fantastic program and an amazing community and I didn't really want to leave," Karen tells us. "So when I left, I announced I'd go for the

Board of Directors. Which actually was a real departure for me because I have been refusing to serve on boards of directors for all of this time."

Duty of care

"Maybe as a lawyer I'm more aware of the obligations that Directors have towards their organisations," she said, "There's a duty of care and a duty of loyalty, and I think as a lawyer you potentially must hold yourself to a higher standard of care and read all the documents and be very involved because you need to make sure you understand. You and your fellow directors are running the organisation, making all the decisions and you have to be responsible in the instance things go terribly wrong."

She also told us that she'd rather volunteer for the organisations she wants to help, than take on titles,

but it was Gnome itself that made all the difference.

"I made a real exception with the Gnome Board of Directors. It was a little

easier because I was recently the Executive Director so I'm very familiar with where things are with the foundation but I'd been joking all of the time while I was at Gnome that if I felt like the Gnome project was going in the right direction then I would leave, so I wanted to make sure that people knew I was leaving because it was going in the right direction, so the best

"Gnome is a fantastic product and an amazing community, and I didn't want to leave."

way to signal this was to join the board of directors.”

This is where it became evident that a lot of people really like Gnome, as eleven candidates put themselves forwards for the seven Director positions, all with different experience and qualifications.

“I had a moment where there was a hotly contested vote – there were 10 candidates and people tend to not throw their hat in the ring if they don't feel they were good candidates, but for various reasons we had all great candidates and several people were not elected,” Karen admitted before telling us she felt people understood what she was trying to do when she was voted into the role.

Both new roles effectively mean is that Karen is swapping her day job for her volunteer position at the Freedom Software Conservancy, and swapping her previous role as the Executive Director at the Gnome Foundation for her voluntary work.

“With Gnome I just have the hours to put in as I did before. But a lot of it is still the same – I'm still doing a lot of the same things I was doing before, but I wish I had more time to do even more,” she said.

Cashflow crisis

Karen quit as Executive Departure just before the Foundation had a widely publicised financial crisis, so we were interested to know whether she thought Gnome was now in a better place than it was 12 months ago. She did say that she thought latest release of Gnome (version 3.12 at the time) was fantastic, and that it was much more polished than early 3.x versions. But using the openness typical of the Gnome Foundation, she also admitted they'd been taking a close look at their organisation.

“There was some discussion about how much control Red Hat has over the project and so forth,” Karen told us. “There's been a lot of really good hard looking at where Gnome is and where it's going as part of the election process. At the same time it's tough for me to be drawing attention to some of the



One of the many things the Gnome Foundation does is sponsor the annual Gnome conference, GUADEC

(Photo: KittyKat3756 CC-BY-SA)

negative things straight away, but the Outreach Program for Women has grown so much that it was tough for the Gnome Foundation to keep up administratively – invoicing and all of the administrative work. At the same time, there was a cashflow crisis right after I left and so that caused a lot of attention and so it's great that people are really paying attention to what's going on.”

The online coverage of Gnome's cashflow crisis focused on the Outreach Program for Women, rather than that the Gnome Foundation was simply being honest about its difficulties, or that those difficulties were caused by the burden of helping a successful project, rather than bad management. We asked whether the Outreach Program should be funded by the Gnome Foundation, only to find out that it isn't – it's only helped administratively.

“It's not quite funded by the Gnome Foundation. It's run by the Gnome Foundation and we hit up a lot of sponsors, so if anyone knows of a company who wants to help support bringing more women into Free Software, contact me.” Karen told us, before going into more detail of how the two are organised.

“Gnome handles all of the administration of the program but we get external sponsors to fund most of the financials. We charge an administrative fee but it doesn't cover all of the work that we have to do, so we are paying out of our general funding to keep it going but a

“There was some discussion about how much control Red Hat has over the project.”

lot of sponsors are more interested in sponsoring interns in the Linux kernel, or multimedia, or whatever it is that they're interested in. A lot of the money coming through for the program is not necessarily meant for Gnome but we're still dedicated to running the program. But it was so successful for Gnome projects that we couldn't just keep it for Gnome, we had to share it. It's worked out really, really well and other projects have started to see the same successes that we've seen at Gnome.”



“It really says a lot about Gnome,” Karen said about the way the Gnome Foundation handled the situation, “it’s the kind of project that will announce when it’s having a cashflow problem. I knew of a few other non-profits that were in such bad cash flow that the non-profits had been in debt. And that was never announced – in debt with no invoices with no cash set to come in and they had not announced it. It’s quite common for non-profits to have cashflow problems. Gnome is the only one I know of that announced it. I think that’s really awesome and I think it’s unfortunate because people sometimes misinterpret that. And no offence [none taken!], but the tech press is famous for not covering the whole story, for better reading.”

“The Outreach Program is inspired by Google’s Summer of Code except that we accept non-coders and non-students,” she told us, “Not only do we have projects to develop the Free Software projects, but we also have marketing and documentation and art and UI, and things like that – everything, all of the different areas where we need to contribute to Free Software we call for participation, but we have a lot of coding internships too.”

Not just for coders

Obviously, only asking women to apply is also a big difference to Summer of Code. “Women often think that Free Software is not for them,” Karen explained, “so by specifically inviting them, with the Outreach Program for Women, we try to think about all of the reasons why women were staying away from Free Software. We systematically tried to address them all – instead of trying to figure out what it is, what do we have to do so that we can completely overcome them, or overcome them as much as possible.”

“Because of the fact there aren’t that many women in our field, it means that women coming in are much more likely to feel ‘Impostor Syndrome’, because they don’t see leaders that are like them.”

The Program been a huge success, and more importantly, it’s brought more contributors to the

After a time in the wilderness, Gnome has now been re-adopted as the default desktop in Debian – something that will no doubt trickle down to many of Debian’s derivative distros.



FREE & OPEN SOURCE SOFTWARE
Outreach Program for Women Internships
 organized by the GNOME Foundation

LOOKING FOR AN INTERNSHIP
DEC 2014 - MAR 2015?

MAKE A DIFFERENCE!
 Support software freedom!

DEC 9 - MAR 9
 PROGRAM DATES

OCT 22
 APPLICATION DEADLINE

\$5500
 STIPEND (USD)

GNOME.ORG/OPW
 LEARN MORE & APPLY!



FREE & OPEN SOURCE ORGANIZATIONS THAT PARTICIPATED IN THE PAST INCLUDE:

GNOME fedora ownCloud WIKIMEDIA Linux OPENTHINK mozilla

Use your skills in programming, design, documentation, or marketing, working with an experienced mentor.

Work remotely from home while collaborating within a world-wide free & open source software community!

The new Outreach Program runs from December 2014 through to March 2015.

Gnome project and brought more contributors and participants into the world of Free Software, which is vital, as Karen explains.

“We found at Gnome that bringing more women through the Outreach Program for Women meant that there are other women who had not been participants of the program who felt more comfortable coming to participate in Gnome, so it increased our numbers.

Bigger than Gnome

“We also have a much better rate of women sticking around after their internship. You can’t expect every women to stick around after their internship – it’s not fair, but what’s exciting is that they’re having such a good experience and they want to continue to contribute and they want to continue to participate.”

And as proof that there’s wide impact from the program that just within Gnome, Karen explained that it’s helping candidates really get embedded within the Free Software world.

“Something like 90% of participants have given talks at Free Software conferences – 19 participants from our program have given full session talks who have become speakers. One of our participants became a mentor – she was in user-interface design, she became a mentor and then the intern she mentored became a mentor, so she’s a grand mentor! One of the members of the Gnome Board of Directors went through OPW and she’s now our treasurer and doing amazing work in helping to fix the cashflow problem we had at OPW. Three alumni have founded programs in their local area to improve the situation for women in tech. So there’s now a group in Chicago hacking on Gnome, there’s the Nairobi Deaf School, and there’s a Women in Software in India group as well.”

Software Freedom Conservancy



What to do if your project needs a lawyer but can't afford one – find a bunch of friends who know what they're doing...

Karen is incredibly enthusiastic about her new job, and when you talk to her about it, you can't help but realise how important a role the Conservancy has played in Free Software.

"The Conservancy is phenomenal because it's like the Outreach Program for Women where one organisation is serving lots of different projects," Karen explains. "It's analogous to a company where you have different corporate divisions so each project is a part of our overall organisation and we provide all of the infrastructure – whatever these projects need in order to run. We have their infrastructure, we handle finances. It's great because we only have to file one tax form at the end of the year for all of the projects. We have a general counsel, so we have legal support. We do all kinds of things and then we're also exploring different projects that are trying to solve different problems in the world for the public good."

But of course, the Conservancy always needs funding. "We're putting legal infrastructures in place, like trademarks and things like that that will help our projects, if we have stable legal foundation. A lot of my time is spent fundraising – please donate to the Software Freedom Conservancy, readers!"

Karen also has one specific example of a problem we'd have thought would have been solved long ago, by a company that now must be making a fortune.

"We noticed from our own experience that there aren't any good Free Software solutions for accounting," Karen said. "We asked our accountant what the situation was for proprietary software solutions, and it turns out they're all crummy – there aren't any good solutions and non-profits pay millions of dollars per year for sub-par software. So we've launched a project called NPO Accounting Project. We're starting to create a piece of software that solves the problem and solves it the right way with Free Software for everyone, so this is the kind of thing that



We shared a lager with Karen at 2014's OSCON.

the Conservancy can do. So I'm really proud about it and I'm really pleased to be part of the Conservancy because there's just so much to be done and we're working around the clock."

Charity vs Trade

At the end of our conversation, Karen talked about something we think is very important, and that's the distinction between charities, such as the Gnome Foundation and the Software Freedom Conservancy, and trade associations, such as The Linux Foundation. Fortunately, as a lawyer, Karen is able to describe this distinction more effectively than we can.

"A trade association is meant to forward a common business interest, not the interest of the public. A charity is meant to forward the interests of the public. And that's why the Linux Foundation looks very polished – it has great marketing and great branding, and it's a way to get particular kinds of money into your project because it's a trade association. But you give up something at the same time.

"At the Conservancy, there's a lot of transparency and it's about neutral control and public benefit, so a project at the Conservancy is making a real statement about its intention. We hold the assets of a project and so the Conservancy takes in the trademarks of a project, which means it can never be abused by any one company.

"At the Conservancy, there's a lot of transparency – it's about public benefit."

"If you join the Software Freedom Conservancy then you're saying something about how intend to run your project. And it says that you will never let a company take over control of who you are and what you do, and I think that's very important and I think that companies actually appreciate that. It means that they will have a neutral playing field with other companies as well." 

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[~] # busybox
BusyBox v1.21.0 (2014.05.19-18:05-0000) multi-call binary

Usage: busybox [function] [arguments]...
or: [function] [arguments]...

BusyBox is a multi-call binary that combines many common Unix
utilities into a single executable. Most people will create a
link to busybox for each function they wish to use and BusyBox
will act like whatever it was invoked as!

Currently defined functions:
[ addgroup, adduser, ash, awk, basename, bunzip2, busybox, bzipcat, cat, chgrp, chmod, chown, chroot, chvt,
clear, cp, cpio, cronos, csplit, cpio, date, dc, dd, dealloc, delgroup, deluser, df, diff, diff3, dmesg, doc2html,
du, echo, egrep, env, expr, false, fdisk, fgrep, find, free, getty, grep, gunzip, gzip, halt, head, hexdump,
hostname, hwclock, id, ifconfig, init, insmod, install, ip, kill, killall, klogd, linuxrc, ln, logger, login,
ls, lsmem, md5sum, mkdir, mknod, mktape, modprobe, more, mount, mv, nameif, netstat, nlslookup, openvt, passwd,
pidof, ping, ping6, pivot-roots, poweroff, ps, pd, rdate, rdate2, readlink, reboot, rm, rmdev, rmmod,
route, sed, sh, sha256sum, sleep, sort, strings, swapon, swapoff, sync, sysctl, syslogd, tail, tar, tee, telnet,
test, tftp, time, top, touch, tr, traceroute, true, tty, umount, uname, uniq, unix2dos, unzip, uptime, usleep,
vi, wc, wget, which, whoami, xargs, yes, zcat
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The Conservancy received \$90,000 in damages from electronics vendors using BusyBox and not releasing their source code.