



The Heidelberg Project: A Detroit Story

Joining the Heidelberg Project

Jenene Whitfield:

He was kind of militant, you know. I was a little nervous because that wasn't my stomping ground. He invited me to get out of the car and we began to have a discussion. And my goal was to find out what in the world he was doing.

And I remember him striking a chord with me when he asked "How was I giving back to the community". I remember feeling insulted because I thought here I am, I'm a citizen, I'm paying taxes. I'm working every day and you're out playing.

So for him to ask me that was a little insulting. But at the same time it never left my mind. Needless to say I returned to that street many, many times. And a year later I completely gave up corporate America and came to work for the Heidelberg Project.

What really gripped me with Heidelberg was not so much the message that Tyree was sharing with me because to be perfectly honest his gift was the paint brush. He wanted to take his paint brush off the canvas and take it out of the studio and bring it on to the street to provide children mostly with a new way of seeing things. Choices, colour, amazement, excitement, music and laughter and joy.

And then I realised that what this man was actually doing in his community was trying to create a sense of hope where it appeared hopeless.

Narrator:

But Jenene could also see a role for herself in building an organisation that could be far more effective than just the artist on his own. But it meant giving up a successful career.

Jenene Whitfield:

My life was what was expected of me and I was achieving as had been hoped by my family. At that time I was a Loan Officer with what was known as Michigan National Bank. And I was serving the private banking clients. So I was dealing with very wealthy people and underwriting their mortgages.

And I was earning a great salary at that time, seventy grand a year was a really good salary, new house, new car and a lovely four year old daughter. Although I was single I was your typical African American woman who was climbing that corporate ladder.

And I'm sure that my goals and aspirations were that I would be the Vice President of somebody's bank by now had I not taken that wrong turn. So it really changed my life.

It was tough. I faced a lot of backlash from family. People didn't understand what I was doing. And they thought I was crazy.

Narrator:

Jenenne's sister, Sherry.

Sherry:

Our family has not always been very behind this. This was a very risky venture. I come from a traditional background where you have to have a job. You have to have security and you have to have insurance and all the things that I grew up thinking were security.

And it takes a free spirit to take on what she's done, the risks that come with that and still be surviving. Thriving and growing. And I'm her biggest fan.

It certainly has opened up my eyes, my mind, my thoughts about what is art? What it has the capacity to do. It's captivating and I love to hear Jenenne speak. When she talks about it she comes alive. It's like an animation.