



ONE MAN'S CHALLENGING BUT Successful Journey to a Fulfilling Retirement

BY ALAN BLITZ



“
I’m working on the
me I’m meant to be
at this time in life.”

—JEVOID SIMMONS

Some retirement stories instinctively write themselves. Jevoid Simmons is a wonderful example. Starting retirement while recovering from cancer surgery, he created a slow but steady path to finding himself through self-reflection, creating artwork, and giving back to his community.

A long-time Evanston resident, Jevoid was previously Director of Workforce Diversity at Northwestern University Medical Center. In 2017, he retired from The Art Institute of Chicago as Director of Employee Relations and Training.

In November 2017, after a cancer diagnosis, he had a successful surgery.

“After the surgery, I took a one-month leave to heal and reflect on how to move forward,” Jevoid recalled. “I decided to retire. There was only one question: ‘What’s next?’”

ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES: TELLING HIS FAMILY’S STORY

Jevoid sold antiques for a year before the pandemic arrived along with the related shutdowns. “This allowed forced time to focus on my real priorities: publishing my family’s migration story from Greenville, Alabama, making art, and giving back within the community,” reflected Jevoid.

At this juncture, “I saw myself as working on the me that I was meant to be.” Jevoid pushed ahead and finished *Up From Down Home, The Journey North*, a book he published as a tribute to his father and mother who died at 51 and 52 years old, respectively, in the early 1970s. It tells the story of his family’s migration out of rural Alabama under the threat of racial violence in the early 1950s.

“The book is for my siblings and our children and the generations that follow. I hope it encourages others to share their family stories internally and with others,” Jevoid explained. “I believe the sharing helps us to understand our commonalities and break down artificial barriers based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, and any other differences that might be carved out.”

ARTWORK ALWAYS FEEDS HIS SOUL

In the completion of *Up From Down Home, The Journey North*, Jevoid created 17 pieces of unique artwork to support the book’s narrative. Artwork has been Jevoid’s passion since his youth in Davenport, Iowa. As far back as kindergarten, creating artwork for friends helped him cope with being dyslexic. Art classes were always a part of his educational experiences.

“When painting I enjoy working in a primitive style,” Jevoid explained. “It’s not tied to the necessity of precision. It has a certain warmth and tranquility in the presence of turbulent surroundings and



Jevoid uses a primitive style in his artwork.

events of the day. I have an affinity for the work of Grandma Moses [Anna Mary Robertson]. Her work and that of similar artists capture a snapshot of life and tell a story.”

He adds, “My more recent artmaking focuses on alarming political and societal challenges facing America as it is at war with itself.”

In addition to painting, Jevoid is a woodcarver and storyteller. “My carvings are ongoing and capture family, friends, acquaintances, and other characters from the past.”

ART EXPRESSION EXTENDS TO THE COMMUNITY

During the past three years, Jevoid has volunteered as an art instructor at Camp Kuumba Evanston. It is a multifaceted camp for young Black and Brown at-risk boys.

“Art classes in the program are offered as a manner of expression for the kids to understand themselves, families, and create an art piece that tells the world ‘Here I am, this is what I want to be when I’m age 25,’” Jevoid pointed out.

“In other words, the kids are asked to express what art means to them. Camp lasts three weeks for students third through eighth grade, and I conduct four sessions with them. The experience gives them opportunities to discover themselves through untapped talents in a wide variety of arts such as drawing, painting, spoken word, and more,” Jevoid added.

ADVICE ON MOVING FORWARD

Reflecting on his retirement journey, Jevoid said, “Understanding that unless I’m a vampire, at 72 years of life, there’s not a lot of time to get things done. My advice to those who are entering retirement is to honor what was achieved—good and bad—and go forward. It can take time. From there, look to what feeds your soul.” ■



Meet the Artist

**Wednesday, February 7
4 - 6 p.m.**

Community residents are invited to meet Jevoid Simmons and view an array of his artwork at the Center’s Art Gallery in Northfield.

Over the years, Jevoid has exhibited his work locally at the Lorraine H. Morton Civic Center, Evanston’s Noyes Cultural Art Center, the Evanston Art Center, the Garrett Theological Seminary at Northwestern University, The Art Institute of Chicago, and Creative Coworking Gallery. Jevoid’s most recent exhibition was held at Geneseo Illinois Public Library.

**To RSVP, please contact
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