



JACINDA WALKER

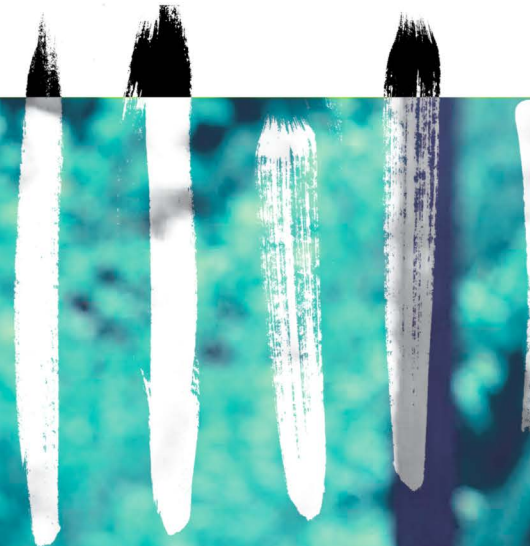
& THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Written by: Randy Gregory II // Design by: Lauren Rice

Back in November, it was clear that the country was divided. However, on January 21st, the Women's March displayed the largest gathering of people from all races, genders, incomes all walks of life, uniting behind a common cause. Now, more than ever, we need to be aware of each other. To show empathy for one another. To understand each other.

Jacinda Walker, design strategist, entrepreneur, instructor, and friend of IBM Studios, embodies this message through her thesis work, but most importantly through her role as a mentor and guide to 30 aspiring designers.

As a mentor, Jacinda empowers and connects an increasingly diverse group of designers—the youngest: a high school student, the oldest: a 37-year-old, single mom. Since lending her experience as a designer and advocate, she's even been surprised by the diversity of students she attracts. "A lot of people assume all of my mentees are black," she explains. The truth is she also assumed that she would primarily attract black students in the beginning. "[But then] I started getting Latino students and white students—I literally just had my first white mentee, Andrew, whom I met at an AIGA event. He asked me hard questions, and I asked him even harder questions," she explains. "I asked him, 'Are you sure? Because I'm not going to treat you different because you're white. I'm going to holler at you, just like the other ones. You are not exempt, you are included.'"



Jacinda works tirelessly to encourage designers to think beyond race and gender, to understand what internally motivates them, both personally and professionally. And while she encourages each and every one of them to aim high and dream big, she also stresses the value of having a plan. "I dream really big, but have a plan to get there," she urges. "Get those steps and pieces on the ground, so it is not just this thing you're dreaming out."

Jacinda is the first person to say that she is critical and not afraid to ask questions. "If you have a goal, have time attached to it," she urges. "If there is no time, then it is just a hobby." This approach doesn't work with everyone, but that doesn't stop Jacinda. "I'm not your parent, and I'm not your teacher, and I'm not your friend," she explains. "I have to go a different level." For her, it is about being the perfect combination of educator, advisor, and confidant.

Jacinda is constantly reminded that the mentor mentee relationship is symbiotic. The community she's built has helped her climb out of the inevitable creative ruts and periods of boredom by inspiring her to create new projects. One Summer, she spun up "Share Parties," where everyone would come together to share concepts and ideas with each other. "I would cook and we would have 'show and tell,'" she reminisces. "We would have a projector hooked up and everyone would bring their stuff." This idea of organically uncovering and telling stories that haven't been told before is a theme that permeates Jacinda's work.

Creating meaningful connections is also a major part of the work she does. From bringing fellow designers into her studio for lunches to recharge, to sending mentees out to talk with friends in the industry, Jacinda is determined to provide opportunities for people to come together on common ground. This deep belief in human connection, responsibility, and doing the "right thing", came from her being a product of opposites: a deeply creative mother and a clean-cut military father.

Her mother was a vital source of inspiration, even when Jacinda wasn't looking for it. When Jacinda was younger, and started to "wild out", she would challenge her daughter to think beyond herself. "[She would say] 'You will pass your classes, you will graduate, and you will not mess this up for me,'" Jacinda says. As the oldest of several children, Jacinda served as an inspiration for her siblings, and a source of pride for her mother.

Even when she became a designer for the Cleveland Division of Water, her mom would comment on her attire, expecting her to conform to a stereotypical look of an artist. "I remember the last two years of [my mother's] life, I came to her apartment, and I was coming from work where I was wearing a suit, which was the attire at my job," Jacinda explains. "My mother knew I was an artist, and she knew where I came from, so

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when she said 'Where you come from?' I said 'work', and she said 'I like this on you, but where are you dressed up to go to?'" According to Jacinda, this is just one of the stereotypes that surround creatives. There's an expectation that a designer or creative needs to look a certain way, but that's entirely up to the situation that the designer places themselves in.

Don't think that this means that she's diluting what it means to be a creative. "It's just about understanding that yes we are creatives, yes we're going to have fun at work, but we need to be prepared for different environments." To reinforce this with her mentees, she schedules monthly lunches with the Mayor of Cleveland, instructing them to dress the part, sometimes with a helping hand. "Tell your mom you're going to be having lunch with the Mayor. She'll understand what is required."



Working with such a diverse group of designers has aided her thesis in Design Research at Ohio State University, which is focused on diversity within the design discipline. By drawing on her experiences working with designers across a wide age spectrum, she started recognizing patterns, particularly when it came to race, community, and their place in the design world. Through her thesis she started exploring the disparities between race and education—a directive from her own mentor, Dr. Noel Mayo—who helped her understand how the same issues are perpetuated within the design world.

Of course, she couldn't sit by and watch this continue within her own community; she had to act, and thus under the direction of AIGA, designExplorr was born. Coined as the "celebration of design learning," designExplorr is an initiative that aims to give teachers and parents the tools they need to inspire creative youth from under-represented communities. It's also a place where creative kids can get the tools they need to find themselves in the professional design world.

"I'm very proud of the work," she explains. "Who else is there to tell these stories? How are we to change these things for young people if we don't begin to share?" Whether they're 7 or 37, she wants current and future

designers to study her experiences and learn from them so they can be smarter, better, and ultimately, more successful. With this, Jacinda still expresses the need for older designers to speak to their younger counterparts, something that we can reflect on in IBM Studios around the world. "Any knowledge you can impart is not something (a younger designer) would have encountered in their everyday work."

But that doesn't mean that we should all go out and start seeking mentors or becoming them. As Jacinda says, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear."

She also stresses the importance of crossing boundaries and creating connections that will ultimately help foster an inclusive culture. "If your path is different and you do not see anyone like you on it, it is easy to think that you're alone," she encourages. "When you walk down the street and think you're by yourself, you develop coping mechanisms. It's human to do this when you think you're by yourself or alone. Perfectly natural, but not effective."

This is why she has always made an effort to connect people with other people. Young people with old people, black people with white people. "Because it's easy to get caught up in thinking you're the only one."

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