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JUSTICE FROM THE BENCH: HONORING A LIFETIME OF SERVICE

March 30, 2017 | posted by Lara Klaber in Filmmakers



After conning his way onto a high school service trip to Tanzania with the promise of returning with a polished promotional video, director Jesse Nesser fell in love with filmmaking. In search of a documentary to pursue after college graduation, a freelance gig in Detroit would unexpectedly lead to his latest film, "Walk With Me: The Trials of Damon J. Keith."

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"He's worked with Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., JFK, Thurgood Marshall," Nesser says. "He put into law in the '70s what they were fighting for in the '60s, but most of these civil rights giants died before they could tell their own story."



The director saw Judge Keith's lifetime of experiences as an opportunity to capture the judge's story in his own words, through his own eyes, as he continues to work and make history. Nesser formed an immediate bond with his subject, captivated by his warm, genuine nature and the extraordinary details of his life.

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"Here's this little old man who gives you a hug when you walk through the door, and this was the same guy to be sued by President Nixon 45 years earlier," says Nesser.

Positive change as a result of Judge Keith's rulings is evident throughout the nation, particularly the Motor City. In a 1971 lawsuit against Detroit Edison, Judge Keith ordered the utility company to pay more than \$4 million for racial discrimination in the workplace. Now, more than four decades later, DTE Energy, formerly Detroit Edison, has partnered with Ford Motor Company to completely finance this film that includes that dark chapter of their company's history.

"I think it speaks to Detroit, and to Judge Keith, that he's got that kind of respect around here," Nesser states.

In the virtuous words of Judge Keith: "One person can make a difference as long as you do the right thing."

Nesser adds: "I think now more than ever we need a lot of individuals to take that message on. When you trace the progress we've made back to a single decision made by a single judge, and judges like Judge Keith, the ripple effects always astound me."

—Amy Brown

