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As the Kendeda Fund Prepares to Sunset, Here Are Nine Questions for Executive Director Dena Kimball

Michael Kavate | April 19, 2022



DENA KIMBALL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE KENDED A FUND

Dena Kimball tries to embrace the uncomfortable.

That’s why the executive director of the [Kendeda Fund](#) — the foundation set up by her mother, Diana Blank — has agreed to an interview that she “probably

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wouldn't have done a few years ago.”

It's why she and the fund's staff have been more vocal lately, eschewing the anonymity and silence that defined the foundation's early years in favor of speaking up to amplify the work of its grantees, partly prompted by requests from them.

And it's a personal journey, too. Kimball is a long-time public education advocate who spent seven years working at Teach For America and Teach For All. Even dropping off her kids at their local — but private — school is a test. “I'm sitting with this feeling of, ‘Does this feel right? Am I making the right decision?’” she said. “I sit with that discomfort and the relative position of incredible fortune that I'm in to make whatever choice I want.”

Kimball is now in her tenth year at Kendeda, founded on wealth derived from the fortune of Diana Blank's former husband and Kimball's father, Home Depot co-founder Arthur M. Blank. But her role is nearly at an end. By the end of next year, the fund will sunset — or, as Kendeda prefers, “spend out.” (“‘Spend down’ is such a downer, right?” she said.)

She has appreciated the journey and the shifts it has brought. “When people understand that you're no longer going to be making them a grant and they still come to you for input or advice, it sets up a very different kind of conversation and relationship,” she said. “That does not feel like you're spending your way into a ⁴tion or irrelevance.”

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We talked about the benefits and challenges of Kendeda's sunset, the role of faith in that process, and to what extent working with her mother resembles the HBO series "Succession." (Spoiler: not at all.) Below are excerpts from that chat, edited for clarity.

Kendeda plans to spend out by the end of 2023. How's it going?

My mom, from the very beginning, was clear that she was not interested in creating a perpetual organization or institutional foundation. I keep waiting for her to waver from that conviction and have a moment of regret — and I just haven't seen it once.

It's been a really positive process. It hasn't felt like a test or anything. It has felt more like sowing seeds to the world. And we'll see what comes of them.

We had a team meeting probably a year or so ago. Somebody said, "We are so focused on our exit ramp, but everybody else is still on the highway." While we need to be focused on our exit, we have to acknowledge that everybody else is still on the journey. Our job is to make sure we exit as gracefully as possible with the least amount of disruption.

It's well-known that sunseting can increase potential impact by upping how much is given out. What are the lesser-known benefits?

First and foremost, it's forced us to really sharpen our focus and increase our sense of urgency. We have a very disparate set of [programmatically areas](#), everything from [violence](#) to [place-based programs](#) in

Montana. Within each, we've had to define: what does success by 2023 look like? And to be incredibly clear about what we are going to accomplish and what we are not.

The other piece has been leaning into opportunities. A good example of that is when COVID hit. We did things a lot of funders did: lengthen timelines of grants, reduce any restrictions. But we were also able to take about \$10 million and create an **operating reserve fund**. We picked about 40 of our core grantees who did not have strong operating reserves. We invited them to apply to a challenge fund to build between three and six months of reserves. You're able to just fund without having to worry about, "How does this affect our long-term endowment?"

I would also say it is very healthy for us as fund advisors to know that we're not going to have a career in these positions.

How about the challenges?

There's a little bit of collective denial that has the potential to set in, either amongst the staff or grantees or even fellow funders, who are counting on us to play a particular role. We've had to work hard to keep us all fully cognizant of the realities of spending out.

Secondly, humility is required. You're not going to wrap everything up with a tidy bow. There are going to be transitions of core grantees right at the end or other things you didn't anticipate. Obviously, the last few years⁴ have been a lesson for all of us in that.

One of the most uncomfortable challenges has been grappling with the question of how external we want to be — how and if we want to use our voice. For a long time, there was no face behind Kendeda. That was something my mom really wasn't interested in. Nobody knew that Diana Blank was the donor. Or, if they did, it was a very well-kept secret. We came to grips with the fact that, if we really want to do justice to the issues we care about, [there is a role for us to use our institutional voice](#) differently.

You reflected on that in a [recent blog post](#), writing, “we once saw visibility and outspokenness as signs of institutional hubris.” But you now see it can be a “resonant, inspirational lever for change.” Tell me about that realization and how you determine when to use that tool?

It was seeing that you can use voice in a way that doesn't necessarily put Kendeda front and center of everything that you do. The Atlanta equity portfolios are a really good example. We hired Tené Traylor, who runs our equity work, in 2016. At that point, “equity” was a word that was used, but not quite so much. Her goal was to spark a set of conversations in and around Atlanta philanthropy with an explicit focus on racial equity.

Tené has been quite active in using her voice to talk about her vision, our vision for equity. We had a very young and nascent set of grantees in that portfolio, a lot of newer organizations and newer leaders. Part of her explicit goal was to help them build standing and capacity, and in some ways de-risk those grantees for

future funders. You do that in part by standing alongside them and saying: “These are great people, great organizations, great visionaries. They have our full support.” If we and Tené had chosen to be fully behind-the-scenes in that portfolio, I'm not sure we could have supported our grantees in quite the way that she has aspired to do.

You and Tené spoke a couple years ago about racial equity and how funders’ “biggest responsibility” is to be “super uncomfortable... all the time.” What’s a recent time you got uncomfortable in that way?

I'm uncomfortable every day in this job. [Laughs] An example directly involving Tené: Around the time of George Floyd's murder, and Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta and Ahmaud Arbery [also in Georgia] a little bit earlier, a group of our grantees came to us. They said, “We want your support in expressing our frustration and disappointment with the way another funder has approached their work recently.” That’s so not Diana's normal M.O. It’s like, until we get our house in order, who are we to point fingers?

Initially, I had my what-would-Diana-do hat on: “We're not going to touch that.” What I came to understand was our grantees were asking us to be uncomfortable. Yes, to continue improving our own equity work. But also to play our part. We can sit at tables that they can’t sit at and push, in our own way, other funders to do more. Tené and I were in long dialogue over that decision. And it moved me to a very different place. Humility sometimes can be a code for staying comfortable.

The spendout section of Kendeda’s website opens with a quote from the Pirkei Avot, or Ethics of the Fathers, a collection of Judaism’s rabbinic teachings. How does faith influence how you and your mother approach spending out?

Diana is a very spiritual person. She's as comfortable in a Catholic church as she is in a synagogue, I would say, and probably the houses of worship of three or four other faiths as well.

There is a prayer that we both love in Judaism’s high holiday services, which is the holiest day of the year. You’re asking God to hold you to account and reflecting on the future year. The prayer is called the [Unetanneh Tokef](#). The idea is that we start in dust and we end in dust. We’re a flower that will fade. It’s this idea that we are just here for a moment.

This idea of trying to impose permanence when that is so against the reality of life doesn’t speak to us at Kendeda. Acknowledging our own impermanence and our own transience has helped us to be comfortable with spending out — and frankly see it as a really positive thing.

You’ve been at Kendeda since 2014, nearly as long as the sunset has been public. What has it been like to be on this journey with your mother?

It's been an absolute pleasure. I first came in to do the girl's work. About a year into it, Diana asked if I would take over, and I said, sure. Back to my Judaism:

honor thy mother and father. But I explicitly said to her, “I will do it either way, but do you want me to keep running it the way you've been doing it, or should I do it the way I would do it?” She said, “Absolutely the latter. I want you to bring yourself into it.” Which is, by the way, an invitation she's given every single person on our team.

I have been waiting for that moment where she's like, “No, no, I didn't really mean that,” and reel me back in. Honestly, I don't think she's done it once. She really meant what she said. It has made it incredibly easy to work with her — and a lot of fun. [laughs] I haven't watched “Succession” yet, but we don't try to pretend that we're not mother and daughter.

Your most recent blog post discusses your mother's love of stories. What's a story that has resonated with both of you recently?

Our favorite stories are “but for Kendeda” kind of stories. Diana loves stories because she is a lifelong learner. She graduated college very late in life, in her 50s. She was always saying to us, “What are you learning?” What attracts her is always the opportunity to learn about things — and the opportunity to create vehicles for people to learn. That's what a story is: a way to your head and a way to your heart.

After the end of slavery, [many places in] the South used — which I did not know — convict leasing as a mechanism to continue the practice of essentially free labor. Young Black men were rounded up, arrested on pre⁴narges, and their labor was leased out. Many

counties' budgets were based around these convict leasing structures.

There was a very large brick factory on the west side of Atlanta that used convict leasing regularly. Many men suffered and died on that site. There is evidence that some of the men who died were burned in the kiln. Therefore, the bricks, which literally built the city of Atlanta, literally have the ashes of Black men from Atlanta within them.

There was an opportunity for that site to go into city hands and become a park, a memorial. But the deal that had been publicly announced quietly fell through at the end of last year. A second higher offer came in, so Kendeda is offering a \$4 million bridge to salvage this project at the last second. [The purchase was approved yesterday, April 18.]

I've lived in Atlanta for years and years and years. I grew up here. I never knew that story. I guarantee that 99 out of 100 Atlantans, if you stop them on the street, would not know that story. To be part of literally unburying that story and supporting activists who want that story told and understood — that is the privilege of this work. Those are the kinds of stories that are not always pleasant to hear, but are incredibly motivating for us.

You have mentioned Diana several times in this chat. What would your mother say if she had joined us?

She's a little bit impish and mischievous, so she would probably say something funny. And she would thank

you and say something sweet about her daughter.

I think she would also say she hopes to encourage others not to do what she did, but to improve upon it. That was her challenge to the students at the opening of the [\[Kendeda-funded Georgia Tech\] Living Building](#): not to replicate the Living Building, and not to do what we did, but to do their version. That's probably what she would say about Kendeda. Don't necessarily do what we did. Do better, push higher, go further, do more.

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