

DiTM – 06 His Story_Omari Booker

Transcript of Audio from the Backstory Clip

[DiTM - Omari Booker - 06 His Story.mp3](#)

00:00:03 When my mom was 15, she came from Trinidad and immigrated to Boston, and that's where she met my dad. And then when I was three, I came to Nashville. And so I've been here since I was three years old. So I went to high school at Montgomery Bell [Academy] and started playing sports. Basketball was my main thing. Ended up getting a basketball scholarship to Belmont University and went three years as a math major before I changed majors to graphic design and studio art.

00:00:30 In that same third year, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I ended up transferring him to MTSU with thoughts of maybe playing there, but also potentially just focusing on school and my mental health and kind of figuring out how to navigate bipolar disorder at that age. And, you know, substance abuse also that I was trying to work all those things out.

00:00:52 And that's really when I started making artwork pretty consistently. When I was 22, my sister passed away. So, my big sister, she might be in the frame [gestures behind him]. It's the big piece above the fireplace – that's her. That was probably the beginning of a lot of the trouble that was both between mental health and the criminal justice system.

00:01:11 But when I was 28, I got a pretty significant drug possession charge that, a year and a half later, I ended up in the position of taking a plea bargain or going to trial. [With] a Tennessee Class A drug felony, the range is 15 to 60 years. So I could have gotten 60 for this drug possession. So I took the plea for 15. And didn't know how long I was going to be gone. I wouldn't likely do all of it unless I got in some kind of major trouble while I was there, but I didn't know when I was getting out either. So I was in a pretty challenging space, just mentally, spiritually, emotionally, all of the things. And art was kind of the thing that I really held on to as the saving grace during that. And I did a lot of writing with some poetry. [I] wrote a book. [I] drew a bunch, did some commission work for honey buns and soap and all that - all the good stuff. I kind of found art could be something that could be traded for goods or money when I got home, but I went straight into restaurant work (that a local restaurateur Randy Rayburn, who was a really big influence and friend and mentor – all the stuff. [So] when I got out, he said that I could come back and work there, which was part of my making parole was having a job plan. So I worked for him until I started doing artwork full time. He was a huge help in that transition and then I kind of just kept on making work, just made work daily and, you know, tried to balance the reality of making the living with making artwork and being really intentional about always making work that was

just for me. And I think that's probably been the most impactful work that I've made to this point is the stuff that really mattered to me.

00:02:53 After submitting to a lot of galleries and kind of going through that process had way more 'No's' than 'Yeses'. But there's the gallery that I'm working with now, and I've got an exhibit up at Channel to Channel in Nashville and I've got a show coming up at The Parthenon, and got to be a part of an exhibit at The Frist recently. So, I'm really grateful for some of the tangible forward movement.

00:03:14 The thing that I found was that I loved making artwork, and that's probably the biggest message that I would give to anyone who is trying to figure out what they want to do or what they would like to do – and that's at any age, this could be at 7 or 12 or 50 or 60 – is kind of identify the thing that you love doing and that you would do regardless. If you wake up, you kind of have to do that thing. And then find a way to make that your work because it is spiritual growth and it is therapy and it's mental health and being able to do that daily and not kind of compartmentalize life into, 'Okay, well I'm going to dedicate this time to this thing that is 'work,' and then try to dedicate this time to this thing that is 'me.' And then this other time to this thing that is God. You know, try[ing] to integrate all of those things has been a huge gift. So jumping into the thing that you love doing and finding a way to make that your life's work. Yeah, there's no way you can't be successful, like, that is success. You're successful by doing it so...