

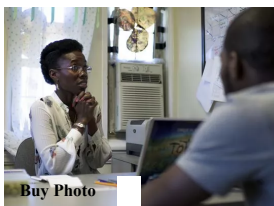
# Camden native wants to expand kids' horizons

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(Photo: Joe Lamberti/Staff Photographer)

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One day while she was driving her daughter to school, Edra Chandler said, 8-year-old Vedra Chandler told her she was going to turn Camden around someday.

She reminded her of this over the years, Edra said, when Vedra was away at Harvard and touring the world as a performer.

"She would say, 'Mom, I have not forgotten this,' " Edra said.

Now 35, Vedra is back in Camden, her hometown, and she is ready to turn things around.

Sitting in her office in The Neighborhood Center in Camden, where she directs art and education programming, Vedra talked about how she strives to engage the children of Camden with their community.

"There are so many teens who want to be doing regular, cool stuff," she said. "I come from here. I have a slightly different path, but I've seen a lot of other stuff and it's cool for me to come back and tell them how much stuff is out there and how to seek it."

Vedra came back to Camden after a decade of being a professional performer, a natural progression from her upbringing. When she was growing up, her mother always sang in her spare time, and so she grew up singing, too.

"When I was involved in my singing," Edra said, "she was always with me and I never thought she was really paying attention."

Dance was Vedra's first love, Edra said; she studied at the Marcia Hyland school in Mount Laurel. She was in musicals in high school and was a cheerleader for the Philadelphia Soul.

She started out working in business after earning a degree in government from Harvard, but fell out of love with it quickly. She would cope by coming home and changing straight into running shoes. "I was literally running away from my job," she said. She turned her attention back to song and dance.

One day, Vedra said, "I realized you could, as a nobody, audition for shows."

When Vedra called her mother to tell her she had landed a role in a national tour of "Hairspray," Edra said, "I was shocked. That was exciting. I think I screamed over the phone."

She toured with "Hairspray," "The Wizard of Oz," and did a number of regional productions. Then she went on tour as a soul singer in Cirque du Soleil's "Kooza."

"I love, love touring," Vedra said. "I don't mind life in a suitcase."



*(Photo: Chris LaChall/Staff Photographer)*

“Kooza” would stay in places for weeks at a time so she got to fully experience other countries and cultures. Eventually though, touring took a physical toll and she took a sabbatical from the show.

She had other dreams, and Camden was one. Vedra moved back in 2015. Edra, who grew up in Texas, had always thought Camden would be temporary, and had been looking at other places around South Jersey for years. She finally sold her husband on a place in Collingswood, and Vedra moved into her childhood home, ready to make a difference in her city.

Vedra was in grade school when she began thinking about what made Camden different.

“I was always trying to get my friends to come over and their parents wouldn’t let them,” she said.

Because of the Chandlers’ concerns about the Camden school system, they decided it was worth it to pay for her to go to Westfield Friends in Cinnaminson. Edra would drive her to school on her way to her job as a school counselor in Pennsauken.

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When it came time for high school, Vedra expressed interest in going to public school in Camden; she craved a classic high school experience complete with football games and cheerleaders. “I wanted high school to look like ‘Saved by the Bell,’ ” she said.

At her parents’ insistence, she went to Haddonfield Memorial High.

“I was very aware that I was going there because they had a nice high school and I didn’t,” she said.

That realization set her on a path that would eventually guide her back to Camden.



(Photo: Joe Lamberti/Staff Photographer)

Upon her return, Vedra met with friends and asked them about different organizations and ways to get involved, and ended up as a volunteer at The Neighborhood Center.

“In a sense, she hired us. She found us,” said Michael Landis, the executive director of the center.

“We’re here to do one essential thing: We’re here to break the cycle of childhood poverty,” Landis said, adding that statistics show the arts are effective in teaching kids how to aspire, dream and create.

And to show them, he said, “Who better than Vedra?”

“She’s seen the world,” Landis said. “She’s seen more of the world than I have and I’ve done a lot of travel. She experienced the earthquake in Japan firsthand.”

All of the kids look up to her, Landis said, “even the teenagers, which isn’t an easy thing.”

Vedra infuses the arts into the youth programs and teaches them to be open to new things, new activities, new food. You can dislike something, she said, but not until you’ve tried it.

She wants the kids to be aware of what Camden has to offer and embrace it.

The kids have told her before they don’t want white people moving into their neighborhoods. It’s too late, she replies.

“The city, it is going to change whether we’re ready or not,” she said. “So, if you’re planning to be here, you better get ready.”

She wants them to have ownership over their home, because if they just get involved, Camden will be better for it.

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“If you don’t want the city, someone else will claim it,” she said she tells them. “If you want it, claim it.” **Camden native works with community’s youth**

“We can make more nice neighborhoods. This is an opportunity. This city can be rebuilt in any way we want.”

Vedra’s path shows the kids life is about choices. “You need to view Camden as a choice,” she said, “not as a sentence.”

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Vedra’s father, a Camden native, used to talk about how the city’s intrinsic resources would help it rebound, Edra said. Vedra ascribes to the same idea, pointing to the river, the hospitals and universities as elements of great cities.

“I have such a huge heart for this place and I want so much for this to go well and I don’t want Camden to squander this opportunity to be innovative,” Vedra said.

If businesses are going to get tax breaks to be in Camden, she said, she wants those companies adding bike lanes and green spaces in return.

“I want Subaru to get a deal for moving to Camden because I think we should get a deal, too.”

Part of Vedra’s job is sparking conversation and encouraging community participation. The baseball field outside her office window is beautiful and green, but with pits in the outfield. She has never seen anyone play on it.

So she called up the North Camden Little League and offered the field, as well as an opportunity to screen the “Pyne Poynt” film as a fundraiser to fix the field.

Vedra still sings in her free time, like her mother always did.

She regularly performs during Camden’s Third Thursdays. She hasn’t ruled out a return to the stage, or anything else for that matter, but for now she is dedicated to Camden.

“One of the benefits of my being here, I’m able to show them there is more,” Vedra said. “I hope if nothing else they get a flavor for what sort of options there are in the world.”

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