



Woman's encore career combines art, business and community in Detroit's Eastern Market

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It takes some imagination to envision how Shel Kimen wants to transform a barren piece of land surrounded by vacant, graffiti-marked buildings just blocks from the vibrancy of Detroit's Eastern Market.

Kimen, 42, a Chicago-raised Michigan State University graduate with an eclectic background in advertising, social media, art and the Internet, is a transplanted New Yorker who wants to

reinvent herself career-wise by repurposing an acre of Detroit. She's pursuing a plan to build a boutique hotel out of shipping containers on land abutting a soon-to-be expanded section of the Dequindre Cut, an old rail line that was partially renovated into a bike and walking path. Close to obtaining first-round seed money for her \$4-million project, Kimen has an advisory board of local design and entrepreneurship luminaries as well as a preliminary agreement with the City of Detroit to buy the land.

She sees a day when visitors to Detroit will stay in her 36-unit hotel, browse art galleries and participate in community and storytelling events on its main floor; then stroll out the door to jog the Dequindre Cut.

"I came here because this city is perfect for me," Kimen said. "I can't think of a city that's more exciting -- so many people who are trying different things. It's the art. It's the freedom and the space. It's that there's something different happening."

But, more importantly, she wanted her work to have a direct impact on people and a place.

New start in Motown

Kimen's quest for personal change and making a difference in the lives of others mirrors a growing career trend across generations. About 9 million people 44 to 70 years old are pursuing what's come to be known as "encore careers" -- work that has social impact and is fueled by personal passion, according to a MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures study released in 2011. In a similar 2008 study, about 8.4 million people considered

themselves in encore careers. And, the studies found, women tend to start encore careers more than men.

Kimen is among them.

She has traveled the world, sailing from Greenland to Alaska through the Northwest Passage. She has worked in Chicago, San Francisco, London, Portland and New York, most recently as a senior vice president for digital strategy at global advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi.

But, Kimen says, she wanted more.

Encouraged by local artists she knew, Kimen relocated to Detroit after quitting her advertising job in spring 2011. Now, she says, she's finding her most satisfying adventure coming to pass in Detroit, where she lives in a house on the lower east side along the canals.

"I believe business has a responsibility to contribute to the community -- that products have to be meaningful and valuable," she said. "One day I realized, I'm an entrepreneur and what am I going to invent?"



Winning friends

Kimen may be a new Detroiter, but she typifies the innovators seeking out the city, lured by its abundance of available and affordable land and buildings and art scene. Before she moved here, Kimen says she had a great job, but it left her feeling unfulfilled and wanting more hands-on work.

"In advertising, you are very removed from the people you are trying to engage," Kimen said. "I was looking to find work more aligned with my values. ... I needed to be stretched and I needed a new challenge."

Leslie Smith -- president of TechTown, the Detroit business incubator -- is Kimen's mentor and one of her biggest cheerleaders.

"What Shel kind of embodies is all the things about entrepreneurship and creativity and the ability to see beyond ... the clouded filters that others see about Detroit," Smith said.

"She sees through a powerful filter of promise and hope and opportunity. And for all those reasons, I haven't doubted for one minute that she'll make this happen."

Smith and Kimen met through a referral from the Michigan Women's Foundation, which has a program to promote networking and business development by women.

Smith said she and Kimen bonded instantly over a shared passion for Detroit and Kimen's project. Smith pitched her Eastern Market container hotel at a competition in October that was primarily geared toward new technology businesses.

Kimen didn't win the competition, Smith said, but "she rocked the house."

Smith lauds Kimen also for her willingness to ask for, receive and digest feedback.

"In no way does she think she has it all figured out," said Smith, who serves on Kimen's advisory board for the project. "She's open to advice and influence." Delphia Simmons, board chairwoman for microlender KivaDetroit.org, part of a worldwide digital lending program designed to spur entrepreneurship, said she was moved by Kimen's affections and commitment to her new home.

"It's hard to believe that she just moved from New York, because she's really into Detroit," said Simmons, who works as the quality improvement director for the Coalition on Temporary Shelter (COTS) and founded "Thrive Detroit," a monthly newspaper written and sold by the homeless people. "I don't pull people into my circle that often. She's very easy and very genuine."

"You can tell she's an innovator and a risk taker," Simmons said. "And you can tell that she's artsy. She sees things differently."



Michigan connections

Kimen said she's always felt a link to Detroit and Michigan. Her father was born in Detroit. Her grandfather worked for Cadillac. She graduated from Michigan State University, where she studied human environment and design. She stayed in touch with friends from Grand Rapids to Detroit, some of whom were active in artists' circles. She visited the city over the years to stage impromptu art events in empty warehouses -- freelance work she has done as an art event designer and promoter.

She's often changed jobs and pursuits. After MSU, she worked in a Chicago record store and in a program for young people with HIV. She moved to San Francisco and used her knowledge about computers and technology -- both of her parents were computer operators -- to land a job writing about the Internet. She landed in New York, parlaying her design and Internet skills into designing Web space for digital agency Razorfish, then went to graduate school to study economic history. She peppered that with side gigs working in a record store, DJ-ing and setting up art events. During one art event setup, she fell off a ledge and broke multiple bones and punctured her lung. Doctors questioning whether she'd walk again. She did within nine months.

Her background in designing websites and art events, in guiding businesses on how to reach audiences through the Web, her teamwork and collaboration skills, Kimen said, all led her to one acre in Detroit.

It all came together

At a retreat/seminar for designers, artists and innovators in California in 2010, Kimen brainstormed an idea to build a retreat center for such conferences in Detroit, where property was cheap and the canvas endless.

"I couldn't get it out of my head," Kimen said.

That morphed into visits to Detroit in 2011, and the eventual realization that a tourist attraction such as Eastern Market didn't have a hotel.

"It was just baffling to me. There were so many people who wanted to come to Detroit to check out the art scene, and they don't know how to get into it," Kimen said -- or where to stay.

She began speaking with community activists, entrepreneurs and architects about building a hotel made out of shipping containers. There's one in London that's portable and shipped to various festival sites to accommodate tourists. There's one in China. Another Detroit developer is planning to build a 20-unit condo complex out of shipping containers near Wayne State University.

Kimen is living off her savings now while she secures funding for the hotel she is calling Collision Works, (<http://detroitcollisionworks.com>) to signify how ideas crash and fuse together and create new visions -- perhaps as artists do.

"People often ask me if I've come here because it's a blank slate and I find that offensive," Kimen said. "Yes, there is a lot of space. Yes, there is a lot of opportunity, but the city is not a blank slate. It is full of history, emotion, experiences, which is precisely what I am trying to reveal. I am here to help other visitors and developers understand quickly, and meaningfully, that it is very much not a blank slate.

"You have to make your world," Kimen said. "This is my time."

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