

From Anti-Apartheid to Land Back, Deborah Santana Reflects on Years of Social Justice Giving

Ade Adeniji | January 30, 2024



DEBORAH SANTANA AT HOME.

You might know Deborah Santana as the former wife of legendary musician Carlos Santana; the two were married from the early 1970s until 2007 and managed his band together for years. But that connection offers only a glimpse into the life of Deborah Santana, a dynamo in her own right. The daughter of African American blues guitarist and singer Saunders King and independent career woman Jo Frances, Deborah has spent her life as a social justice activist and philanthropist in support of women and people of color.

A native of San Francisco, Deborah married Carlos Santana in 1973. In 1994, the duo began managing Santana band, and in 1998, the Santana family launched the [Milagro Foundation](#) to support underresourced children around the world, mainly in the realms of education, health and the arts. Deborah served as vice president and treasurer of Milagro. Since the couple divorced, Deborah has continued giving independently through her own charitable fund, building on her social justice roots and diverse heritage. She was also a founding donor of Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).

Inside Philanthropy recently caught up with Deborah Santana to learn more about inspired her to use philanthropy to advance social justice, what she learned standir...

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Milagro Foundation with Carlos Santana, her work with Smithsonian, and how she sees the next chapter of her giving playing out.

An Oakland start

Born in 1951 in the Bay Area, Deborah Santana is a “child of the 50s and 60s” who grew up in a biracial family that was committed to equity and empowering and protecting those who loved as they loved. While the word “philanthropy” was never explicitly used, she says some of her earliest lessons in giving back started in her local Oakland church. Her father’s parents started a church in their local community, while the ministry and activism of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. loomed above.

“We were a beloved community believing in supporting each other and elders,” Deborah said. Within this space, she learned to tithe, giving 10% of earnings to the church. As Deborah grew up, she began to expand the definition of what church meant.

In 1972, Deborah went to see a Tower of Power and Carlos Santana concert at Marin Civic Center. Performing since the 1960s, Tower of Power is an Oakland R&B and funk band and horn section that collaborated with Carlos Santana, including on the track “[Give Me Love.](#)” Deborah and Carlos Santana met that night in Oakland and the rest is history; eight months later, the two married and went on to raise three children together.

In 1994, the duo assumed management of the Santana band. Four years later, they launched the Milagro Foundation (“milagro” is the Spanish word for miracle). Deborah explains that the family had been giving for a while at this point, but she felt things needed to be more organized so their giving could be more effective and impactful. The foundation made its first grant to the Albanian Adoption Committee, and during Deborah’s time there, went on to fund music programs, camps for homeless children, afterschool programs, Latino college prep courses and a theater for hearing-impaired youth, among other efforts.

Milagro also built out a board, which currently has around a dozen members, including executive director Shelley Brown, a longtime teacher and principal in the Bay Area who joined the foundation as a founding board member. Milagro was funded in part from profits they took in from concerts, Deborah said.

“Do A Little”

When Deborah and Carlos Santana divorced in 2007, Deborah went on to start Do A Little, a donor-advised fund housed within the San Francisco Foundation that she founded in 2008 to serve the needs of women and girls. Deborah likes that she has the freedom to find organizations and leaders doing the work, with the support of a big community foundation that can guide her and vet organizations as needed.

Do A Little was inspired in part by the words of her mentor, the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who said “do a little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

Deborah Santana first connected with the South African Bishop and human rights activist as a supporter of the anti-apartheid movement, backing Artists for a New South Africa (ANSA), which was founded by a range of Hollywood figures in 1989, including Alfre Woodard, Danny Glover, Blair Underwood, CCH Pounder and Mary Steenburgen. It was through this work that she ended up meeting Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Deborah said she’s grateful for the lessons she learned and friends she made within creative and activist community, including LaTanya Richardson Jackson, actress and wife of

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Sam Jackson, and actress Alfre Woodard. It was a group of people truly dedicated to getting “in the trenches of life giving back.” Among the lessons she learned during this time was an important piece of wisdom that she would still offer those looking to engage in this type of work today. “They have to listen to the people. Personally, I’m completely against going in and colonizing Africans. That never happened with ANSA,” Deborah said. She adds that it’s critical to listen to Indigenous people, not to try and change them, and that no one should go into any organization or country of color and try to lead.

Do A Little continues this approach to global work, with an emphasis on women and girls, including support for Daraja Academy, a free secondary school for girls in Kenya. When she first started backing the academy in 2010, there were 26 girls in the school. When she first visited the school in person, that number had doubled. Deborah combined her philanthropic support with filmmaking, creating short documentaries to raise awareness about the project and the plight of these young women. Today, there are nearly 300 girls attending that school, which boasts an 85% literacy rate. Looking ahead, there’s a goal to build a new facility that will be an academic hub for social change. “They have grown so much,” Deborah said.

Other grantees have included the East Africa Oral Health Initiative; the Simama Project, which empowers children and youth in Kenya; Sankofa Farms Agricultural Academy; and Friends of Winny Obure Foundation Fund, which supports women and girls. Winny Obure is a young feminist and women’s rights defender from Kenya.

Building a history museum and looking ahead

Deborah became a founding donor of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) at the Smithsonian, giving at least \$1 million toward that effort. Like other donors I spoke with, including [Rodney and Michelle Adkins](#), Deborah pointed out the vastness of the Washington, D.C., institution.

“I love the Smithsonian. It’s an amazing institution. With 19-plus museums and a zoo, there’s so much to learn,” Deborah said. She first got involved with the Smithsonian back in 2012, supporting a concert series on the National Mall. Then she was asked to join the national board, which allowed her to become even more familiar with the organization.

Later, she was courted by Anna Barber, who convinced Deborah to come in as a founding donor to NMAAHC. Barber, who now runs fundraising consulting firm Barber & Associates, LLC, served as a lead fundraiser for NMAAHC, raising \$40 million from a network of untapped influencers and donors that traditionally had not been courted. Barber made a particular point to connect with donors on the West Coast, like Deborah. A few months before the museum opened, they used Denzel Washington’s family home for a fundraising event to encourage seven-figure Founding Donor gifts. NMAAHC ultimately raised \$17 million as result of this one event.

“She [Barber] is a friend today. So I was so lucky to be involved from the ground up in that historical movement to build that museum,” Deborah said.

While the story of NMAAHC involves high-level Black donors and others stepping up to the plate, it is also the story of ordinary Black Americans pulling together resources to make the museum a reality. Here, Deborah credits historian and Founding Director Lonnie Bunch, who believed he could start a membership program before the museum was open, asking everyday people to contribute \$25 to become a member. Months before the museum opened, more than 100,000 people had made this pledge, according to Philanthrop

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Roundtable. “The museum was built with everybody. Not just through the donors who gave millions of dollars. And that’s what the celebration was,” Deborah said.

Looking ahead, Deborah said she had an estate planning conversation with her three children a few years ago. They agreed that they would take over Do A Little at some point and calls them all “very passionate” and “very radical.” But Deborah Santana herself has plenty more new plans up her sleeve, too. She ended our conversation talking about a new cause she is focused on these days: Land back efforts for Native and Black people. She believes there’s an intersection between these two communities, which share histories of stolen land and stolen people. She has supported the Sogorea Te' Land Trust in the Bay Area, which applies a “Shuumi Land Tax,” a voluntary annual contribution for non-Indigenous people. She also mentions a movement in Atlanta where Black people are buying back lands that were stolen from them. “So that’s my passion now. The land back movement.”

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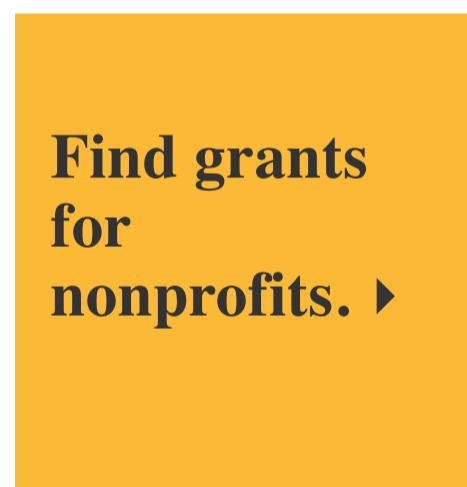
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