August 27, 2013: 2013-2014 Distinguished Alum, James Griffioen

Department of English
Jim Griffioen is a writer, photographer, and community activist at the forefront in the reinvention and revitalization of Detroit. A 1999 Western Michigan University English Department graduate, Jim went on to receive his J.D. at the University of Michigan Law School. Following several years practicing law as a corporate litigator in San Francisco, Jim and his wife relocated to Detroit, where they now live, work, and raise their children as “two more yuppies raising their kids in the most dangerous city in America.”

Since his career shift, Jim has become one of the most recognized and poignant chroniclers of contemporary Detroit – both through his popular blog, Sweet-Juniper.com, and through his photography, advocacy, and writing. He has been interviewed and featured on venues including NPR, BBC, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Rachel Maddow Show, and multiple other local, regional, and national outlets. His photography has been seen in Time, O: The Oprah Magazine, and many others. “Feral Houses,” a photo-essay of buildings being overtaken by nature, has received national attention. Oprah.com has featured Jim in a column titled, “What Inspires the Most Creative People We Know” and profiled his fatherly creativity.

His written voice -- like his photos -- is clear and humanistic. Where others see only decay, he is able to see beauty. As he states in the conclusion of an essay accompanying photos of the now-decrepit Detroit Public Schools Book Depository,

Despite the ugliness that is inherent in these photos: the ugliness of poverty, the tragedy of loss, and waste, this building still lets us glimpse something beautiful. In Detroit this beauty is uniquely sustained. In other cities, buildings like this would be turned into luxury loft condominiums. They would be knocked down so that something new could be built in their place, their contents dragged off to a landfill and forgotten. Here we get to see what the world will look like when we’re gone. We see that the world will indeed go on, and there is a certain beauty to nature’s indifference.

Jim’s work provides a longer and more empathetic view of the city than what is documented by national journalists who have been content to make quick trips to Detroit to document “ruin porn.” He is not reporting on Detroit – he is reporting in it – and living it. His powerful photo essays provide context, empathy, and hope while chronicling current decay and past mistakes -- abandoned schools, prairies that were once thriving neighborhoods, and other similar scenes. In Sweet-Juniper, he intimately chronicles his own family’s life and all the joys and adventures that they have in a supposedly ruined city – building crafts, exploring vacant lots, and embarking on trips throughout town. In doing so, he provides a powerful counter-narrative to the stories of bankruptcy, corruption, and neglect portrayed in national and international media.
Detroit – and other industrial cities like it – are being re-envisioned and rebuilt by people like Jim Griffioen – those with vision, talent, and the commitment to see past the ruin and towards a new future.

Posted by Jonathan Bush at 4:20 PM