



**HIGHLIGHTS – WIL # 204 – May 29.  
2020**

**“An Innovative Approach to Bringing  
People Together and Changing the  
World – Civic Dinners” featuring**

**Jenn Graham, Founder & CEO of Civic Dinners and Aha! Strategy**



**Summary:** This month’s WIL seminar (now our 3<sup>rd</sup> virtual webinar) could not have been more perfectly timed, particularly given the current environment around racial injustice as well as the ongoing health and economic uncertainties. Jenn Graham’s business and her passion are about bringing diverse people together to talk about and take action on the most critical issues of our time. Her story begins with early family influences which taught her about community service and about pursuing goals. It continues and flourishes with achievements and recognition like being named a 2020 “World-Changing Woman” by Conscious Company Media; a Cox Enterprise Social Impact Accelerator / Techstar; and an ABC “Entrepreneur of the Year Rising Star” – just to name a few honors.

Hearing her story, her insights and wisdom made everyone want to follow her leadership and her passion. Jenn is not only a highly engaging strategist, entrepreneur, innovator, and social engagement catalyst, she’s also a devoted wife and mother AND one of the most inspiring, enthusiastic, and creative leaders we’ve ever had speak at WIL. Starting Civic Dinners in 2014 in Atlanta as a “social experiment” has turned into a brilliant decision and now, with the most recent partnership with Facebook, the brand and the initiative have gone global. Already with more than 1300 dinners held in homes and restaurants, and in virtual gatherings across the country, Civic Dinners is now spreading even faster and further all around the world. Businesses, nonprofits, government agencies and other groups are all benefiting from Jenn and her team’s help to focus, raise awareness, and most importantly, bring about needed change.

**Background - Personal & Professional with Career Milestones:**

- Grew up in Raleigh, N.C. with father who was an entrepreneur in the printing business and her mom, who became a senior HR leader in the government; Jenn's early aspirations - entrepreneur or doctor; Family very engaged in the community from soup kitchens to Habitat for Humanity
- Attended UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School; BS in Business Administration; Also attended Miami Ad School @Portfolio Center in Atlanta earning a Certificate in Design
- Significant career positions include Co-Organizer of TEDx ATL (4+ years) and Social Innovation Designer at Unboundary (5 ½ years)
- Leadership Atlanta Project – Regional Collaboration Summit (CoLab) 2013 – Three Issues: Attract and retain talent; Transform education; and Cultivate innovation
- Jenn helped grow Atlanta Streets Alive from 5000 attendees to over 140,000 participants.
- Started Civic Dinners with millennial friends; 60 dinners in 6 weeks; 6-10 people typically discussing three big questions
- First Client: Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) in 2015; 130 diverse millennials from 10 counties discussing mobility, livability and prosperity; 5 of the 130 have since run for public office
- Business and Nonprofit Engagements, e.g., the King Center; City of Cincinnati (IRS), Baltimore (pilot for Women Founders); Facebook (2018 first contact, then 2019 full contract, and partnership with Cheryl Sandberg in 2020 )
- Civic Dinners team response to Covid-19 - Virtual in 10 days
- A few of Jenn's volunteer roles: Atlanta Bicycle Coalition, Communications Strategist; Community Farmers Market, Board Member; Hands on Atlanta, Advisory Council

### **Key Lessons, Insights & Takeaways:**

- "While at UNC, I discovered graphic design and how to use it as a tool for good. From my first teacher, I learned that the role of a designer is to create a whole new world that doesn't exist but that no one can live without."
- "I wanted to make the world better and not harm the earth."
- "Bringing opposites together to really find humanity in one another."

- "I've learned that relationships are how you get stuff done. I got the idea to move from organizing big events to smaller, more intimate settings so that everyone could have a voice. It's also more scalable."
- "These are real stats: how many kids can read proficiently in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade dictates how many jail or prison beds will be needed."
- "My super strength is curiosity. I'm now on a personal journey of reawakening. Injustice drives me. It's not ok that 34% of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders can't read proficiently!"
- "I had a bike accident riding to work on North Avenue. That turned into a catalyst to help make ATL more bike friendly - and led to my volunteer role with the ATL Bicycle Coalition."
- "I ask myself the question: am I spending my life on the right things?"
- "Leadership is all about leaving people feeling they have the power to actually change something."
- "Being a new mother has made me a better leader. I've had to build a team and rely on the team, not just try to do it all myself."

## Q & A

- Who was your first hire? Jenn: "My husband actually helped me with the technology (he owns a tech company.) After that I hired a community support person who's still with me today!"
- What's your favorite topic for a Civic Dinner? Jenn: "There are dozens to choose from but I like belonging, our connection to each other. I also like voices of women, all issues facing women."
- What was your most memorable dinner? Jenn: "One certainly was when we had a dinner with Trump supporters. It was difficult but I learned to control my emotions and not to stereotype others."
- What are the rules for a Civic Dinner? Jenn: "Typically you decide on the goal of the conversation (do something; think differently; hear one another.) Pick three topics. Other considerations include not to be offensive, not bring up other people's names other than attendees, be respectful, and tell your own stories."

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