

The Story of Celeste Collier

By Caroline Campbell

Inkster, Michigan, 1974. A little black girl named Celeste Collier loved to draw. Every day at school she doodled in the margins of her notebook while she was taking notes. When she came home made a meticulous drawing of something she saw on her way to or from school with a sheet of typewriter paper and a number two pencil, which she sharpened every five minutes. For her seventh birthday she wanted the master's painting kit that she found at Rembrandt's Art Supplies in Detroit but all her parents could afford was a fifty-pack of Crayola colored pencils from Sears. She just kept drawing.

It was now 1985 and Celeste was applying to colleges. She was no longer just making drawings but now stayed after school to work on animations, so she was interested in both art and technology. She really wanted to go to the Illinois Institute of Technology so she applied for a full-ride scholarship for first generation college students. Somebody in Chicago she didn't know was amazed that her animations looked so professional that he wrote, "Miss Collier, I have never seen such a spectacular piece of artwork."

However, on her first day of class a white man sitting next to her was drawing a mammy scrubbing laundry on a washboard over a tin washtub. Celeste felt queasy seeing his drawing and told the professor. He said, "Enough, Celeste. What Jeff makes is Jeff's choice. Now you need to control your emotions." After class she asked Jeff why he made such an offensive animation. He told Celeste very bluntly, "I don't think a woman, and especially a black woman, is more capable, nor would she be more satisfied, than keeping a home and family. As you see, there's this amazing new instrument called a computer that may soon take over as the animation medium in the movie industry. Using a computer requires ultra-advanced mathematical knowledge that only a select few men are capable of learning. You really don't have the brain or the skill to be a professional animator. I'm sorry." The next Monday the professor presented each student's animation and each student had to vote for a favorite animation other than their own. 17 of 27 students voted for Jeff's animation.

Celeste knew that her class had voted for Jeff's animation to ridicule her but she also knew deep within her heart that she could prove Jeff wrong. She ended up taking thirteen computer science courses and even though they were boring, she worked hard and received A's and B's in all of them. She even collaborated on an hour long movie using a computer animator. After she graduated she was offered a job at Disney Animation Studios, where she contributed to movies that every white American child would know and love but still made black American children feel neglected. Then she heard that Disney was making a movie about an ambitious young black woman from New Orleans in the 1920's and she was going to be the chief animator. She was thrilled. After that movie, *The Princess and the Frog*, was released, children with no experience in computer programming all over the United States of many different races and ethnicities pulled up their internet browsers, whether it was at home, at school or at the library, to watch the trailer and then beg their parents to take them to the movie theater.