



# PROJECT KILIMANJARO: THE CLIMBERS

## **Venita Ray, Attorney and Partner, Marsh Darcy Partners**

Venita is an attorney with Marsh Darcy Partners, a Houston-based firm specializing in planning and economic development. Venita received her JD from American University and is licensed to practice in Texas, District of Columbia, and Maryland. She is 52 years old.

Venita's story is unconventional, to say the least. She grew up in San Diego, California, the eldest daughter of an alcoholic mother and a difficult home life. Despite knowing how hard this life was, Venita became a teenage mother herself, giving birth to a daughter 11 days after her 15th birthday. She dropped out of high school, went on welfare and did a number of things she vowed she'd never do. "I realized," says Venita, "I'd become my mom."

When her daughter was a young teenager, Venita realized she needed to take a hard look at her own life. She decided to get sober; she did so with the help of AA. She went back to high school and graduated at the age of 28. With the encouragement of friends and family, she went to college at night, and then on to law school. It took 10 years.

Working in the Office of the Attorney General in Washington DC, her daughter grown and on her own, Venita was "living the dream," in her words. And in 2003, her world fell apart: she was diagnosed positive for HIV. "I would go to work every day," she recalls, "but I would come home and 'die' at night." She became so depressed that she finally left her dream job and came to Houston, where her daughter and sister lived, literally, "to die."

At a health supplements store, someone recommended Shana Ross Fitness to her. She learned about the importance of eating and nutrition. She's become a serious practitioner of yoga and has taken charge of her health and life.

Her climb up Kilimanjaro represents another opportunity to show herself and others the importance of "taking the power back" because there are no excuses in life. "When I get to the top," says Venita with a smile, "I'll yell out, 'No Excuses!'"

