Creative Environmental Strategist Intern

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Internship Title: Creative Environmental Strategist

Organization Worked For: Moné Design Studio

Student Name: Mason White

Internship Dates: 9/12/23

Faculty Advisor Name: Zander Albertson

Department: ENVS

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STUDENT SIGNATURE: Mason White  Digitally signed by Mason White  Date: 2023.08.18 13:39:37 -07'00'

DATE: 8/18/20
Mickey Blake created the company Moné Design Studio a year and a half ago and she does all the product design and 3D printing from her home in Bellingham. Mickey has a background in sustainable materials, owning a previous business that focused on recycling plastics in lab/medical settings, and also invented and produced Floral Soil™ which is a 100% plant-derived microcellular open-cell foam, the first alternative to traditional phenol formaldehyde flower foam. She has been working with sustainable and plant-based materials for many years so it’s natural that her current project is 3D printing plant pots, vases, and watering cans out of virgin and recycled plant materials such as wood, corn, coffee waste, beer waste, and clay. The goal of the company is to create a conversation about the future of non-fossil fuel-based materials and how sustainable innovation can include beauty and design. There’s an intersection between science and art that is often forgotten about and Moné Design Studio bridges the two. Mickey is self-taught in 3D printing and has designed several of the pots herself, as well as working with other artists around the world to create unique planters that people can connect with. This is no easy task but ultimately she has created something no one else in the world is producing the way she is.

I met Mickey at random in April this year when I was out for the First Friday Art Walk in downtown Bellingham. She had a pop-up at a new art cafe down the street from my house. My roommate and I stopped in and at first, I walked past her stand because I didn’t need any pots or plants. However, when she came out and explained what they were made of and what she had worked on in the past, we were instantly engaged and
really excited about her work. We had no idea you could 3D print with anything but plastic and were even more excited that the pots were bio-degradable and recyclable, and that she was experimenting with growing mushrooms with the pots after they broke down. At the end of our almost hour-long conversation, I jokingly said that I was looking for a job but when I came back the next day to pick up my plant she said she wanted to interview me. A few days later we met at Boulevard Park and talked for almost 3 hours about all sorts of things, mainly pertaining to the environment and how people engage with problems and solutions. We connected over the nuances that exist in sustainability and environmentalism in a way that we had struggled with others. Meaning that we were both frustrated with how words like sustainability seemed to be thrown around so much recently without actually being sustainable at all. I understood that her company was not only about making and selling a product but about showing that there are sensible materials out there that you can use instead of fossil-fuel-based plastics. I learned from her that on a molecular level, plant materials like corn and algae function similarly to plastics but are much easier to break down and/or recycle. After that, she offered me a job for the summer which I accepted and was excited to use as my internship experience.

My goal with this job was to connect what I’ve learned in school with a marketable business to understand how to bring textbook ideas to real life. I genuinely believe that the environmental problems we face today are often an issue of our relationship with the earth, the future, and each other. So I was especially interested in communicating with people about sustainable innovation, and figuring out how to make the concept of material sciences understandable and exciting to everyday people.
Communicating is definitely my best and most natural skill so I knew I would be good at this and Mickey clearly believed I was competent enough to represent her business. When I started in mid-April, I was just working on Saturdays with Mickey at the Bellingham Farmers Market selling the pots. I really enjoyed this aspect because I got to talk to people all day and fine-tune my elevator speech on 3D printing and the bio-degradability aspect. I learned to gauge how interested people were within a matter of seconds and format my spiel based on their interest in either 3D printing or compostable material. Sometimes it was neither and they just liked how the pots looked and sometimes it was both and I could have a really great conversation in a couple minutes. There were many instances where people were ecstatic about what we were doing and they really wanted to learn more. Sometimes people would stay after the market was over and talk with us for almost an hour or more. This is why we wanted to do workshops- to give people a chance to ask questions about the process and build on the aspect they were most interested in. This way we could take the time to really articulate how important our work was and that the goal was to educate and inspire, not just sell.

When school ended in Spring and I officially started my internship with Mickey, she presented some things that I would be mainly focusing on. One of my responsibilities would be to set up pop-ups in businesses downtown, market them, and maintain them (restock and make sure the plants are healthy). While I’m not completely clear on the details, Mickey never followed through with this and we did not do any pop-ups this summer. She also has not finished the website which was a big goal to do by the beginning of the summer and because of various obstacles, it is still not finished.
being updated, so we did not do any online sales or marketing as planned. She also had said early on that another responsibility of mine would be to run social media, which I thought I would be great at given my many years of social media experience. While she did bring it up on a couple of occasions, she never actually had me do anything for social media because we couldn’t direct them to a website or any events and didn’t have the capacity to begin selling through Instagram. Although I think the marketing aspect could have been beneficial to the business, she was very particular about the language and how she wanted to brand herself, so we just never got to it. Workshops were going to be a big part of my job as well, which I was looking forward to because I enjoy speaking in front of people, organizing events, and introducing a topic I’m passionate about. Mickey made a connection with a woman who owns a local nursery just outside of Bellingham and we were going to do workshops there because they have all the plants on site and plenty of space. Unfortunately, after we spent some time there getting to know the owner and how she operated the business, Mickey made the decision that it was not the right fit. She was not able to organize any workshops over the summer for a multitude of reasons but has said she has an opportunity north of Bellingham and the business will sponsor her to do workshops in September and October.

I was offered 30 hours a week when I first started and I often didn’t fill all those hours because of a lack of things to do. What I spent the majority of my time doing was talking on the phone with Mickey while she processed what was coming up for her as far as obstacles and how to move forward. I never actually got to see the 3D printers because she was quite private about her home. We talked a lot about what people were
saying at the market, how they were responding to certain colors and designs, what sizes we should make, how we could diversify our product line, etc. She definitely gave me a lot of creative freedom and really valued my input, which I appreciated. We both knew that if we weren’t making enough money, we wouldn’t be able to work on the bigger projects we had in mind. One of those was becoming a member of Patagonia's 1% for the Planet program so that we could invest in and support organizations around the country and world that are doing important on-the-ground work for climate change. I went through the application process and we were accepted to be a member as soon as we paid the membership fee and then at the end of our fiscal year, we could choose an organization to donate to. I made a diverse list of organizations from Patagonia's directory that I thought she would like based on what I heard her talk about and show interest in. These were groups that were doing things like river restoration, plastic removal and recycling, policy design, education, social justice work, or planting coral to create new reefs. She did not end up paying the fee and we did not finish becoming a member. Almost every week, I spent time making 2inx3in cards to put in the bags at the market that explained what the pots were made out of and how to contact us. I also sanded and painted some signs to put on the table at the market to distinguish which pots were made from what materials. I made some 200 seeds balls to sell at the market, which are seeds wrapped in compost and clay that you could throw or plant in places that could use some wildflowers or herbs. Each day I did what I could to help her out to the extent that she would let me.

While I did not do many of the things I thought I would be doing over the summer, I still learned a lot and gained experience that is valuable for me moving forward.
Starting a small business all on your own, aside from a little help from her business partner (who does not live in Bellingham) and me, is no easy task. I respect the hard work and many hours that Mickey put in to do something that is meaningful and needed in this world. There were moments of real frustration, stress, and emotional exhaustion on my part throughout this internship but it was nothing I couldn’t handle and work through on my own. Patience, empathy, understanding, and articulation were all things I had to work on to be able to work for Moné Design Studio but I know that practice will make me better prepared for future jobs and experiences. There are no classes or textbooks that could have prepared me for this summer, this was a matter of life experience and I’m grateful for past jobs and internships that helped me succeed in this position. I worked the Saturday market with Mickey on August 12th and after that, we both decided it would be best to end my internship, as the business was not going in the direction she thought it would when she first hired me. We are on good terms and we left things on a positive note, both understanding that life is a harsh road full of obstacles and we’re all doing our best to move forward on that road.