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Students see design as profession



PHOTO COURTESY KENT DAYTON/YOUTH DESIGN BOSTON

YOUTH DESIGN BOSTON founder Denise Korn, center foreground, with 10 students in her office, sees the program as a tool for economic development.

By Ted Nesi
PBN Staff Writer
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Josh Silverman was 16 when he got a summer internship that would change his life. As an intern in a design firm, Silverman discovered that he could channel his talent for the visual arts into a promising career.

“I had no idea that design was a career path when I had my first internship at that age,” said Silverman, who now owns his own Pawtucket-based design firm, Schwadesign Inc.

That’s why Silverman – who is also the co-founder of the Rhode Island branch of AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts, the professional design association – has decided to bring to Rhode Island a successful design industry summer-jobs program that began in Boston six years ago.

Each summer since 2003, Youth Design Boston has introduced a small number of students from public high schools to the design profession by placing them in paid internships at Boston-area design firms, agencies, and in-house design departments. This year, 10 young people are interning at organizations that include Harvard University Press and Metropolitan Life Insurance’s in-house design department.

The program was the brainchild of Boston designer Denise Korn, who said she sees it not only as a community service but also as an economic-development program.

“It’s specifically for public high school students with an interest, a passion and a talent in the creative and commercial arts,” she said. “It’s a way to open up and introduce them to opportunities to take that passion and channel it and make it a career.”

It was particularly important to create opportunities for public school students because art programs have been drastically curtailed in many taxpayer-funded schools, she said.

Youth Design Rhode Island, which is set to begin in 2009, will be patterned after its Boston-based predecessor. It will be easier to expand to new cities now that the format

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has been established in the original program, according to Korn, who is familiar with the state's design community through her work on the Creative Economy Council of New England.

"I think we have some tremendous scalability now because the Boston one can be a prototype," she said.

Silverman – who hosted one of the six interns who participated in Youth Design Boston's first summer, before he set up shop in Pawtucket – is enthusiastic about the possibilities for Youth Design Rhode Island.

It "will ignite passion in kids who, like me when I was 16, will discover that design is not elitist, but an accessible and highly valuable way of thinking and communicating – and most importantly, making a living," he said.

Korn agreed. "There's a lot of excitement and energy around design and the creative economy in Rhode Island, and I think it's a perfect fit," she said, due to its large and growing design community, its textiles sector and the presence here of leading educational institutions.

"There's a vibrant design community" in Rhode Island already, Korn said, "and also coming out of all the incubating being done by RISD and at Bryant College."

The students chosen for the Youth Design internships acquire hands-on knowledge of the design profession, and they are encouraged to voice their own ideas and opinions while assisting their firms with projects.

The seven-week internships are five days per week. Funding to pay the students, who receive slightly above minimum wage, comes from fundraising and the design firms' pockets. Three hours of the students' 30-hour work week are spent in a professional development workshop, as well.

The programs are also quite selective. Students must demonstrate talent, motivation and maturity, according to organizers, and also be capable of functioning well in a professional environment.

More than 35 firms have taken part in Youth Design Boston since 2003, and their experiences have been extremely positive, which makes her optimistic about the prospects for a Rhode Island program.

But she also acknowledged that her students face stiff competition for the coveted internships.

"It's challenging," she said, "because professional advertising departments, design firms and in-house design houses at corporations, they get approached by college students from top schools to work as interns for free," whereas Youth Design students are younger and need to be paid.

However, hosting a Youth Design student could also reap dividends for firms that need qualified workers down the road.

"Many, many kids tend to stay local for college and work," Korn said. "From an economic- development perspective, we're feeding out students."

Silverman and Kristina Lamour, a design educator at The Art Institute of Boston and Lesley College, are already at work putting the pieces together for the launch of Youth Design Rhode Island next summer.

Along with AIGA Rhode Island, the pair are partnering with the Providence After School Alliance, the Jaqueline M. Walsh School for the Performing Arts in Pawtucket and the R.I. Economic Development Corporation. They have been working closely with John Haidemenos Jr., the school's principal, and Chris Kane, an art teacher there. Other partnerships are expected to be announced in the coming months.

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Meanwhile, Youth Design Boston is also expanding. Formerly an all-volunteer operation, the group is now adding paid staff members. The group is also adding a program in Denver and Korn has hopes for continued expansion. •

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