Establishing an industry farm system for the next generation of shoe designers. By Kathlyn Swantko

The Pensole Footwear Design Academy

The excitement surrounding innovative athletic shoes rose to a feverish pitch during the 2012 Olympic Games in London, as Nike launched its Flyknit running shoe and Adidas introduced its adizero Primeknit running shoe. High-profile attention like this for cutting-edge athletic footwear has escalated the search for talented footwear designers. Recognizing this need, D'Wayne Edwards, former designer of the Jordan Brand at Nike, founded the Pensole Footwear Design Academy.

Growing up in Inglewood, CA, Edwards drew his first shoe design at the age of 11 and even then, at such a young age, he was motivated to be a footwear designer. Edwards found, however, that opportunity for achieving his goal was limited.

"After graduating from Inglewood High School, I wanted to attend design school in Los Angeles to study footwear design," explains Edwards. "But, growing up in a single-parent home with five siblings, there was no money for design school. In addition, I discovered that no local schools offered a program in footwear design, nor did any other school in the United States. It was at that point that I first had the idea that I would start my own footwear design school."

Since design school was not an immediate option for Edwards, he attended a local community college, and was fortunate to get a job as a file clerk for footwear company L.A. Gear. Edwards worked his way up through the ranks at L.A. Gear, and became its head footwear designer before being hired by Nike in 2000.

Taking the Next Step Forward

In 2010, Edwards launched the pilot program for the Pensole School, through the University of Oregon, giving design students from around the world the opportunity to learn from the industry's best instructors. Today, the Pensole Footwear Design Academy is a completely independent school.

Now located in its own space in the Design District in Portland's Old Town/Chinatown, Pensole is a one-of-a-kind footwear design school. The school was created to give talented young design students – regardless of socio-economic background – an opportunity to learn from the industry's best, and to provide the footwear industry with a farm system for the next generation of designers.

Master Class: Suzette Henri working with Material Design students.

Founded as a footwear design "master class," Pensole's "learn by doing" curriculum teaches students the entire footwear design process: inspiration, concept-development, problem solving, materials, prototyping, marketing, business, networking and branding. Edwards says Pensole is "the school I wish I could have attended." The school's unique curriculum is currently offered in intensive two-, three- and four-week programs, in which students, who have come from more than 60 different schools around the world, are in class for up to 14 hours a day.

The format somewhat resembles a footwear design boot camp, where students earn the same credits as a full 16-week semester. Currently, a three-month program is in development, which will be the equivalent to one full year of college. Pensole has also partnered with prestigious design schools such as Parsons The New School for Design (New York) and the Art Center College of Design (Pasadena, CA).

The Materials Class

One of the key courses taught at the Pensole Academy involves a comprehensive program on color, materials and finishing (CMF). These classes are taught by Suzette Henri, who worked with D'Wayne Edwards in developing the Jordan Footwear line at Nike. As the school has evolved, so has the materials program at the school. Henri's materials class has grown into a dedicated materials library, which is known as Pensole's MLab, and houses various resources including industrial, automotive, medical, footwear and apparel materials.

According to Henri, the library partners with strategic vendors who keep the library replenished with both seasonal and working materials. "Vendors also mentor students both during sessions and after graduation, creating unique networking opportunities that empower both students and suppliers," explains Henri. "We have amazing vendor partners that are global leaders in their respective industries." ●

For more information on the Pensole Footwear Design Academy and the school's MLab, contact Suzette Henri, szettehenri@gmail.com.

Kathlyn Swantko, president of the FabricLink Network, created TheTechnicalCenter.com for Industry networking and marketing of specialty textiles, and FabricLink.com for consumer education about everything fabric.

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