

GAME CHANGERS: D'WAYNE EDWARDS

Difference maker

D'Wayne Edwards is a well known athletic footwear designer and the founder of the Pensole Footwear Design Academy. Based in Portland, Oregon, it gives aspiring young designers from all backgrounds the skills they need to have a successful career in the footwear industry. Pensole has collaborated with leading footwear brands to deliver training programmes that prepare students for the real world.

How did you find your way into the footwear industry?

My path is a little bit unconventional, in the sense that I started as a file clerk in the accounts department at [shoe company] LA Gear back in 1988. I always loved shoes and art in general; I was a "sneakerhead" before it was a term. I'd put sketches in the suggestion box [at LA Gear], along with the suggestion that they hire me as a footwear designer. Back then, there was no Google and no social media, so there was no real way for me to show people what I could do. The next best thing was [to use] the box. After about six months of doing that, the owner of the company, Robert Greenberg, who is now the chairman of Skechers, called me into his office and hired me, purely based on the ambition of submitting every day, as well as him seeing that I had raw talent. I was right out of high school; I never went to college. I was at LA Gear for about four years, then I followed Robert to Skechers, where I spent another six years. Then I moved up to Oregon to work at Nike. One year into my Nike job, I became design director for the Jordan Brand. My dream was to design for Nike. I didn't know the Jordan brand was a possibility; it wasn't a reality until I got there. I worked on the third floor, Jordan was based on the fourth floor, and I would sneak up and see what they were doing. They asked me to do some projects and eventually they hired me.

Persistent - the word that comes to mind when describing D'Wayne Edwards.

 Marcus Yam/Pensole

What inspired you to set up the Pensole Footwear Design Academy?

Back in 1988 or 1989, if you wanted to be a footwear designer there was no clear path. I was able to get in through an unconventional path and other people that I have met at companies where I've worked got in through different paths as well. When Google happened and kids were able to post their work and email people, you could see there was a rise in interest in sneakers in general and also in designing them. During my time at Jordan we were always understaffed. I would take the time to mentor kids, through email and phone conversations, with the idea of them becoming my interns because there was no straight path. I had to take it upon myself to teach them the industry. In time, the interns became full-time employees. After 24 years working with the greatest designers in the industry, I realised that I'd developed more of a passion for helping people. Instead of designing a product, it was about designing lives and giving [young] people the opportunities that I had. It was also about giving the footwear companies access to raw, young talent. [The academy] gives the students more knowledge of how the industry works before getting a job, rather than learning everything on the job from day one. At a company, there isn't always time to develop your talent.

What skills does the academy try to teach?

Fundamentally, we teach product design, but we teach it in a way that reflects how it is done at a company. We also teach personal development; this part is the missing piece from major universities and colleges. The kids need to understand that although the products that they design belong to a company by logo, they belong to the designers emotionally. We try to get them to understand that there is a certain weight that comes with being a professional and hammer into them the importance of personal responsibility, business etiquette, time management, communication and how to work with people. Our classes are eclectic; we always have a mix of students from all over the globe and in terms of sex and race. We've tried to create an environment that reflects what life is like in a real company. The academy is not designed like a normal college or university; it is designed like a company. It's an immersion; they're with us every day for four to six weeks, 12 to 14 hours per day so there is an emotional attachment that happens.

What qualities are you looking for in the students?

Passion, because I can't teach that. It's easy to teach footwear design; that's simple. The hardest



part is finding someone who loves what they do. It's difficult to find the kids that are willing to work 12 to 14 hours per day. When you are passionate about something, time isn't an obstacle. You work until you get it done because you want it to be great. Kids are starting to realise that if they are accepted into Pensole, it's going to be the hardest thing they've done from an education point of view. I just want to prepare them for the realities of the industry and then they can decide if this is what they want to do. It's ultimately a four-to-six-week job interview because the [partner] companies are watching. These kids have more visibility than they would have in an internship. The companies pick the candidates that they want. We work with over 100 design schools globally. I present the company with 30 to 50 options but they handpick each student. We set up time for the companies to come in and see how people are working and the progress that is being made.

Is it easier for young designers to break into the industry now compared to when you started?

Definitely! They have a lot of tools at their disposal. They don't have an excuse; their biggest obstacle is themselves. These kids are used to things happening at a quicker pace. As a result, their attention span is shorter. Pensole is still the only academy that specifically focuses on footwear. We're also the only academy that has close ties to the industry. The students are starting to realise that the best pathway into the industry is through a Pensole programme. But it's not easy; there are up to 1,000 kids trying to get 18 spots every time we run a class. The kids aren't used to it being so competitive. It's a very

Founder D'Wayne Edwards works closely with all the students that come through the academy.

 Marcus Yam/Pensole

competitive industry but competition just makes you better. If you become complacent at anything, you will never reach your full potential. We push them to understand that there is more to it than talent and that talent alone doesn't guarantee that you'll get a job.

Are there any success stories that you're especially proud of?

All of the students who come through the academy are like my kids. It's always exciting to get an email from a student saying they've got a job interview or that they've got the job. We have over 180 students working professionally in the industry now after a little over five years; a lot of them are working at top companies and making major contributions to those brands. For me, it's further proof of what can happen when you invest in somebody. I wanted to leave the industry better than when I entered it; it's important to know that I was able to make a bigger impact than just the shoes I designed.

Do you think there will be any big developments in the footwear industry over the next 10 years?

I hope there will be some because our industry is really old; we've been making shoes the same way for over 100 years. I'm excited about new ways to create things rather than new designs. It's not about making a silhouette look different, it's about creating a new way of making things. I'm hoping that there are new methods and new materials, which are more interactive with the human body and natural movement. I'm working on a project called the CO2 shoe. The idea is to turn CO2 waste, which the footwear industry produces a lot of, into a foam that can be used in products. It leverages the negative things in our industry. Our industry is focused on just making things rather than making things better. As we move forward, I hope that we not only focus on making product, but on making it better, easier and more innovative. More importantly, it would give consumers the opportunity to engage with the brands to get the types of products that they want, instead of what the brand wants them to have.

Will this result in more 'local for local' manufacturing?

It will. It's in direct response to consumer lifestyle right now. For younger consumers, everything in their life is faster – except products. Products are still introduced to them at a slower pace and through traditional methods. There are new shoes being released every week but that isn't genuine speed because it took one or two years to make that product. What if, instead, a company got insight from a customer and turned



that insight into a real product that was available within a month. For me, speed is going to be about making things more closely connected to the consumer. The relationship between the consumer and company will change; it has to. If the goal is to design product for your customer, you should let the customer decide a lot more than they do now.

What's next for the Pensole Design and Footwear Academy?

We are expanding into high schools. We are trying to identify talent at an earlier age to help them get into college and eventually find a career. We are also launching a global online programme to tap into more international markets. We already have a programme called the World Sneaker Championship, which has had representatives from more than 75 different countries. It has shown us the size of the interest in designing sneakers across the globe so we will be diving deeper into online programmes with a specific emphasis on international schools and students. We will also start producing our own co-branded products. Our first one with [athletic footwear brand] Asics sold out within an hour. So, we're going to look at doing more collaborations with brands, not with the idea of generating revenue but to further elevate the idea of giving a kid the opportunity of seeing a product they design on the shelf at a major retailer. That is still the most important moment in my career in the industry, the day I walked into a [branch of US shoe retailer] FootLocker and saw a shoe that I designed on the wall. That should be the dream [for aspiring designers]; it shouldn't be how much money you are going to make, it should be the result of all your hard work showing up at the largest athletic retailer in the world. 🌐

Pensole's programmes are tailored to the needs of partner brands, many of which are industry heavyweights.

🌐 Marcus Yam/Pensole