

## Personal Statement

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### **Where I come from**

While living in Ann Arbor, MI. working in a cancer lab at the University of Michigan, I had the opportunity to join the school of theatre at the University of Michigan as an incoming undergraduate lighting student. I was blown away by how design worked behind the scenes, being enamored by the work and crew members creating amazing designs. Beyond undergraduate school, I was accepted at the University of California, San Diego in 2003 under the mentorship of Chris Parry. I was enamored OF him, his attention to teaching and detail, and his professional approach to design. He taught me so much about being human, working towards a professional goal, gin and tonics, and changing your profession every 10 years. Funny, I took most of his advice, but I couldn't give up being a lighting designer. I love to encapsulate an audience, drawing them into a show. Jump to 2013 and I am working professionally in New York, designing and as an Associate/Assistant across the country. But something was missing; I really loved to teach others. In Grad school, I had the pleasure of being a Teaching Assistant the majority of my time at the University of California San Diego, so I wanted to continue the pursuit. The job at Virginia Commonwealth University came about from a friend sending me an email about the advertisement. I immediately applied, had an interview and was accepted. This was a big change that I was really happy about and the next chapter in my life. I was making my dream come true; to be able to teach college students and continue my research across the country. I wasn't sure if Virginia would be my final home, having lived in the Midwest region most of my life, San Diego and New York. But having been here for 6 years, I can now say Virginia is my home.

### **My Arrival at VCU**

When I arrived at VCU, I had the opportunity to re-work certain aspects of the lighting program. What worked in the past followed by what I could contribute to the future of the lighting program inspired me to develop a program that would give the students a strong pre-professional outcome. I spent the first semester observing the current classes while making some slight changes to the syllabi, observing the students during technical rehearsals, lighting focus, cuing, and the overall temperament of the students. I came to the conclusion that the training had not been engaged enough to what the professional world is and that students didn't successfully design shows that were understood by the students themselves. I asked students, "why did you put that light there on the light plot? What is the purpose of your cue? Why is the light focused so low to your feet when it should be on your head?" and I realized

that the students were duplicating other students' because "it worked." I knew I had to do something; to re-work my program so that students had a building block of growth from freshmen to senior level, they knew the professional world, how to be human dealing with professional and personal life, and what it would take to become a designer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So I started over in my program from the bottom up, re-creating the class structure, encouraging student confidence in their work, and allowing myself to grow my department into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Collaboration and communication have been lost in a new generation of young designers. I felt that during my first year the students were not engaged enough, though they liked all the "theatre stories" from the previous professors. And while that might be ok in some instances, the students were not learning all that was needed in this field. In building a department, I am engaged in helping them learn to listen, considering what they have heard, and responding effectively. In turn, I decided to make a lighting handbook to inform the students as to what their responsibilities would be in each crew position, what acceptable classroom demeanor is, and what I expect, as students, to be in the department. Respect is very important to me and helping them understand their responsibilities and work is helpful for them.

I am focused in spending appropriate amounts of time introducing students to lighting basics before I go to the advanced portions of lighting. I really need to start with fundamentals and qualities of light, different professional positions in the lighting field, and creating projects that can be essential to their learning process, starting with something simple to more advanced projects. While I understand and accept that a solid knowledge of technology is part of being a designer, I also believe we need to teach students how design helps us understand the world of the particular show. I never attempt to tell my students there is a right or wrong answer; because lighting is so organic, you can mold, change and create at any time. A lighting designer is a like a master at chess; we are always 7 steps ahead and we re-create and move in different directions if there is a challenge we face. Why that light? Why that color? That first cue for me is always the toughest, and I've learned that the students feel the same way. What light do you turn on first? Why do these colors work together? And for students designing a show for the first time, they are creating a world that is so new to them that it makes me feel rewarded that the education I gave them allowed them to create.

### **Students as Thinkers**

Most students coming to VCU do not have a lighting background, but are intrigued with lighting. They may have done some lighting at their high school or local community theatre, but mostly have experience limited to pushing the "go" button or hanging a light. Some students have done acting in their high school but love to crew shows. And there are some students that came from high school understanding lighting, have designed shows, and are pretty up-to-date on lighting lingo. Whether they know some lighting or none at all, I mentor them from the beginning and beyond school graduation. I treat them with respect and ask them to have their own point of views, judgements, and make their own decisions. I feel more like a teacher that wants them to grow and become themselves in their own skin, not having little mini-me's

running around. I want them to take the classes they need, the classes that are mandatory, and consider additional classes such as art, photography and film as electives. In helping them become designers, artists, educators and freelance professionals, I like to help guide them into the business they are going to enter.

As they enter their second semester, they begin work on drafting with paper projects and understanding all the paperwork involved with lighting. This is essential to become an assistant, designer or an electrician. In their Junior year, we work on design and process (where to begin, how to talk to a director, creating plot/paperwork, and finishing up the ending process with focus, tech and previews). By the end of their Junior year, they will have taken 3 advanced lighting classes that take them on their process journey from reading the script to completing all plot and paperwork. For me, it is this journey from opening a script to the finishing 3-ring binder that is essential to a designer. I am so satisfied when the show has opened and I see my work.

I ask my students to find a love for the show they are working on, whether they like the script or maybe love the action of the show. I tell my students that design is problem solving. I begin what is necessary to the project. Where do these people live, what are their relationships, do they love/hate each other, and what is the emotional state of the characters? I like to tell my students the mood of those scenes would be accentuated with the lighting design they create onstage and the lighting needs drive the action of the play. Along with the designers and the director, we all create what is essential and appealing to the show itself and allow the audience to be immersed.

### **National Work**

Before joining VCU and continuing into the present, I have worked for Mint Theatre Company, designing more than 9 shows with them in the last 6 years, spent 4 years as the Resident Lighting designer for the Eugene O' Neill Conference, and I have worked all over the country and internationally for Parsons Dance Company as their lighting supervisor. Nationally and internationally, I have designed and assisted in Regional, Off-Broadway and Broadway shows. At school, we have moving lights, intelligent LED lights, and standard conventional lights. So while working out in the professional world, I try to bring technology to VCU with new choices of gear and thoughts about the future in terms of the industry. I have also worked on theatrical projections for the last 10 years as an assistant or designer and I plan to continue that work at VCU. It is always important to keep up with technology and where lighting will take us in the next 20 years. I believe it is my responsibility to train working designers who can move from one show to another with ease and confidence.

### **Responsibility of my outside work to students**

Working on a variety of design projects has made me a better teacher. Over my career I have worked with budgets totaling tens of thousands of dollars to a few hundred thousand. As I work on my outside projects, I include my students in the design, whether they are assisting in the

drafting or they are observing my process and progress. It's very interesting to show the students the difference between a design at VCU and a design in New York. They see how big the show can be, the structure of its design, and the different work a professional company seeks. While I train them professionally, there is always the subtle differences they notice in the outside world vs. the educational work. As I teach them shop orders, they don't necessarily do one for their show positions, rather a mock-up of a shop order so they can learn. But for the professional work, I show them a working shop order that will go out to bid to rental shops and what is involved in each shop order. For me being a designer has always been finding a connection between the director, fellow designers, and actors to the audience we perform. If I am successful in bringing this together, then I have created an environment for the show to exist.

I work extremely hard at balancing my outside work, my school, and my personal life. I share my successes and failures with my students so they don't have to make these same mistakes. Every day at school I present a reality of what the professional world is and what it can be. It is difficult at times to give them harsh realities about the work, long days with bad pay, or non-collaborative people. But I always feel that being upfront with the students can make them better people, and they learn what not to do in the field. I encourage my students to come with respect and work hard. Without these two traits, you won't collaborate well with others and you make yourself look disrespectful to others. I continue to bring opportunities for my students to practice their work in the city of Richmond, working with Richmond Ballet, Virginia Repertory Theatre, Henrico Theatre, and Firehouse Theatre. I build relationships with my continuing partnership with Seattle, New York and Connecticut to better allow my students to work in the industry, giving them opportunities to draft and assist me on shows. Whether it is something small or a big show, I always hire my students to work on it. I have made a point in my contracts to hire students on the shows. Both in the city and out of state, my students would experience first-hand how to collaborate, and watch a project evolve outside of the university.

I believe a balance of paper and realized projects are necessary. The students need to learn not only in the classroom but also in practice in technical rehearsals as well. Students should observe tech not only at school but in all levels of theatre outside of school. As Howell Binkley once told me, "You will learn a lot in school, but much more observing technical rehearsals." I want the students to learn by success and failure. As the resident lighting designer at the Eugene O' Neill Conference, their slogan is "Risk, Fail, Risk again." This is so vitally important. The way to learn is to fail, then learn from those mistakes and succeed. And the best and safest place to fail and succeed is at school.

### **My role as a Teacher**

At school, I wear a lot of hats. I serve as a mentor, role model for the students, and teacher for all students. As a mentor, I attempt to work with the students as they grow from freshmen to seniors. While they may not have a deciding factor on whether they want to be a designer or an electrician, I help them guide them through what is good for them. They make the final decision

and I help them along. While in tech, I mentor not only the lighting student designing the show, but I mentor all the student crews as well. In our department, we have the following positions: Lighting Designer, Associate Lighting Designer, Assistant Lighting Designer, Master Electrician, Assistant Master Electrician, Moving Light Technician, Deck Electrician, and Programmer. For all these positions, there needs to be a sense of professionalism and mentoring to be given so every student understands what the positions even mean. At VCU, I don't have a Master Electrician, so most of the mentoring comes from me and I can't let the students down. As a role model, it is important how I conduct myself with my staff and fellow professors. I am always watched by the students so I want to present a certain demeanor that will allow myself to be looked upon with respect and hopefully will continue on in my student's work. As a teacher for all students, in the classroom I can have a scenic or costume or stage management student. I need to make it interesting with them and allow all other disciplines to understand lighting. If they can understand the lighting field, they may choose how to interact with lighting professionals in the real world and respect others.

### **Student Success**

It is awesome to see my students succeed, not because I'm not confident but because I never thought I would say "students succeed" in my lifetime. I wasn't aware of the positive feeling you get that your students will get jobs, become designers or electricians, or work professionally outside of theatre. I have students who won 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> place at the Southeastern Theatre Conference, students who work as designers and electricians in New York and Los Angeles, and students who work for design firms to create drafting both in 2D and 3D. One alumni in particular, Kathryn Blair, has had work shown in a magazine and now works for a company in Oregon 3D drafting in Vectorworks software. It is amazing how students project their professionalism in this industry, have a level of respect, and work hard.

While I am not convinced of the benefits of winning and losing at a conference, it does look good to the program that our students are working hard and people are noticing. It makes me feel great that I am doing something wonderful to their lives and they are able to work in their field. I think my students leave the program having learned to collaborate, communicate, understand patience and work together with a director. I believe they have learned to take risks, trust one another, and will listen.

### **My Future**

The future is always uncertain in this field, but I am always confident in the work I do. I will continue to work around the country and hire students to assist me in my work. I intend to balance my personal life with my career as a designer and a teacher. I want to grow as a lighting designer, learning more from the directors I work with. I want to learn much more in the field of projection design, having assisted in some tours and on Broadway. This is a field that is becoming a huge design implementation into scenery that I want to be a part of. I want to learn new software that can better my rendering techniques, more 3D work and video editing. Each year I teach, I learn a little more from my students and how to be a better teacher. Every time

there is an error, I remember to fix it for next time. I keep copious amounts of notes about my mistakes and accomplishments in mentoring and teaching. Not everything I teach works with students, so I like to continue to make it interesting. My ability to find a common ground with the students and sharing my experiences improve every year. Students need to be treated as students and as professionals. I continue to work towards the future with new incoming students and the future of how the field of lighting will take me in the years to come.

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