

## **VF Corporation and PENSOLE Academy™'s DiverCity x DESIGN Partnership Is Shifting the Narrative on Who Gets to be Included**

PENSOLE Academy™ has a longstanding history of granting life-changing opportunities and access to budding designers, with a mission of offering master-class design curricula with no socioeconomic barriers for new talent. What's unique about the academy's new [DiverCity x DESIGN](#) partnership with VF Corporation's Timberland, Vans and The North Face, is the rare opportunity for five individuals (representative of the BIPOC community) to matriculate through a year-long rotational apprenticeship across the three trademark brands, taking place at their respective HQ's in Stratham, NH; Costa Mesa, CA; and Denver, CO.

“That was really where the idea came from was how do we give these kids an opportunity to experience VF Corporation as a whole,” explains [PENSOLE™](#) founder D'Wayne Edwards, adding that it took a “collaborative effort” when developing the ideal design program. “As we start to go to different brands, each of them has something different because they represent something different in the industry. So they all had their unique point of view that we had to craft into the curriculum.”

Those few who secured one of the five apprenticeships — after making it through Phase 1 of the competition (where 27 students attended a three-week online pre-program) and Phase 2 (where the pool was narrowed to 18 students who entered PENSOLE™'s eight-week Masterclass) — are Ashley Narvaez, Gabriel Pimentel, Shawn Williams, Gaganjit Singh, and Jesus Mendez. One of the stewards helming the program alongside Edwards and a wealth of retail, footwear and design professionals, is Chris McGrath, Timberland's VP of Global Footwear Design. He, like Edwards, stresses the underlying intention to make the initiative multi-dimensional.

“How we've really structured the program is to expose the apprentices to every single aspect of the business to give them a real strong insight into the brand as a whole, but also to give them insight into the industry as well,” McGrath says. “Because the design side is one thing ... but then there's a whole host of other elements that are needed to, A, not just bring it to life, but, B, get it out into the marketplace and for it to be a successful piece of product design for the brand.”

One such project to give the apprentices a taste of the full scope of the business has been to work on their interpretation of a Timberland boot for the brand's 50th anniversary in 2023. They'll even have exclusive access to the brand's “Maker Shop” in Stratham, offering them the unique experience of having their prototypes produced. The apprentices will go on to present their final concept to senior leadership at the end of the rotation, having each been guided by an assigned mentor, design manager and category throughout the process.

“One thing which is really important is that every single mentor that they've had through the program will stay in touch with them, hopefully for the rest of their career,” says McGrath. “I think that's one of the biggest things because mentoring is a huge deal to us, but I think it's a huge

part of what this program is meant to stand for. Partnership, collaboration, inclusion, but also support.”

The importance of collaboration and relationships is felt throughout the cohort, with Pimentel stating: “I think the five of us are all super grateful and feel super lucky to be in the position we are, and we're just loving and enjoying the process.”

Edwards doubles down on the sentiment.

“I appreciate them taking a chance on us and trying it ... for the opportunity to show them a group of kids that they would've missed out on based on the traditional recruiting ways,” he says. “We meet kids where they are ... It's not an obligation for you to have a college degree or even attend college to be a part of our programs. We just need you to be passionate about what it is that you want to do or curious enough to try to figure it out.”

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### **Meet Shawn Williams** **Timberland Apprenticeship: Street Team**

Shawn Williams could always draw, he explains of any initial interest in design, but gaining exposure to the technical side of the business — “like designing against cost ... how much it costs to make a shoe, and how that affects the design process” — through the DiverCity x DESIGN program has offered him a much-appreciated avenue to expand his tool belt. Without a doubt, Williams still has and expresses gratitude for the design opportunity at large, in which he serves on the Street team as a Timberland apprentice. But because he comes from a “left-field path,” Williams notes that he is the “least experienced” of the final five apprentices, though the oldest.

“I have no real design background at all, other than the [PENSOLE™] class I took that granted me this opportunity,” he explains. “I was actually in the social work field, working with individuals with disabilities... [as well as] individuals that may have recently come home from prison, helping them find jobs. I always had a passion for drawing. I was really into shoes, but once I reached out to PENSOLE™, about a year ago, that's when I knew I wanted to change my career path and get into design. It's a complete opposite direction from social work.”

Yet what Williams feels he lacks in design experience, he seems to make up for in professional savvy. In fact, it was through a mentor-mentee relationship that he'd fostered with a Timberland employee (the mentor), that he found out about DiverCity x DESIGN and decided to apply. The program marks Williams' first official foray into fashion, and he's taking in all it has to offer, from the educational aspect to the social dynamics.

“This is my first major thing. I'm learning every day from the ground up. I'm learning how to use Illustrator for the first time. I'm learning design. I got exposure to some of it in the [PENSOLE™

Master] class, but this is another level. This is the corporate level, so it's a little different," says Williams.

The budding designer goes on to explain that as a Virginia native, he's been equally immersed in the new environment that New Hampshire provides and has found one of his favorite parts of the program to be the "people aspect" of it all. "I'm getting exposed to a lot of things I wasn't exposed to back in VA," he explains.

Taking into account his limited design experience but eventual ascension into the final five apprenticeships, Williams' story serves as a real-life testament to not only the wide reach, but also the underlying goal of the program — increasing access to footwear design for those who may have not been otherwise exposed to, or worse, not accepted into, the fray.

Besides, Williams leads into his social work background as a strength.

"I think [in terms of] storytelling. That can be a strong aspect I can give to [design], that we don't really get with shoes, the storytelling aspect. Especially when it comes to community, I can give a unique perspective to my community initiatives, and just push it further, especially for marginalized communities. We can use more of that."

So what is Williams' advice for others hoping to make similar moves? Well, it's parallel to some that he's already used for himself.

"Network. Bug people, really bug people. It's a fine line...You don't want to annoy somebody. Find a mentor to stay persistent," he advises. Most importantly, he finishes, "Don't doubt yourself...You don't necessarily fit in, but that's a good thing. Embrace that."

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## **Meet Ashley Narvaez**

### **Timberland Apprenticeship: ACE (Advanced Concepts and Energy) Team**

"It's definitely surreal," Ashley Narvaez, an apprentice with Timberland's ACE (Advanced Concepts and Energy) team, recounts of the DiverCity x DESIGN experience thus far. Narvaez had already grown familiar with PENSOLE Academy™ over the years, having heard about it through alumni from her college in Detroit, College for Creative Studies (CCS), and even trying out for one of the previous Masterclass opportunities.

"I was still in school, so I didn't get into that first round," she explains. "But D'Wayne emailed me saying, 'Hey, I saw your stuff, and I was pretty impressed. You weren't selected for this, but I want you to make sure that you're keeping up with us.'" And so she did, eventually coming across an ad on Instagram (shortly after her 2019 graduation), which led her to take part in PENSOLE™ 's Design Intensive, putting her more squarely back on a design career track after she had declined a role in the automotive industry.

“Once I graduated from school, there was a job offer over at GM, but the thought of that ... obviously, the opportunity I was grateful for, but I couldn't imagine myself doing something like that,” Narvaez explains.

It's understandable that she would be drawn to more design-centric opportunities, having studied the subject since high school where she attended Miami's DASH (Design and Architecture Senior High). Furthermore, Narvaez took up the specific discipline of “shoe design,” giving her an edge on what the footwear world entails and the educational foundation to match as she matriculates through the PENSOLE™ program.

Still, her entrance into the apprenticeship hasn't come without its fair share of challenges, namely ones that Narvaez has placed on herself. “I've heard a lot of horror stories in the industry, especially against people of color or women, or just people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. I've only heard sh—t stories, to be completely transparent. And I guess I was a bit wary of that. And I got in my head about it,” she explains. “But it was refreshing to see that it's good to be your authentic self. It's reassuring ... to see that it won't be used against me.”

With an already-layered background in design, Narvaez — whose favorite aspect of the program has been getting an up-close look of the “thought process” and “behind-the-scenes” action — knows first-hand how intense it can get between creatives in the field. That's why it's been “encouraging” for the ACE team apprentice to operate within a symbiotic environment fueled by genuine collaboration, collective brainstorming and constructive feedback.

“I know communication is important, but seeing how these teams are working together, and they make sure there's transparency throughout, that's just been dope to see,” she says. “Because back at school, you're going to definitely run into people who are competitive, but they take it to an extreme where the ugly comes out.”

Competition or not, formal education or not, Narvaez has a clear understanding of what it takes to sustain, and be successful, in a professional design environment: lose the ego.

“PENSOLE™ ... they kill your ego, and they're there to be completely transparent,” Narvaez says. “And if you've never had that, this is good. And if you did have that, that's dope, just continue hearing feedback, and listening to other professionals ... from there, it's not like they're going to leave you hanging. They're going to tell you why, and how to push yourself.”

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**Meet Gaganjit Singh**  
**Timberland Apprenticeship: Outdoors Team**

For some, it is written in the stars. For Gaganjit Singh, it was written as early on as elementary school homework.

“In third grade, we would have an assignment where we would write an article about ourselves. So it would be [questions such as], who my parents are, who I am, what is my favorite cartoon,” explains Singh, who is rotating through Timberland as an Outdoors team apprentice. “At the bottom left corner, one of them was, ‘I want to be... when I grow up.’ And I put ‘designer.’ So it was a thing where I knew I wanted to be a creative designer, but didn’t really know how it was going to come into fruition.”

Over the years, his journey continued to be dotted with hints of his impending path into design. As a youth, Singh would dream about the sneakers he hoped to one day have as he perused the Foot Locker near the mall kiosk where his mother worked, humbly yet graciously wearing a less-popular pair as he looked on.

“I would never want to bother my parents for the shoes because they were expensive at the time. So I would only wear one pair of shoes from Sears for an entire year,” Singh says. “I always had a passion for sneakers because I was always like this outlier. So I always tried to make sure my turban matched the color of my shoes or I was well coordinated. Shoes were a really big thing for me to express myself.”

Singh’s desires didn’t stop at Foot Locker’s door or his sartorial selections. During high school, the determined young designer officially embarked on the field by applying for a PENSOLE™ competition for students — and winning it.

“After winning the contest, my parents were a little skeptical of design itself and they were hoping I’d maybe be able to go to community college and try to pick up on something else, but I really had the passion for design,” Singh says. Deciding to forgo college in lieu of PENSOLE™’s fall 2019 Intensive, he then followed up the experience with a string of classes and other competitions, one of which was unfortunately shut down due to COVID-19.

“In the meantime, I stayed connected with PENSOLE™, my mentors and tried to get feedback and pick up on new skills. I would sketch daily and practice my proportions, as well as teach myself 3D,” Singh says. His efforts have paid off; when asked about current challenges, Singh firmly declares, “nothing.”

“I feel like PENSOLE™ prepared me for this opportunity and there’s nothing really shaking me or giving me trouble because I’ve been through, not the worst, but the harder times in learning, being humble and how to act as a professional,” he explains.

Still, the self-described “rugged” designer (he likes to “focus in on the very small details” of a shoe to tell its story) knows he has much to learn. Hence the reason why one of his main facets of advice for others aspiring to walk a similar path is simply to “be open to critiques.”

“One sketch that you might think is amazing might not even be able to be produced or be able to be manufactured. So you have to be able to listen and learn,” he says. “That is a really big key, as well as just putting it all out on the table ... if this is what you really want to do, you have to be very passionate and dedicated to your career ... because they really try to make sure you are tackling everything you need to. Stay focused and be open for feedback.”

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## **Meet Jesus Mendez**

### **Timberland Apprenticeship: Men’s Casual**

Jesus Mendez understands the power that comes along with the simple will to try something. In fact, it’s what landed him a coveted spot as one of the five apprentices in the DiverCity x DESIGN initiative, of which he’s settled into the Men’s Casual team for his first rotation with Timberland.

“The days prior to the actual deadline to submit the application, I just decided, ‘You know what? Let’s try it,’” he says assuredly, going on to explain that he had already connected with PENSOLE™ previously through networking. “I ended up in my first PENSOLE™ program about two years ago. Since then, PENSOLE™ does a great job of just always being in your feed and [promoting] free challenges and reminding you of new programs. So this was around six months ago that this came up,” Mendez explains.

His knack for design has been brewing much longer, however. After immigrating to the U.S. from Mexico as a child, the fledgling creative found himself enamored with one of the most popular programs featured on computers during the early aughts.

“I was in first grade, and I wasn’t really picking up English that fast. So my mom and dad decided to finance this computer, and it didn’t really help me to speak English — but I would just spend my whole time exploring the Paint app,” he recalls. “I was experimenting, drawing, doing typography in it, colors, shades. So it started at that age.”

Fast-forward to the present, and Mendez is still focusing on honing those same skills — just on a much different level, thanks to the apprenticeship. “I’ve never been part of that big company type of workflow. It’s been me and myself doing freelance work,” he says. “Even though I enjoy working as a team, I knew that corporate was going to be a little different. But to my surprise, it has been the most helpful, and I learn from my peers. They’re always reaching out, trying to give the most info they can or help however they can.”

He’s not only enjoying the work environment itself, but also the scenic environment that he’s been surrounded by at Timberland HQ. “My favorite part of the program is actually being here in New Hampshire, even though I was hesitant about being in the middle of the woods,” says Mendez. “So I’m sitting right now at my desk, but I have this nice view and the colors of the leaves are changing. I got to see that whole change from season to season.”

Mendez, who considers himself a “dreamer” and hopes that his path illustrates a good success story for others, offers words of wisdom for those that aspire for similar opportunities.

“It’s OK with failing as long as you try. For myself, sometimes I’ll be hesitant about applying for things because of the fear of being rejected,” he says. “But it’s really fulfilling sometimes, actually just completing the application and submitting your work. At least you do your part.”

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### **Meet Gabriel Pimentel** **Timberland Apprenticeship: Women’s Casual**

Gabriel Pimentel is the only one of the five apprentices still in school, but he’s no stranger to putting in the work. He juggled classes, school projects and final exams alongside his PENSOLE™ duties as he made it through phases one and two of DiverCity x DESIGN, somewhat surprising himself when he’d secured a spot in the year-long apprenticeship.

“I had to balance all these new PENSOLE™ classes, another two-hour class three times a week. So that was a little rough,” he says. “But I really liked the program and I hadn’t done any footwear design projects before so it was really fun ... I was in finals and that’s when we had the first cut that went down to the 18. And I was still really not expecting to go any further.”

Now that he has, Pimentel has had to make swift and tough, yet worthwhile, choices in order to shift his plans and put his studies on pause. Before joining the cohort, he was reaching the end of his second year studying industrial design at San Jose State.

“The hardest part was definitely the move and the transition,” he contends. “We found out the last week of the program and they actually wanted us to leave in two weeks [time]. Not knowing this, I had just signed a new lease for the year because I was expecting to finish school. I have my financial aid set up, I’m enrolled in classes, my major’s impacted ... So then finding out at the last minute, that was really hard.”

The story comes with a silver lining, however. “Luckily for me, everything kind of lined up into place. I got someone to cover my lease, I got a petition signed so they would save my spot, save my money in school for one year and everything really worked out,” Pimentel explains.

Besides, would anything really keep him from his inherent sense for design? He’s been drawing since he was a little kid, “24/7,” and Pimentel further explains that he attended a Waldorf School, where he was very hands-on with arts such as woodworking, handworking and pottery.

“I really loved art and building things, but at the time, I didn’t know about design ... until around high school when I found out about industrial design, automotive design,” he says. “I really liked

to draw cars, and discovered that it's this synergy of drawing and sketching and doing an artistic thing, combined with building it and problem solving.”

He's taking those same cues and developing them further in the program by gaining his first major moments of exposure to footwear design and corporate culture as a whole, noting how especially significant the opportunity is for individuals with similar backgrounds to his.

“This class being focused on diversity, highlighting Black and Brown designers who maybe do not come from a more able background, that's huge,” says Pimentel. “I was kind of lucky to stumble upon it, but if I could look back just a few years and being a design student of color with not so much financial ability, to see someone like me be able to get an opportunity like that or be able to succeed, it's just really inspiring and just shows people that it's possible.”

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