

How York University grad Deborah Lau-Yu is using extraordinary design to create exceptional stories

With nearly 300,000 grads living and working around the world, York often looks to our growing alumni family for support in continuing the University's rise as a progressive and world-class academic and research institute.

And while this support comes in many forms, alumna Deborah Lau-Yu (MDes '08) is hoping to take a more hands-on method. Using her ground-breaking approach to design and her post as co-owner and founding art director at luxury graphic design and production firm PALETTERA Custom Correspondences, Lau-Yu has started her journey towards making an impact on the hearts, minds and futures of forward-thinking York design students just like her.

"My experience at York was definitive to my professional journey, so I believe it's incredibly important to give back a grad. Education opens our minds to possibility, and the spirit of lifelong learning is something I passionately share with current and prospective students so they may better understand what is possible with a York degree in-hand."

To help usher in the next generation of creative talent, Lau-Yu has remained involved at York in a number of ways, including by participating in student extracurricular events at the School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design (AMPD). But her most direct impact on the experiences of York design students can be felt in the internship opportunities that she has established through her team at PALETTERA, which takes on two to three design interns from York at a time and puts them through a rigorous learning experience.

"As a student, I remember looking for opportunities to gain insight and practical skills that would inform my studies, and prepare me for the real world – and that's what we try to do for York interns. I believe exposing these students to projects that will help them to define their own voice as designers is the greatest contribution I can make as a grad."

And it's this refreshing sense of idealism, hard work and possibility that Lau-Yu instills in her York interns that was also responsible for bringing her from a young girl with a big imagination to an industry-renowned designer and an award-winning entrepreneur.

Lau-Yu's interest in design began at a very young age, making her own greeting cards and handing them out to family members. But what started out as a hobby began to develop into something much more as she grew older. "By the time I started my undergraduate studies at the University of Waterloo, I was seeing the impact of design at large and across disciplines; it didn't just exist on a piece of paper, it was spatial. The design has both a place and time. I

began to see it as something that many others did not; something with the power to convey stories.”

With her newfound appreciation for the impact of design, she set her sights on York University, where she graduated from the masters in graphic design program in 2008. Lau-Yu says that much of her experience at York was defined by the dedicated professors, who brought a wide range of international experiences and approaches to the table. “York cultivated our creativity and independence, encouraged us to think outside of the box and to develop individual passions in uniquely personal ways. Instead of churning out students who were mere copies of them, the faculty taught us how to think and chart our own course in design.”

There was one project at York University in particular helped Lau-Yu shape her mission as a graphic designer. “I submitted two book designs to Applied Arts Magazine Awards, with one revolving around my grandmother and documenting a day in the life of her nursing home. Just as with any reporter or journalist, I was telling stories, but instead of using words, I was telling the story through design.”

As mentors and clients began to respond enthusiastically to her unique approach, Lau-Yu’s reputation for originality, creativity and a much-needed personal touch became well-known. She decided it was time to make her dreams of defining her own niche a reality.

PALETTERA first opened its doors in March 2010 in Markham, Ontario, and since then, Lau-Yu, along with her partner Raymond and their team, has transformed the boutique company into an industry leader known for its innovative approach to storytelling through design, an utmost commitment to customer service, and an ability to deliver exceptional, award-winning work.

“I’ve realized how valuable it is to be entrepreneurial and to define your own journey. I enjoy the empowerment and freedom that comes with measuring my time by impact. There were and still are many long, hard days involved, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

Little did she know however that this new undertaking would come at a most difficult time in her life. When Lau-Yu’s mother passed away, it was a massive blow to both her life and career. But, as she looked back on the lessons her mother had taught her over the years, Lau-Yu was confident that she had to continue on pursuing her dreams.

“My mother always said to embrace life, do what you need to do and not waste a minute. Considering that my vision for this business is to design and tell meaningful stories for life’s milestones, I knew that I’d be doing her proud by capturing her high-energy spirit. My hope is that I can help other York students who find themselves questioning their dreams through difficult times to understand the importance of perseverance like my mother did for me.”

Despite her successes, Lau-Yu says she’s still learning and has her sights set firmly on the future.

"I often think of the saying about the old men who plant trees so that the next generation can benefit from its shade. Art has so much power — it should answer questions that people never knew they had. Through my work and ongoing involvement with York, I'd like to pay it forward for the next generation of great designers while using art and design to continue moving our generation forward. That's what I aspire for the next chapter of my story."

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