



The Road to Success

Upon her graduation from college in spring 2010, Rhea Lynn Leonard found herself at a fork in the road of life. With the uncertainty of the U.S. economy and an unstable job market, she, like many recent graduates, was skeptical of whether she would be able to find a good job right away. Thus, she was faced with a decision: continue her education and attend graduate school for an additional four semesters, or take her chances out in the real world.

Leonard finished at the top of her class in the College of Agricultural Education and Communications at Texas Tech University and grew close to many of the faculty and staff members. One faculty member in particular,

Cindy Akers, was a mentor to Leonard from since she came to Texas Tech as a freshman in fall 2006. As a teacher, mentor, and friend, Leonard said, Akers encouraged her to pursue a graduate degree because of the advantages it would give her in the professional world that followed.

"When it was all said and done, I just felt like it was the best option for me," Leonard said. "I'm not really even sure what I want to do with my life yet, but I feel like graduate school can provide a little more direction and give me the best chance to be successful."

Leonard knows a thing or two about being successful.

Following her sophomore year at Texas Tech, she realized she needed a way to support herself financially. In June 2008, with an interest in fashion and a passion for jewelry, Leonard decided to start her own business. She now hand-makes

her own line of western-themed jewelry and sells her work at trade shows and on a website she created herself, *glitterandblingjewelry.com*. Boutique owners from across the country have shown interest in her designs, and several now even sell them in their stores.

"It's been a pleasant surprise," Leonard said. "I never could've imagined the response I have gotten from my jewelry. What started out as something small really turned into a profitable business."

Former roommate, close friend and fellow jewelry aficionado Emma Matkin, said that Leonard has really come a long way with her business. Matkin said that seemingly overnight, Leonard went from creating personal fashion pieces to match her outfits, to having half the house covered in her latest creations.

"People saw the jewelry she wore and wanted the same look," Matkin said. "Her designs practically sold themselves."

Aside from her business ambitions, working on her thesis, Leonard said, has been her most challenging venture thus far. While the graduate program at Texas Tech offers a thesis or non-thesis route, she said she chose to write a thesis and forgo the additional six hours of coursework that the non-thesis option requires.

While writing her thesis, Leonard was also the teaching assistant for the ACOM 1300 Intro into Agricultural Communications, ACOM 3311 Web Design, and ACOM 4310 Development of Agricultural Publications classes. Having been a student in those very classes only not long ago, Leonard said being on the other side of things is an entirely new experience.

"It seems like I was the student sitting in those same seats only yesterday," Leonard said. "It's completely different now that I look at things from a teacher's perspective."

Although she enjoys her success as entrepreneur, the majority of her time these days is spent focused on her job as a student teacher in Hagerman, New Mexico. Under the direction of Jesus Trujillo, who has taught agriculture in Hagerman for over 11 years, Leonard teaches agriscience classes and oversees the Career Development Event teams for the school's FFA chapter. She said her experience thus far has been very rewarding, and she enjoys sharing her passion for agriculture with students at the secondary level.

Leonard said she could not be happier with her decision to attend graduate school. Although still uncertain of what her future holds, she said she is just taking it all in stride, one day at a time. Some days, she said, her work never seems to end as she juggles being a businesswoman, a student and a teacher.

"Some days get a little crazy," Leonard said, "but I'm loving every minute of it."



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