

EXCHANGE --- How Did You Get That Cool Job? -- - A Pixar animator, an NBA stathead, a software engineer, a nonprofit worker and an entrepreneur talk about how they moved from college to their fields, and offer advice for new grads

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FULL TEXT

Active Voice: Finding the Right Nonprofit

Madeline Firkser

Age: 24

Location: New York City

Title: Special Projects Associate

Company: JustLeadershipUSA

Time in the job: Eighteen months

Education: BA in Sociology, Bard College

Key skills: Communication, project management, research

Salary: \$55,000-\$70,000

Madeline Firkser says the best part of her day at JustLeadershipUSA, a New York-based criminal-justice reform organization, is working with a broad group of colleagues.

"Some of us are still incarcerated," she says. "Some of us have family members who are directly impacted, and some of us, like myself, haven't been touched by the criminal-justice system in tangible ways."

Ms. Firkser was looking to channel her college activism into a career, but her first job after graduation wasn't a great fit. She says she leaned on her network when it was clear she needed to pivot.

WSJ: What's a typical day like for you?

A: I serve as a project manager for the entire organization, so that can range from administrative tasks, to making sure we're maintaining deliverables and contracts with outside partners, to brand-building. I work in the policy and advocacy department, so I manage some of our most important campaigns.

WSJ: What was your first job after college?

A: I ended up getting a job at a really corporate, national nonprofit. I was like, OK, I got the dream and I got the salary, I'm doing well. But I really was unhappy there.

WSJ: How did you get your current job? Did you apply online?

A: I still did the whole cover letter-and-resume thing. But at the end of the day, it was really not just about my skills, but about my relationships.

WSJ: What would you tell a college student who's just starting the job hunt?

A: What I always tell people is: "Participate." Reach out to someone whose name you heard, or whose book you read, or who you saw on a panel – always reach out to them if what they do inspires you. LinkedIn offers a free premium membership for a month. Do that, and then message people who you think you want to learn more about.

You never know who might become your friend or mentor along the way.

WSJ: What's your best advice for someone who realizes their first job isn't a good fit?

A: It's OK to not love your job. It's supernatural. Allow yourself some grace. From there, try and talk to your allies. Maybe that isn't your peers in the job you don't like, but it might be. Take the risk of being a little vulnerable. Even in this one job that I really didn't like, there were a few people who from time to time would ask how it was going. I was really hesitant, but once I did say, "OK, I'm struggling here," I got some of the best advice ever.

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Cartoon Networking: Drawn to Animation

Cheyenne Chapel

Age: 24

Location: Working remotely from Walnut Creek, Calif.; Pixar HQ in Emeryville, Calif.

Title: Set Dressing Technical Director

Company: Pixar Animation Studios

Time in the job: One year

Education: BS in Visualization, Texas A&M

Key skills: Modeling, set dressing, lighting, Python

Salary: \$77,700 a year median, according to government statistics

Cheyenne Chapel has always loved disappearing into the immersive worlds of animated movies and games.

She remembers first hearing Buzz Lightyear's famous catchphrase, "To infinity and beyond," when she saw "Toy Story 2" and lights up when she describes playing "Jak and Daxter" on PlayStation 20 years ago. In college she saw "Coco," Pixar's 2017 film about a boy who is accidentally transported to the Land of the Dead, and was stunned by the beauty and richness of the world it portrayed.

Now, as a set modeler and dresser for Walt Disney Co.'s Pixar Animation Studios, she builds the digital buildings, vehicles and landscapes that conjure vivid worlds. Her debut credit was Pixar's 2020 release "Soul." She followed that up with contributions to "Luca," released on Disney+ last month, and is now at work on the background of "Lightyear," scheduled for release next summer.

"Getting a chance to make a sci-fi adventure film with Buzz, it's always cool to me," said Ms. Chapel. "And I think it's going to look insane. I just feel like I came in at a really cool time."

WSJ: What drew you to this kind of work?

A: Animation and anime have always been some of the biggest influences on my life. The films that I've connected to the most have, a lot of times, been Pixar films. Especially "Toy Story 3." It's just crazy to see the amount of work and passion [that go into these movies].

In college I actually started out in architecture; I was trying to get into the animation degree but it's very competitive. I ended up getting into the program my sophomore year.

WSJ: How did you get your current job?

A: In my junior year I actually was a Pixar Undergraduate Program intern. It was a 10-week program where we just got immersed within each department of the production track at Pixar. After that I knew I wanted to work at Pixar. I ended up returning after I graduated to do a sets modeling and dressing internship on "Soul." During that year I transitioned from an intern to a resident, which is like an apprenticeship. Then I ended up going full-time after that.

WSJ: What's the best part of your job?

A: Seeing how my friends, family, and the world receive the films that we make and knowing that I get to contribute to them. Whenever I would go to the movies and see films I'd just be captivated. Someone else experiencing something like that is very fulfilling for me.

I get to work on films with some really great friends. Each film could take four-plus years, depending on the production, done by 200, 300 people. I get to nerd out with people about the same stuff and they understand what I'm talking about.

WSJ: What's the most challenging part of your job?

A: As artists we all tend to be very hard on ourselves. For me, the most challenging thing is being comfortable with being uncomfortable, like when I'm showing my work. That's one of the most stressful things, because when you see your work, it's not even just you seeing it. It's millions of people seeing it.

WSJ: Outside of your internship, what do you think is the most critical thing you did that led to you having your current job?

A: Networking and talking to people is something that I think everyone talks about, "You should network!" Even though I know it's the most challenging thing for a lot of people, it's the first thing that you can do to help get you into the positions that you want to get to.

I went to Siggraph, [an annual computer graphics industry conference] and that was where I actually got to meet a lot of the Pixar team and was able to form relationships with people.

WSJ: What's your best advice for somebody who might want a job like the one you have at Pixar?

A: Reach out to technical directors and recruiters. Use your time to start seeing the process of what Pixar does. Each studio is different and animation as a whole is such a unique and specific niche of art. You kind of have to understand the field that you're going into. Know at least a little bit about the industry so you can understand terminology. You don't want to just apply to an industry and not necessarily have any context for what you're getting yourself into.

A lot of us animation people, we didn't grow up in a way, because we still kind of kept that wonder – just seeing the world in a different light and being able to help bring that together. Keeping that same energy that you had when you're a kid and translating that to the application process, even though I know it can be difficult and rough, it will all work out just as long as you keep trying.

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The Milk Man: Nondairy Dreamer

Josh Belinsky

Age: 26

Location: Boston

Title: Co-founder

Company: Slate Milk

Time in the job: 3 years

Education: BS in business administration, Northeastern University

Key skills: Sales, relationship building, Excel

Salary: 'Below market-rate salary, majority equity ownership of business with co-founder'

A string of internships during college and a job at a tech startup had already positioned Josh Belinsky for a promising career in sales by the time he graduated from Northeastern University.

But he credits a postgraduation trip to Greece, during which his phone was stolen, with encouraging him to start his own company.

"I didn't miss it at all, and I didn't think about work. That's when I knew, 'OK, I'm clearly not happy here if I'm not tuned into what's going on,'" says Mr. Belinsky, who co-founded Slate Milk, which makes ultrafiltered, lactose-free chocolate milk, in 2018. Since launching, the company has raised \$2.5 million, landed on shelves in 3,000 stores and appeared on "Shark Tank." (The Sharks passed.)

WSJ: What drew you to this kind of work? Did you always want to be an entrepreneur?

A: My great-grandfather came over from Russia in the early 1900s and started a butcher shop in downtown Boston and it was in my family until the 1980s. Everybody in my family has it in their blood to work from a young age. I was 8 years old and I started caddying for my dad and then some of his friends, and I did that for about 12 years. I was basically running my own business. I loved the hustle of it.

When I was in college, I worked at a couple of corporate jobs and two different startups. I was able to learn how people are fundraising, how startups get off the ground, how they deal with investors, how they build a pricing model. I ended up partnering up with another local Boston entrepreneur and we started this business. I love

chocolate milk and I became lactose intolerant in fifth grade. Chocolate milk is something that brings people happiness and a lot of people can't drink it anymore, and so we wanted to try to bring it back to adults.

WSJ: What's the best part of your job?

A: One of the biggest perks of running your own business is you're hiring people that you like. We're all in the trenches together. When something goes wrong, it's all 24 of us hopping on together. Nobody's pointing fingers.

WSJ: What's the most challenging part of your job?

A: Knowing that the buck always stops with me and my co-founder. Especially during Covid, a lot of things go wrong. There was an aluminum-cans shortage that nobody could see coming and we had to fight for just the aluminum cans. We're not going to be able to produce the product. We're not going to be able to supply our retail partners. We had to go fight against all of the major beverage companies to make sure that they kept our product in stock and after a lot of trials and tribulations, we were able to get it done.

WSJ: Were your college internships essential to getting to where you are today?

A: Absolutely. An internship I had at Liberty Mutual selling insurance was my first true sales job. Learning how to cold email, cold call, building relationships with car dealerships and all that kind of stuff. I was 18 and it was an opportunity to hang out with older people and just learn and pick their brains on everything, from my manager all the way down to the entry-level sales reps. From there I went to State Street Bank. That's where I got really good at Salesforce and learned what it's like to build out a CRM [customer relationship management] tool.

Northeastern is a five-year program, so in my last three years I joined a tech startup in Boston. I was the first sales hire and that business ended up pivoting two or three times. I tell everybody that's where I got my M.B.A.

WSJ: What's your best advice for college students who are starting the job hunt?

A: What's almost as important as finding what you like to do is finding what you don't like. I wrote down everything that was most important to me about a job and ranked it. "How far is the commute? Do I like the people that I'm working with? Do I like my boss? Is there an ability to grow within this company?"

Just start talking to people. If you don't know anyone, hop on LinkedIn and start messaging people. I would joke in my cold emails to people: "I'm a third-year in college and I've been in sales for 20 years. If you're wondering how, it's because I've been caddying since I was eight years old." Something like that, just a way of showing your personality. You'd be amazed how much people are willing to help.

WSJ: What's your best advice for someone who realizes their first job isn't a good fit?

A: Internally you try to find an advocate, whether it's your boss or a co-worker, or just somebody that's a little bit older than you. Be open with them about what's going on, what you don't like and potentially why you don't like it. Is it the industry? Is it the company? I've had friends that just weren't happy in the role they were in and they were able to find a different role within that company.

Numbers Game: The Sports Statistician

Sergio Santamaria

Age: 24

Location: Detroit

Title: Data Analyst

Company: Detroit Pistons

Time in job: Eight months

Education: BA, Sports Management and Data Science, Rice University

Key skills: SQL, Python, R, Excel

Salary: \$60,000 league average for job title

Sergio Santamaria's childhood obsession with sports went beyond playing basketball, which he did plenty growing up in Houston.

"I refused to get excited about a school project if it didn't have something to do with sports," says Mr. Santamaria, whose Colombian-born parents moved their family to the U.S. from Ecuador just before his third birthday.

"Videogames, extracurriculars -- everything I did was related to sports."

All that practice paid off, just not on the court. During college, Mr. Santamaria interned for the Houston Rockets, tracking stats, filming games, contributing to scouting reports and wiping down the occasional floor. An internship with the Phoenix Suns turned into a job after graduation, and after a brief stint with a sports-analytics startup, he landed in Detroit as a data analyst for the Pistons.

Now, Mr. Santamaria works with the team's scouting, coaching, strategy and analytics departments analyzing data and building tools that allow the team to craft its strategies. One of his continuing projects is an internal dashboard that displays current stats, future projections, salary data and staff evaluations for every current NBA player.

Mr. Santamaria recently spoke with The Wall Street Journal about how a passion for sports led him to pursue a degree in data science. Here's his story, edited and condensed.

WSJ: What drew you to this kind of work?

A: A family friend a couple of years older than me who went to Rice had a roommate that was studying sports management and had worked for the Astros and Rice Baseball. Immediately I knew that that's what I wanted to do. My first week on campus, I went into [sports management] Prof. Tom Stalling's office and was like, "I know about sports analytics, and I know that the Houston Rockets are a very advanced and analytically driven organization, and I love basketball, and I know that the department here has connections with the Rockets, and I would love to work there." Within a couple of months I was interning for the Rockets and just kept my foot in the door.

WSJ: How did you get your current job? Did you apply online?

A: Every job I've gotten in the sports industry has been network-based. I had built a network over my time in Houston and also in Phoenix. When the new front office here in Detroit was established last summer, my name was lofted to the executives as an analytics employee that had been with the Suns for the previous two years, and the Rockets before that, and was working at a sports-related startup at the time. There was no formal application process.

WSJ: What's your typical day like?

A: Working remotely has been a challenge. I'm extremely extroverted and really crave interactions and being around people. With the Suns in the 2019-20 season, I was traveling with the team. I was on the court with the players and the coaches. This year has been very different because it's been at home, at the computer, creating these tools, these dashboards, these analyses, and starting this job virtually, too. There's a lot of co-workers that I've never even met in person. A lot of it is meetings to understand what people need, what people are looking for. And a lot of watching basketball in the evenings.

WSJ: What's the best part of your job?

A: The euphoria and excitement and passion that fans show really make you appreciate the job. The things that fans will talk about in the Uber or at the bar or at the water cooler at work: "Oh man, the Knicks should have traded for him," or "The Pistons should assign them." That's all the stuff that I actually get to contribute to and work on in a way.

WSJ: What's the most challenging part of your job?

A: NBA analytics teams are still really small relative to the technical departments at other companies or other sports leagues. You have to be extremely productive across a variety of different areas.

WSJ: Did your internships make or break your job hunt?

A: Without a doubt. I was able to get into the actual industry that I was looking to get into starting my freshman year of college and build on that.

WSJ: Outside of an internship, what do you think is the most critical thing you did that led to your current job?

A: Having a positive attitude and being someone that people like spending time with. The sports industry is often more of a lifestyle than a job; it really is a choice that becomes more than your typical 9 to 5.

And pursuing the technical side of my education was huge. The people that I was in class with are software engineers and project managers and data analysts and developers at the biggest tech companies in the entire

world, but I chose to apply those skills to sports.

WSJ: What's your best advice for students in college right now who are facing down the job hunt?

A: The first step is a ton of research and an understanding of what kinds of problems the industry that you're hoping to get into is facing. I was really aware that the NBA was shifting more and more toward analytics and technology and I knew having those skills would serve me really well as a candidate for a job.

Understanding problems that the industry or the company or the field faces will allow you to craft your skill sets, craft your resume, craft your experiences with the goal of being the missing puzzle piece.

WSJ: What's your best advice for someone who realizes their first job isn't a good fit?

A: The No. 1 lesson is not to discount the opportunities that you have available to you in your current position. Being transfer-focused rather than restart-focused is a really important mind-set to have. Two of the internships that I did in college, I was doing really rigid software engineering, building websites, working eight hours a day coding. I knew pretty early on that wasn't going to be what I wanted to do; I value interpersonal connection and communication and problem solving more than developing websites.

But I still learned a ton from that experience. I can manage people that have those skill sets. You never know who knows who and you never know what you're going to learn in one place that's going to apply to problems and situations in the next place.

—

Good Optics: The Eyes Have It

Gabriella Lanouette

Age: 25

Location: Working remotely from Guilford, Conn.; company is based in New York City

Title: Full-Stack Machine Learning Engineer

Company: Orbis International

Time in the job: Six months

Education: BS in applied mathematical sciences, University of Connecticut; MS in applied artificial intelligence and machine learning, Columbia University

Key skills: Python, JavaScript, React, HTML, Java

Salary: \$90,000-\$110,000

Growing up in Guilford, Conn., Gabriella Lanouette watched her mother head off to work each day as a pediatric nurse.

"Every day she comes home having helped kids," says Ms. Lanouette, who began planning her own career in healthcare while still a child. "Seeing her work in this field was really inspiring to me."

As she got older she realized she didn't want to be a healthcare provider, so she began looking for other ways to get involved in the field. A passion for coding led to an engineering job. After earning a master's degree from Columbia University, Ms. Lanouette landed a job at Orbis International, an international nonprofit focused on preventing and treating blindness and eye diseases in economically developing countries.

Ms. Lanouette is part of a team that develops algorithms for the company's telemedicine platform, Cybersight. Clinicians use the tool to diagnose eye diseases like diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma, uploading images of the back of the eye to the platform, which provides artificial intelligence-enabled analysis.

WSJ: What drew you to this kind of work?

A: I knew I wanted to be an engineer, and I knew I wanted to do something in healthcare, but I wasn't sure exactly what. I started college as a chemical-engineering major, so I thought that maybe I'd go into pharmacy, or something to actually work with chemicals. But then I took a Python [programming-language] class and just fell in love.

WSJ: How did you get your current job?

A: I believe I found it on Indeed.com. I would refine my searches by healthcare, and when I saw Orbis and the job posting I did more research on the company. I really wanted to work here.

I applied online and was given an interview with my direct boss now.

WSJ: What's a typical day like for you?

A: A typical day for me would be maintaining and enhancing the Cybersight AI website. That could mean anything from fixing bugs, to implementing new enhancements, thinking ahead to new features. Everything is focused on making the platform really serve the people on the ground who are using it. I also maintain and design the algorithms, which involves enhancing the machine-learning elements and ensuring that the system continuously improves its ability to read images.

WSJ: What's the most challenging part of your job?

A: At first the most challenging part was getting up to speed on the eye-care industry and what goes into being an ophthalmologist. Fortunately for me, the Cybersight platform is an educational tool as well, so I was able to actually use our platform to get up to speed. You have to learn the technology side, but it's not enough to just know how to program; you also have to understand the role of the code in this actual area in this industry.

WSJ: Was that your first job after college?

A: I worked as a software engineer for machine learning at a market-research company. I had a really strong working relationship with my boss, and he actually did the same degree program that [later] I did with Columbia. He recommended it to me because he knew that I wanted to get into healthcare.

WSJ: What's the best thing you did to prepare for your career outside of an internship?

A: Working on as many projects as I could get my hands on. Those projects where you run into issues, or you run into errors, or you're not getting great results, those are the ones where you learn the most.

I really am in love with the Python programming language so I spent a lot of time with Python, but it's not enough to just know one language, so I forced myself to learn [several other programming languages as well]. I think that played a really important role in obviously getting this job, but just in my career in general.

WSJ: What's your best advice for students in college right now who are facing down the job hunt?

A: Get your hands dirty and really look for opportunities that allow you to build the skills you're looking to grow. Communication is a huge part of any job, but especially in technical roles, being able to explain complex work to people outside of the field is really critical.

Credit: By Kathryn Dill

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