Justice Curry:

Greetings, earthlings. And welcome back to another episode of Chat with WRAC, the only podcast about Michigan State University's Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures. I'm your guide, Justice Curry, here to take you on another adventure within the WRAC Department. Hi, welcome to Chat with WRAC.

Terrell Shaw:

Hi, thanks for having me.

Justice Curry:

How you doing today?

Terrell Shaw:

I'm all right. It's early.

Justice Curry:

Yeah. So what do you do for a living?

Terrell Shaw:

So I'm a communications designer, and I work for myself. So right now, I don't work for anybody else. I mean, I do. I have clients. But yeah, self-employed communications designer, which is more and more common these days.

Justice Curry:

How would you define the difference between being a communications designer and a general graphic designer?

Terrell Shaw:

A little bit more in depth in terms of I'm not just producing visual work, but also a lot of technical things, as well as strategic implementation of whatever the goal of that company is in terms of their communications.

Justice Curry:

Where was your starting point for your career?

Terrell Shaw:

When I first started my career, I actually got my first job while I was still in college. I was the in-house designer at Pure Detroit for a year or so. And from there, I've been both freelance and I've had longer term contracts at companies. I've worked at GM. I've done work for Via Transportation, Meridian HealthCare, a lot of different clients, mostly across the Midwest and some here in DC, too. But I definitely started off freelance and move into positions whenever they are available.

Justice Curry:

So you mentioned that you pretty much got a job right into college. Was it difficult for you to secure a position within your area of interest?

Terrell Shaw:

No, not at the time. I mean, I was working at Pure Detroit in a retail capacity. And then everyone knew on staff that I was a graphic designer. One day, the bosses walked in and I was on my computer doing homework, which I shouldn't have probably been doing. But they weren't angry about it. They actually were very interested in what I was doing. And then they started having me doing communications work for them. They started this Facebook graphics, and then it became more print and other things, too. And some t-shirts and stuff like that, products in the store. So it wasn't difficult. I got lucky it fell in my lap. But yeah, I was lucky to get a first job so quickly and so soon after starting school.

Justice Curry:

So you mentioned that you worked freelance on and off. Would you say that it was easier for you to work freelance as opposed to working for a specific company or business?

Terrell Shaw:

Freelancing is definitely, I would say, more difficult because it's just you. You're on your own and you have to not only prove your... Whoever the client is, you have to prove yourself worthy of taking on that job, of course. But also, there's not a whole lot of the support and other things that you get when you're working at a company. So really, it's you and whoever else you're working with. And that can be a little bit harder to manage sometimes, especially when you're working on bigger projects that have complexity in multiple departments. It can be a lot. And you don't typically experience having to manage all of that yourself when you're working at a company.

Justice Curry:

Would you say it's competitive working as a designer in trying to get employed at a firm or a business or company?

Terrell Shaw:

It's highly competitive. This is not a career path for the non-competitive because you're going to be competing 9 times out of 10 for any job that you go after.

Justice Curry:

What advice would you give to future designers on how to set themselves apart from the competition?

Terrell Shaw:

I would say if you choose to go the school path, look more into the type of work you want to do. This is a very vast career field. So look into the type of work and the type of industries or people that you want to work around, and try to cater your portfolio to make more sense to that realm.

Justice Curry:

With the competitive nature of being a designer, do you think it's possible to be financially stable as a graphic designer working full time as a graphic designer straight out of college?

Terrell Shaw:

Yes. But it's a lot of work and a lot of designers do work a day job, just because it is so competitive. But I will say also, this depends on where you live. Somewhere like Detroit, where I first started out, it's not a real haven for graphic design. But if you live out west in LA, which I've been out there, there's a ton of work out there. So this also, it depends on where you live. And I know a lot of things are being done online now, but having physical proximity is still important.

Justice Curry:

As a freelancer, what is the process like of getting a client and working with a client and getting things done?

Terrell Shaw:

It depends on the type of client and also just how their work style is. I'll say corporate clients can be more difficult. There's typically more paperwork, more of a proposal process there. And I won't go too deep into what that's like. But there's a lot more waiting around with corporate clients, where individual clients or if you meet people who might be in charge of these corporate projects, it tends to be a little bit more personable. Well, the process is typically the same where you go through, of course, do your homework, do all of your analytical homework before you even pursue a project to make sure it's, first of all, something you want to do and something you are capable of doing. Typically, you go through the proposal process, and then there's some back and forth there. You plan out the project, whatever that looks like for the particular project with corporate. It's a lot more charts and planning and things like that.

Terrell Shaw:

Individual projects is not as much work. But once you're done with that, you start working. And I mean, and of course, you're in communication with the client the entire time, and there might be regularly scheduled meetings or update briefs or things like that. Of course, you produce some work, you go through the process of refinement. Depending on the type of work, you might go through some additional production, whether that means you're preparing it for print or you're preparing it for broadcast or whatever that might be. It's hard to say depending on the type of work you do. But yeah, there's a process where typically, you propose. If they accept or deny, there might be some negotiation there. You do the work, and then you prepare the work to be out into the world. And it's a long process sometimes. Sometimes it's a week. It really depends on the client.

Justice Curry:

How do you avoid burnout? When you have a creative block, how do you get through that?

Terrell Shaw:

I would say sometimes it's about taking a break. And I've talked to other designers about this too, who have gone through the same thing, especially when you're coming out of working on a big project that might have taken several months. If you can take a break, it's definitely a good idea to give yourself just some time before you take on another big project. There are designers who take a rest and digest strategy towards their work. Marian Bantjes is a good example of this where she spends a lot of her time, and these are her own, this is what she says she does, spends a lot of her time resting while she's coming up with a concept. I think that taking a slower approach to work can also prevent burnout. I took time off from graphic design to do a simple job and stuff like that. Because this can become... It can overtake your life in a way. It can become... It's everywhere. Sometimes it's hard to even go to the grocery store and turn off that graphic design brain.

Justice Curry:

To close out, is there any advice or anything else you want to say to inspiring designers that are looking forward to getting into the field or even getting into freelancing?

Terrell Shaw:

If you want the longevity out of this career, if this is what you really want to do, I would say don't rush yourself. Don't think that you have to start out working on the big projects. It's okay to do things for the local mom and pop, local bakery, the local nursing home or stuff like that. Start local, start with people you know, family and friends. Those are worthy projects, too. You can help people without it having to be a huge corporate project that makes a bunch of money. Start small. If you want the longevity, the lessons that those small things will teach you is definitely worth it.

Terrell Shaw:

Another thing that I think if you are serious about this career and you don't see it as just something that you're going to be doing on the side. Or even if you do, if you have the opportunity to do something for someone that really can impact their life, like wedding invitations or an obituary or something like that. If you ever have the opportunity to take on those projects and you're comfortable, definitely take those projects on. That type of project will really connect you to why what you do is essential.

Justice Curry:

Thank you so much for joining me on this episode of Chat with WRAC and answering questions about your design work.

Terrell Shaw:

Yeah. Thank you so much for having me.

Justice Curry:

Thank you so much for listening to Chat with WRAC. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter, @ChatwithWRAC, and tell us what topic you'd like to hear next. Don't be a stranger.