

Kara Snyder 0:00

Hello, and welcome to the PodCAST, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing, communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the College and today we have a chance to talk to Flor Hernandez. Flor is an alum of the Department of Family Consumer Sciences, and currently serves as Senior Designer at Serenity. Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Flor Hernandez 0:30

Thank you so much for having me over. I'm very happy to be here.

Kara Snyder 0:34

This is going to be fun, I can't wait to learn about your journey. Let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU,

Flor Hernandez 0:40

I've always been very passionate, I was born and raised in Mexico. And I, you know, I grew up seeing how the American University was, you know, the typical American University. And I've always been, you know, very interested in that experience. And that opportunity is us actually, my second my third school that I joined for my university career. And I've always, you know, been very passionate about going to school and wanting to, you know, get my studies. So I decided to go to is you just because, you know, they are accredited. I knew I wanted to be an interior designer, you know, early on in my career, when I was a junior in high school, and I tried doing some research and I found that Illinois State University was one of the only universities in Illinois that was accredited, and that was very important to me. So I always had it like, you know, in the back of my mind that hopefully, that would be the the university that I would be getting my my diploma from, and eventually ended up happening once I transferred on my junior year of college.

Kara Snyder 1:32

So tell us about that. I think it can be rare for an individual to find their passion. So early in life, what was it junior year of high school that helped you to know that interior design was the path for you,

Flor Hernandez 1:45

I personally been always very creative, you know, ever since I can remember, you know, I've been very drawn to drawing or creating or just, you know, some sort of anything related to drawing or just being passionate enough creative artists. And I wanted to go into interior design, once I figured out that, you know, it's something similar to architecture, it's related to building spaces and creating experiences. For interior design, it loads a little bit more closer to creating those specific experiences for the, you know, occupants of those spaces. So I was, you know, very drawn to that. And I know that, you know, that was probably easy for me to to find out that I wanted to get into your design so early in my career, because I

know that you know, for other people, it may be a little a little more difficult to know what they want to do in life. Because I got lucky with that.

Kara Snyder 2:30

Now, and that's why I love to ask people because everybody kind of finds their path in a different way. So to find it early, I think is so lucky. And tell us about then, you know, you said you came to ASU, your junior year, were you able to be involved once you were on campus? What did that experience look like for you?

Flor Hernandez 2:49

Yes, so I once I came into ISU, I noticed that they had one of the chapters for Ida, which is the interior design association. So I immediately joined once I saw that they had a chapter, I was not able to get involved part of like, you know, the the chapter as a, you know, how to position itself the first semester since I came in to second semester of the year. And, you know, typically those started, like, you know, first semester, but I was able to still participate and have that experience and had exposure to you know, collaborate with other students that were also passionate about interior design, and they wanted to have all their experience outside of the classroom.

Kara Snyder 3:23

What would you say you miss the most about your time on campus?

Flor Hernandez 3:28

It definitely has to be, you know, the camaraderie and having those close relationships with other people, as well as having like, the flexibility that you can walk around or like, you can just literally like walk to school, walk to the classroom walk to, you know, the restaurants, anything, it's very accessible. And I feel like that's very, you know, convenient that happens in a lot of like those typical college campuses that you don't necessarily see in other areas, I would say, absolutely.

Kara Snyder 3:53

So tell us how you get your interior design degree, what was that initial job search like for you? And where did you end up?

Flor Hernandez 4:02

So the very initial search for me when I graduated, it was a little bit of a difficult situation. I mean, hence once I graduated, I decided to study abroad. So I believe that one semester after I was done with my studies, so I came back one semester after and it was a little bit of a, you know, transition, trying to find a job just because, you know, I was not really super fresh, you know, from school, because I just came back from from being abroad. And then also, I might my internship that I had done the gear prior, was in Bloomington Normal, and I wanted to come back to Chicago. So it was not necessarily, you know, like a super transferable experience, but it was a little bit of a challenge. My first job that I got, it was not necessarily you know, the one that I love the most, but I took it as an experience, you know,

everybody has to start somewhere and we have to get experienced, you know, one way or another and it's just a matter of like, you know, getting in and pushing through. But then my second job, that's where I got, you know, very lucky and I was able to get a job at one of the top 10 and architectural companies. So I was lucky enough to land a job at a job game. And that's where I stayed three and a half years, and I was able to get a lot of experience, you know, working on hospitals working on airports, and just like various types of, you know, broad experience, and also interior design experience, which definitely helped my career to be able to transfer like, you know, to get another job after that, that time. So I would say, you know, the very first initial job that I got after college was was hard in that experience to get that job was definitely hard. But then after that, once I got my second job, it came a little bit more smooth or seamless, I would say.

Kara Snyder 5:36

Yeah, once you have that momentum, it's a little bit easier. That's for sure. I want to back up just a minute. Before we talk about your current role. I want to hear all about study abroad. Tell us what that was like for you, where you when what you learned, that experience sounds so enriching, so I would love to hear about it.

Flor Hernandez 5:55

Yeah, definitely. I've always wanted to study abroad, you know, seeing and TV and seeing other people doing it. And I mean, me being a first generation college student, no one in my family ever had that experience to do it. So I knew that if I had to do it, I had to work extra hard. And I had to, like do the research myself and had to ask the questions, I had to just get involved, and indeed how, you know, I could get those opportunities happen. So I was able to go to Florence, I went to the Florence University of the Arts, which is a university in Florence, that they specialize mostly in the arts, in design in architecture. So it was a very good experience for me, because I was able to take classes into sustainable design and sustainable architecture, as well as some, you know, photography and drawing classes, just you, you know, fill in my schedule, and get that part of the experience as well. But it was a great experience, because I was able to see how they do architecture, how they do design in a different part of the world. And also how you know, the different perspectives that they have, and the different codes that they need to pass. And also, I mean, they work in a different whole metric system. So it was a great experience to be able to see how, you know, that translates into, you know, what I study in college, that translates into the real world, and how, you know, it can affect what I've learned in school, it can affect, you know, the way that I worked professionally. So it was, it was an amazing experience to be able to partake in that. And then travel abroad, get that experience and in cultural also, you know, knowledge and exposure to how people live and how, you know, the world is outside of the US and outside of you know, Mexico that I'm used to. So it was a great experience, I definitely recommend that to you know, anyone that's able to

Kara Snyder 7:26

Well, and I know you said when you got back then your you felt like your job search momentum wasn't quite there. And then it took a while to get back in the flow. But I think

the fact that you were able to push yourself out of your comfort zone and have that learning experience, ultimately, you're better off in the long run, you know, overcoming that hurdle of that job search that you felt was, you know, you were maybe a little bit stuck or didn't have the momentum that you wanted? Overall, I think you're better off and you're that much more of a candidate for some of these upcoming roles. Right?

Flor Hernandez 8:01

Definitely. And that's a great perspective to see. Because, you know, eventually, when when I was studying or writing when I was planning to study abroad, I'm always, you know, like, it's definitely a financial way, you could say that, you know, to make that commitment to go study abroad, but I've knew that, you know, yeah, it's going to be a little bit of a financial way that I could, you know, have to do it right now. But then eventually it will be, because I'll have that experience and that exposure, that not necessarily everybody, you know, will have. So it's definitely a good perspective to see it that way. Even, it took me a little bit to get a job right after but then, you know, at the end of the day, it made me into a better designer, because I've been exposed to a lot of other things and a lot of other, you know, way of working. Absolutely.

Kara Snyder 8:41

And I know as you share that story, you also shared that you're a first generation college student. So I'm wondering if you have any advice for other first generation college students that are navigating this experience, and debating how far to push themselves out of their comfort zone? What would you say to somebody in a similar situation,

Flor Hernandez 9:01

I would say that, you know, it's definitely hard. But I think it's also rewarding, seeing how, you know, you can get through those experiences, and you can make those things happen, even without the help or without the assistance that maybe your parents or your siblings could have provided you. And then eventually, you know, once you're at that level of once you're able to get to, you know, university and go through that you are able to help other people or other you know, younger, you know, maybe siblings or cousins, because now you have that experience. Now you have that exposure, so you can help other people. So they're not in that same situation that you were in before. That's something that you know, I try to help other people too because I feel like once when I was in school and what I was trying to get through college and apply to college even or get through studying abroad, it was difficult time not to know who to ask questions or where to go and get that information. And if if I was able to get through that I feel like now I can be the help the people you know, if people have those questions, I can help them out.

Kara Snyder 9:58

Exactly. Time's to pay it forward. That's a great perspective. I love to hear that. So tell us, let's flash forward. Now, how did you get to your current role senior designer? What does that look like?

Flor Hernandez 10:11

I like my current role, you know, I've been working hard teaching it to this senior designer role position for a while, before this, while I was working as a hospitality designer, and I was passionate about that, too, you know, I've always been very, super passionate about hospitality, I know that that's what I want to do. And that's, you know, essentially my dream goal, to be a hospitality designer, and then just retire out of it, too. But my current role I, I recently joined it as of January this year, it's a smaller firm that I was working at, it's four people right now. But I like that exposure of hair, or, you know, being in a smaller firm having that exposure to a lot of different tasks, you know, I might not necessarily get it at other bigger firms. So I've definitely been good, good exposure and good experience. Also, a lot of our projects are local. So that's also a great experience to be able to see how, you know, the project evolves from start to finish in, you know, what, when it's being constructed? That's, that's great to experience as well.

Kara Snyder 11:06

That's great. It sounds like a great fit. As your career has evolved. How would you describe your leadership style?

Flor Hernandez 11:15

I've always looked up people that I wanted to be like, like, you know, people that I liked their leadership style, and I feel like I could relate to you, you know, not necessarily giving them the option and given them the opportunity to give the ideas and to bring, you know, insight to the table. I feel like everybody at every level has, you know, insight and good insight and good questions or good ideas. And I feel like oftentimes, I've seen with other leaders that, you know, oftentimes you have to get through the experience, you have to get through the years to be able to have that seat at the table, I would say or to be able to have your ideas being being listened to. And I don't necessarily agree with that. I feel like, you know, necessarily, no matter how many years or how, you know, much experience people have, there's always insight and there's always good ideas that people may have. So I try to give those opportunities to other people even younger, you know, younger professionals, when I work with them, to see what they think about, you know, what's your perspective? How can I learn from them, too, and how can you know, they learn from me. So it's a collaborative leadership, I would say,

Kara Snyder 12:20

Well, and that tracks Flor because listening to you talk, I'm thinking about how you talked about paying it forward with your knowledge that you gained while you were at ISU and your study abroad experience and what it was like to be a college student. So that tracks for me that you're trying to pay it forward in the workplace as well. So I'd love to hear that. What is a quality that you would say you admire most in a leader?

Flor Hernandez 12:46

The ability to take, I guess, advice from other people to, you know, to know that not necessarily only what they say, it's what it goes, it has to be the ability to, you know, to take constructive criticism and be able to improve with it.

Kara Snyder 13:04

That's a great point, I like that, tell me what your favorite part of your job is.

Flor Hernandez 13:09

The flexibility that I get from it, as of now we work from home, mostly, you know, every day, we go to the office once a day. So I feel like that flexibility is very, because a lot of the time to you know, in this industry, specifically, we spent a lot of time just, you know, focus down working on, you know, let's say a model or some floor plans and things like that. So I feel like having the flexibility of just being able to, you know, live my life, but also be able to be productive at work. It's great. And also the exposure that I get to, you know, all sides of the industry in the projects, since it's a smaller firm.

Kara Snyder 13:43

What would you say the most challenging thing about your job is?

Flor Hernandez 13:47

As of now, I would say definitely getting getting used to working on a smaller firm. You know, I came from a firm that I was about 130 people and now I'm working with, you know, just three other people. So it's definitely been an adjustment, you know, when it comes to resources and everything like that, but I feel like, you know, the positives outweigh the challenges. For sure. Absolutely.

Kara Snyder 14:10

Well, we are going to finish with a speed round so our listeners can get to know you just that much more go with your first instinct on these questions. What are you reading or listening to right now? Anything you'd recommend to us?

Flor Hernandez 14:23

So I'm listening to the latest Shakira album. I've been obsessing skim out couple weeks here.

Kara Snyder 14:29

Love it. What is your favorite season?

Flor Hernandez 14:33

Fall for sure.

Kara Snyder 14:34

Where did you go on your last vacation?

Flor Hernandez 14:36
Mexico

Kara Snyder 14:38
What is your favorite board game?

Flor Hernandez 14:40
Oh, it's a good question. I don't use the word games, but I like drawing a lot. Oh,

Kara Snyder 14:44
fun. Maybe you're a Pictionary person. Yeah. What's your favorite thing to cook for dinner? steak and potatoes. And I ask everybody that comes on the podcast Avanti is gondola or pub to cheese balls?

Flor Hernandez 14:58
The cheese balls for sure.

Kara Snyder 15:00
And one last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Flor Hernandez 15:06
Find something that you're passionate about. So you don't make your work your whole lifestyle because I feel like time after college goes by super, super fast. And you don't want to look back 10 or 15 years down and you know, see that the only thing that you've done, it's just work.

Kara Snyder 15:22
Fantastic advice. Thanks again for being here. That was Flor Hernandez, senior designer at Serenity. Join us next time on the PodCAST for more stories from our cast alumni.