

Students' social activism FTW!

 By Leigh Andrews

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Global design students Bo-Won Keum of the Rhode Island School of Design affectionately known as 'Risdee' (RISD) and Rhys Jones of Canada's Carleton University of Industrial Design, enthralled attendees at the second day of Design Indaba 2017 with their use of design to make the world a better place.

"Heal the world, make it a better place, for you and for me and the entire human race..." If you've been alive over the past few decades the lyrics to this immortal Michael Jackson song will either have you doing a slow-head dance with your eyes closed or an irritated shake and wondering what I'm on about now – especially as the song hasn't been played at this rendition of Design Indaba.

The truth is, when introducing two of the day's global graduate speakers, Kojo Baffoe mentioned that the students' stories are always inspiring, with co-MC Michael Bierut commenting that when he gets back to New York and reports back on his Design Indaba experience each year, it's often those global graduates' tales that stick in his memory.

I felt the same way on hearing the first few graduate students' presentations yesterday – so much so that I tweeted out the following...

“ These global students' presentations at [@designindaba](#) sure have a way of making you feel inadequate. [#designindaba pic.twitter.com/ZOKyUKucbY](#)— Rambling Litchi (@Leigh_Andrews) [March 1, 2017](#) ”

... which was met with 'likes' and comments of agreement:

“ Totally Leigh_Andrews ;) <https://t.co/rxXWLpSalj>— Social Insights (@insights_social) [March 1, 2017](#) ”

The reason is simple – every single one thus far has resonated because these young, inspired minds have been motivated to take their new design skills and use them in a way that actually makes the world a better place. Right, long-winded explanation over. Here's how Keum and Jones are doing their bit to heal the world through design:

Free your mind: whoever you are, wherever you are

Graphic designer and storyteller of note, Keum kicked off by explaining her interest in how constraints often inspire creativity. What bigger constraint is there than having to spend your days in prison? During her studies at [RISD](#), she partnered with the Books to Prisoners project in Seattle. It's exactly what it sounds like: a non-profit organisation that responds to letters from prison inmates in the US asking for books by donating the books that are asked for – or as good a match as possible.



Keum

Keum said: “The journey begins with letters from the inmates who ask for reading material. The prison systems don't necessarily provide these. Being locked up in a cell with nothing else to do for 23 hours a day can make you go crazy. Reading is a way to forget that, to imagine and learn and hopefully lead to a better life on their release.” Some request dictionaries, other want self-help books and others are simply after the latest fantasy and romance bestsellers.

Now, Keum is helping Books to Prisoners develop a system to archive the reading materials, requests, restrictions and donations, but of course the tale is a little more complicated than that. Some of that complication lies in the fact that the books are all donated materials and there are format restrictions; some prisons won't accept hardcovers or books in other languages. But it was never about

simply being faster or automating the process to the click of a button, as the physical labour is as much for the volunteers as the prisoners, as they take time out of their lives for each letter they read, and something magical happens when you browse the books.

Keum wanted the inmates to tell their story of the impact of the books they receive, asking them to write what it meant to them. The responses were then turned into a book because, “Despite the convictions print is dead, a book still commands physical presence and is a democratic object as it’s something the volunteers and prisoners can all read.” Designed to look like one of the packages, external content was kept to a minimum, with each letter occupying a full spread, with the letter on the right and a quote or footnote to accompany the letter on the left.

Condensed previews of the book are available at the Design Indaba pop-up store, as well as the zines Keum created of the books that have been sent out to the prisoners. She ended with a quote that suggests she’s wise beyond her years: “Don’t be afraid to let a simple gesture take up space, it’ll resonate in more ways than you can imagine.”

Getting real-world results with evidence-based design

Jones then explained his focus on evidence-based design and beefing up assumptions with scientific vigour. Once he started talking it was clear why he was president of the [Carleton Industrial Design Student Association](#). He’s passionate and focused on making a difference, and believes that all products developed in the future should be tailored for human diversity and universal design. His design thesis project? A special Kangaroo chair for neonatal intensive care units that offers skin-to-skin contact for the baby and caregiver alike. The benefits of this are numerous, and while other chairs exist, they’re often too heavy to unlock and move around from room to room, didn’t meet basic infection control criteria and are uncomfortable to sit on for a long time. Jones’ prototype has already won multiple awards for healthcare product design. His research shows us why...

Hospitals are extremely complex spaces, not very big, yet crowded as many people work there, from doctors to nurses and cleaners, not to mention the patients and their visitors. Jones had many design decisions to make, with the following five points his critical drivers:

1. **Spatial constraints**
2. **Patient and family care**
3. **Hospital-borne infections are on the rise**
4. **Ergonomics**
5. **Environment**

The resulting chair effectively meets all of these.

Jones took this all into account, prototyped a model and upped the user experience by adding recline options, with minimal creasing to reduce the risk of infection and colour used in such a way that it shows the high-touch areas for easy cleaning. It’s sustainable, socially responsible and so very simple.

Jones boils his own design success down to taking both user needs and research into account. That’s the crux of evidence-based design, and something we can all take forward.

[Click here](#) for more on Books for Prisoners, [here](#) for more on Jones’ chair and visit our [Design Indaba special section](#) for all the latest coverage!



Jones

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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