

As an Interior Design student, I have been told that my future can go in two directions: residential or commercial. As an IIDA Student Member, I knew there was more to the Interior Design Industry. In February, the Student Mentoring Program introduced me to my mentor, Shanna Pajares, Senior VP of Business Development at Office Pavilion in Houston, Texas. Shanna and I discussed what my goals and expectations were for the mentoring experience and she crafted a plan accordingly.

Once I arrived to Office Pavilion, Shanna greeted me with enthusiasm and immediately made me feel at home. She began with a tour of the office, showroom, warehouse, and introduced me to each employee. I met with the Business Development team where I learned about the importance of relationships with landlords, brokers, and contractor developers. I sat in on a strategic planning meeting where we discussed space utilization, customer satisfaction, and the process of working together with multiple departments in a business. I took a trip to the Ziegler Cooper's Houston office where I met Liz, Associate Principal and Design Director as well as, Paige, a landlord designer, who is a recent graduate from my University. Liz, spoke to me about her experience as a designer as well as what it is like to switch back and forth between companies to find the right fit. At lunch, Paige, spoke with me about her progression from a post-graduate to a landlord designer, while simultaneously working towards the NCIDQ certification. Later in the day, Shanna set up a personal meeting for me and sales representatives that are also IIDA board members. We spoke about the different avenues each took while transitioning from design students to fabric and light representatives. I thoroughly enjoyed this conversation because it provided valuable insight as to how I can create my own path with a design degree and how I should balance between work, IIDA board membership, and my personal life.

I also met with the Principal of a new Residential-Commercial Firm that offers architectural, planning and interior design services. She spoke about her experience of working with firms, advancements, and when she realized it was time to create her own firm. This really instilled the need to believe in your accomplishments, skills and knowledge and most importantly yourself when wanting to branch off and make a business of your own.

Before I met Shanna, I heard about her devotion and impeccable drive in this industry. After my time with her, I realized she is not only devoted to her work, but also a devout leader. She inspired me to be determined and confident. She showed me the ins-and-outs, the ups-and-downs, and the power in working-smarter-rather-than-harder. Most importantly, she shared lessons that her boss passed down to her, "relationships are non-transferrable" and "the greatest value is an extraordinary partner." The most valued experience to me is not a short-cut in Auto Cad or a particular sales pitch that will land the client, but having a positive network that surrounds me and knowing that there are genuine people around me who want to see me succeed. I am forever grateful for Shanna and the time she contributed to enhancing my future by creating invaluable connections and more importantly, standing as a mentor to me. This experience taught me that self-awareness is the key to self-growth, but in order to advance in a career I must know the environment too. Without Shanna and the IIDA Mentor Program, I would not have been able to fully learn how to know myself, as well as the industry, business, friends, and the competition. The IIDA Mentor Program complimented my formal education at University Alabama in an irreplaceable way.