



*Founder D'Wayne Edwards works closely with all the students that come through the academy.*

ALL CREDITS: MARCUS YAM/PENSOLE

# Pensole sketches a path to success

D'Wayne Edwards, founder of the Pensole Footwear Design Academy, describes the route he took into the footwear industry as "unconventional". He drew his first shoe at the age of 11 and at 17 he won a Reebok design competition. As a self-professed "sneaker head", someone with a strong passion for sneakers, his ideal destination after graduating from high school was the Otis-Parson Design School in Los Angeles, where he could have studied footwear design. Growing up in a single-parent family with five siblings meant money was tight and so instead he attended evening school to study business marketing, advertising and management. He combined his studies with a job as a files clerk in the accounts department of shoe company LA Gear. His aspirations were much broader than this, with the ultimate ambition of becoming a sneaker designer.

In an age before social media, he says it was hard to get noticed: this forced him to think creatively. His only means of reaching out was a suggestion box in the office. "I'd put sketches in the box with the suggestion that they hire me as a footwear designer," he tells *World Footwear*. Six months and 180 original sketches later Robert Greenberg, owner of LA Gear, took notice and hired him as an entry-level designer. At just 19, it made him one of the youngest designers in the footwear industry. What's

**The Pensole Footwear Design Academy gives aspiring young designers, regardless of background, the tools they need to have a successful career in the footwear industry.**

more, he was one of the first African-American professional footwear designers. He believes he was hired purely because of "the ambition of submitting every day". When Mr Greenberg left LA Gear four years later to establish Skechers, Mr Edwards followed, spending a further six years honing his skills there. In 2000, he achieved a lifelong dream by joining Nike as a senior footwear designer. He progressed quickly and was appointed design director of the Jordan brand in under a year. In 2007, he joined an exclusive list of people to have designed an Air Jordan sneaker. He has gone on to hold more than 30 patents and has created over 500 sneaker styles for athletes including Derek Jeter, Carmelo Anthony and Michael Jordan. His designs have grossed more than \$1 billion worldwide.

## Difference maker

Having already achieved his dream of working for Nike, and then surpassing it by designing an Air Jordan, Mr Edwards felt he could do even more. "I wanted to leave the industry better than when I entered it," he says, adding that his desire was to "make a bigger impact than just the shoes I designed". This inspired him to establish the Pensole Academy. Located in Portland, Oregon, it is named in honour of the No. 2 pencil, the tool with which he drew his first shoe (as well as each one since). The academy held its first class in 2010 and has collaborated with many of the leading footwear brands to deliver training programmes.

He had experienced first-hand how difficult it was for a young designer to break into the industry. "During my time at Jordan I would take the time to mentor kids, through email and phone conversations with the idea of them becoming my interns because there was no straight path," he explains. One of the reasons for this was the absence in this part of the world of a design school dedicated exclusively to footwear. Pensole aims to fill this void and give young, talented design students an opportunity, regardless of their socio-economic background. Its programmes are funded through private donations, school scholarships and corporate sponsorships. Students come from all walks of life, giving the classes an eclectic feel. "We always have a mix of students from all over the globe and in terms of sex and race," he says. This creates an environment that accurately reflects what it is like to work at an international company. Discussing the programmes at the academy, Mr Edwards says they "give the students more knowledge of how the industry works before getting a job". It gives them a head start when they take their first steps in the industry, rather than them having to "learn everything on the job".

The footwear companies also benefit from the academy, as it provides them with the next generation of "raw, young talent". The programmes are immersive, giving Mr Edwards the opportunity to learn about each student on a deeper level. This means he is able to tell potential employers "hidden things that you may not see in a traditional interview process". He builds up a better understanding of them on a personal level, leaving



*Pensole's programmes are tailored to the needs of partner brands, many of which are industry heavyweights.*

him in a better position to judge their personality or work ethic. "I'm able to give companies a bit more insight into who these people are, not just as a creative but as a person."

## Challenging programmes

Pensole teaches the entire footwear design process via a "learn by doing" curriculum. From generating ideas through to branding, as well as the steps in between, such as concept development, material selection and prototyping, the programmes are intended to mirror the real world. "The academy is not designed like a normal college or university; it is designed like a company," Mr Edwards explains. Programmes last from two to four weeks, with students in the classroom for up to 14 hours each day. It is an intensive footwear design boot camp, which gives them the same number of credits as they would receive for a full 16-week college semester. He accepts the programmes are tough, but their aim is to give students a realistic taste of what it is like to work in the industry. He believes time ceases to be an obstacle if you are passionate about what you do, and it is this quality he most values in his students, besides the raw talent they must possess.

The classes teach more than practical skills; they also work on personal development, something which Mr Edwards feels is the "missing piece from major universities and colleges". He stresses to the students that they must take personal ownership of the products they design, as well as explaining to them the importance of business etiquette, good time management, strong communication and working effectively with other people.

The footwear companies with which Pensole works have a strong influence on the academy's programmes. "They come to us with their proposals and then we design a class based on that," he says. Recent collaborations have been with New Balance and adidas, which was the very first brand to host a class at the academy. The programmes are extremely competitive, with up to 1,000 applicants competing for an average of 18 spots. It is further preparation for when the students enter the job market. It also teaches them to avoid complacency. "We push them to understand that there is more to it than talent; talent alone doesn't guarantee that you'll get a



*The word that comes to mind when describing D'Wayne Edwards: persistent.*



*Classes at Pensole cover a wide range of topics, from technical skills to product branding.*



*Students learn about the whole design process, including material selection and prototyping.*

job," Mr Edwards says.

Pensole is able to tap into the close relationships it has built with more than 100 global design schools to find the best candidates for its classes. Mr Edwards compiles a shortlist of between 30 and 50 students, from which the partner company selects a preferred intake. "These kids have more visibility than they would have in an internship; it becomes an extended job interview," he says. As part of a recent programme with New Balance, students who excelled were considered for a one-year apprenticeship with the New Balance Design foundry programme.

### *Time for change*

Mr Edwards feels there is a need for significant change in the footwear industry over the next ten years. "We've been making shoes the same way for over 100 years," he explains. He is excited by the new methods being developed to create shoes. "It's not about making a silhouette look different, it's about creating a new way of making things." He wants to see an increased use of materials that adapt to the human body and its natural movements. "As we move forward, I hope that we not only focus on making product, but making it better, easier and more innovative," he adds.

He also expects to see a shortening in the time between a design being conceived and the public having access to the final product. "There are new shoes being released every week, but that isn't genuine speed because it took one-to-two years to make that product," he points out. He says the speeding up of footwear development is in "direct response" to the increase in the pace of consumer lifestyles. Consumers will become more connected to the development process; companies will need to seek out input from their target market and respond to it when designing their products.

### *Industry impact*

Pensole is now targeting an expansion into high schools; it hopes to identify bright design talents at a younger age and guide them towards a college place and a successful career beyond. It is also developing a global online programme "to tap

into more international markets". This move is inspired by the interest in its World Sneaker Championship event, which has received entries from more than 75 countries. Mr Edwards says the competition "shows the size of interest in designing sneakers across the globe". The online programme will have a strong focus on international schools and students.

Pensole also plans to build on the success of a project with Asics, which saw the resulting co-branded products sell out in under an hour. Similar collaborations in the future will not have the ultimate goal of generating revenue, rather the academy wants to give students the opportunity to see the products they have designed on the shelves of major footwear retailers. Mr Edwards tells *World Footwear* that the first time he saw one of his designs in a branch of US retailer Foot Locker remains the most important moment of his career.

Pensole has built its reputation on the success of the graduates from its programmes. "I invested all of my own money to prove that the idea could work," he says, adding that companies were understandably sceptical about the concept because it had never been attempted before. Once they saw the quality of designer it was producing, they were quick to embrace it. Mr Edwards says he still gets a buzz from hearing the news that one of his former students has secured an interview or job. "We have over 180 students working professionally in the industry now in a little over five years," he enthuses. Many of these are making "major contributions" at leading companies; Pensole graduates have gone on to work at the likes of Wolverine, Timberland, Converse, Under Armour and Nike.

He insists it is much easier for young designers to break into the industry now than it was when he started in the late 1980s, primarily due to the growth of the internet and social media, which allow them to demonstrate their ability to a much wider audience. "They don't have an excuse; their biggest obstacle is themselves," he stresses. Pensole offers them a place to hone their skills and improve their chances of being noticed. If they show the same passion and dedication to designing shoes as the academy's founder did nearly 30 years ago, they will already be a step closer to achieving their dreams. [🔗](#)