

The business behind the brand

ASU FIDM instructor one of several biz school alums to translate education into fashion industry success

By Molly Loonam, ASU News

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Ask [Jennifer Boonlorn](#) ('01 BS in marketing) about the secret to a successful career in the luxury fashion industry and she'll tell you that community building is top of the list.

"I want to share with my students that it all comes down to relationships and having a strong network," says Boonlorn, a faculty associate at [ASU FIDM](#) and the founder and lead designer at [Soul Carrier](#), a luxury travel accessories brand based in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Community — both serving it and calling upon it — has been central to Boonlorn's most recent project: the [Heart Home T-shirt series](#). Each shirt features a heart with the word "home" written beside it, and all of the proceeds will benefit people impacted by the Los Angeles wildfires.

Boonlorn considers LA her second home. When the fires began devastating the city this winter, Boonlorn knew she could rally her local design community to help Californians in need.

"What's happening in LA is a reminder that we can be stripped of everything materialistically but nothing can take away our heart, our soul or our spirit," Boonlorn says.

Projects like the Heart Home T-shirt series typically take weeks, if not months, to coordinate, execute and produce. But when Boonlorn pitched the fundraiser to her longtime colleague Mark Daus, president of the local screen printing company X-treme Apparel, Daus printed the first batch of shirts within hours. Boonlorn's students gathered to model and photograph the T-shirts for Soul Carrier's website just days later.

Fashion major Sydney Rumsey is one student of Boonlorn's who stepped in to help model and photograph the T-shirts.

"We both have friends and family in LA, so I was more than happy to help with such a great cause," Rumsey says.

"I'm so blessed to have a community willing to jump on a project like this because the timeline is not normal for any production," Boonlorn says. "Bringing an idea like this to life in such a short time has taken me years of building relationships, experiencing hiccups, learning from setbacks and building new relationships."

Now, Boonlorn is investigating opportunities to partner with LA-based businesses to continue supporting the people and places affected by the fires.

"At some point, everyone will face some kind of hardship or tragedy. What matters is not the tragedy, but how we learn to move through it and respond to the tragedy," she says.

The business of fashion

Three years ago, Boonlorn's community played a role in her recruitment to teach at ASU when friends of friends connected her to ASU FIDM Assistant Professor [Danielle Sponder Testa](#). Returning to the university as a faculty member has been a natural fit for Boonlorn.

"It's an age group that I want to inspire and give back to: They're adults, but they still need guidance and inspiration," she says.

As an undergraduate student studying marketing, Boonlorn thought she was destined for law school, but her plans changed the summer before her senior year when Boonlorn's family was involved in a car crash that took the lives of her parents. Just before the accident, Boonlorn's mother asked where she wanted to go on vacation. The question became the basis for Soul Carrier's ethos — to go where your soul takes you — and inspired Boonlorn to found the [Paisan and Joyce Boonlorn Memorial Scholarship](#).

Boonlorn created the fund in partnership with the ASU Foundation to honor her parents' memory and express gratitude to the friends, family and ASU community that rallied around her after the accident. The scholarship supports W. P. Carey juniors and seniors with financial need.

"My sister Jaime and I felt very supported after my parent's accident. I remember my W. P. Carey marketing professors attending my parents' funeral and being there for us in the months following the accident," Boonlorn says. "Jaime and I felt strongly about showing our gratitude to the community that supported us. Creating the scholarship was a way to express our gratitude and honor our parents' memory."

Following her graduation from ASU, Boonlorn attended Parsons School of Design in New York City, where she lived and worked for several years before returning to the Valley and founding Soul Carrier in 2009. Her products have been featured at resort boutiques including the Waldorf Astoria, The Beverly Hills Hotel, Fairmont and the Four Seasons, and in publications including GQ,

AZ Foothills Magazine and Phoenix Home and Garden.

A career in fashion is not the traditional path for most business students, yet Boonlorn credits her business background as essential to her success in design. When writing her Parsons application, Boonlorn used an ASU peer as an example in her case study: While her friend was an extraordinary artist, Boonlorn argued that creatives without the business acumen to market their products successfully would struggle to build commercially viable businesses.

"It has to be the foundation: You must learn to balance the business and the art," she says. "If you're only focused on making money, you might zap the creativity. If you're only focused on the art, you might not make money."

Over the past three years, Boonlorn has taught students with varying backgrounds and career goals, including several W. P. Carey students and alums.

At the start of his ASU career, Joshua Tunac ('24 BA in business and global politics/BS in management) didn't share the same passion for the career paths his peers were pursuing. After studying abroad at Waseda University in Shinjuku, Japan, during his sophomore year, Tunac was inspired by the culture's emphasis on self-expression through personal fashion. He began taking fashion and design courses from Testa and Boonlorn after returning to Arizona.

"I got to see a new side of creativity and design I hadn't found in the U.S.," Tunac says. "Hundreds of people could buy the same basics from the same brand, but everyone had unique styles. That inspired me. It was a formative experience."

At Testa's recommendation, Tunac applied to the Fashion Scholarship Fund — the most prestigious fashion-focused scholarship program and nonprofit organization in the U.S. — with a [case study](#) he wrote on improving sustainability transparency for retail company supply chain traceability. Tunac was one of 160 students nationally selected to be a 2024 FSF Scholar.

The experience exposed Tunac to the many career opportunities in the fashion industry and the value of understanding how business concepts, like risk and profit margins and quarterly sales, impact all design organizations.

"The case study made me realize that an advantage to not being a fashion or design major is having an analytical mind," Tunac says. "I could take the principles I learned at W. P. Carey and go deeper with whatever projects or case studies I did at the fashion school."

Tunac is now pursuing a career in fashion strategy international business and hopes to eventually be based in Japan or Europe.

"In this career, you're bringing a sense of identity to a consumer. That's something I identify with," Tunac says.

ASU FIDM student Berenis Reyes ('19 BS in supply chain management/marketing) worked in marketing and supply chain management for four years after graduating from W. P. Carey but always envisioned herself working in fashion and design.

"It felt like it was meant to be," says Reyes, who returned to pursue her second bachelor's degree and will graduate from ASU FIDM this spring.

Many ASU FIDM faculty members are full-time designers and entrepreneurs. Since the field is constantly changing, Reyes wanted to learn from faculty who were teaching based on their industry experiences. She plans to pursue a career in buying or merchandising, and it's important to Reyes to work for a company with values similar to hers.

"Sustainability is huge," she says. "It's hard to produce something and feed consumerism while staying sustainable. That's a focus of mine and something that has been focused on in the curriculum."

Reyes' ASU FIDM courses have exposed her to the industry's creative side and pushed her out of her comfort zone — she hadn't expected to learn to sew in class — but her business background has prepared her for job opportunities after graduation.

"So many creative people and students are doing incredible projects but don't have as much exposure to the business side of things," Reyes says. "I have a leg up in that way. I feel well prepared to take on the workforce, help a company succeed and be a valuable asset while also scratching that creative itch."

Local connections

Throughout Boonlorn's FSH 394: Fashion Entrepreneurship class this spring, Reyes and Rumsey will have opportunities to engage with designers and entrepreneurs from all sectors of the fashion industry, including trend forecasters, sourcing experts, independent artists and growth advisors. Boonlorn welcomed her first guest speaker, gemologist and entrepreneur [Cassy Saba Shovak](#) ('11 BS in marketing) to class last week to share her experience working in New York's Diamond District and founding her fine jewelry business, [Cassy Saba Jewelry](#). Saba, who maintains offices on the East Coast and in the Valley, has designed for E! News, and her work has been featured in dozens of national magazines.

Boonlorn first connected with Saba in 2009 while coordinating The Mannequin Is Our Muse competition, an event where local creators and artists competed to design over 100 life-size

mannequins.

"She has the gumption and tenacity I want to teach my students," Boonlorn says.

Saba discussed her early love of jewelry and entrepreneurship — she founded her first business at just 13 years old — sustainability and trends in the diamond industry, building a trusted community of vendors and collaborators, and navigating client relationships. She reminisced on reaching out to established designers for advice while she was first starting out.

"It's important for me to give back to students because people were open to helping me when I was in school," Saba says. "I wish success for everyone who has a dream, and if I can help in any way, I am there. I believe I am blessed to be a blessing."

Saba says her W. P. Carey education gave her the skills to be business savvy while adding to her credentials. She recommends ASU students interested in pursuing careers in design finish their degrees while seeking out part-time job opportunities or internships in their desired fields. She also emphasized cultivating relationships with anyone and everyone students meet in the industry.

"Something I took away from Cassy Saba's lecture was the importance of making connections and not burning bridges," Rumsey says. "The fashion industry can be intense, but kindness and respect can get you far."

There are countless opportunities for students to pursue design careers in fashion hubs like New York or LA, but Boonlorn wants to make her students aware of local opportunities, too.

"If you can go to New York or LA, that's amazing. The world is your oyster in those cities," she tells students. "However, if it doesn't work out, or you stay in Arizona, we have to get a little more creative with what's available as a job opportunity. But the skills and principles that you're learning here at ASU are still applicable."

Soul Carrier's next project is more local than ever: Boonlorn is collaborating with former Louis Vuitton product developer Armand Poole, who lives just blocks away from her, to expand the brand's reach into corporate gifting.

Boonlorn, who was connected with Armand through an ASU colleague, knows from experience that collaborating with designers and manufacturers outside the state — or even the country — can be costly and time consuming. Living close to a design partner has been more convenient for the brand and allowed Boonlorn and Armand to easily meet and develop their ideas.

"Armand has been a huge gem that's come out of being associated with the ASU fashion program. And then there is the reward of being around all the awesome and creative students," Boonlorn says.

By sharing her story and experiences with young designers, Boonlorn hopes to expose her students to the vast opportunities available in the fashion industry and its sister fields, whether through styling, product development, marketing, social media, purchasing or design.

"I want to open their eyes to all that is possible," she says.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



From left: ASU fashion students Sydney Rumsey, Nicolina Kondos and Peyton Noriega modeling Jennifer Boonlorn's Heart Home T-shirts. Photo by Katryna Bourommavong

Text image(s)



Jennifer Boonlorn



Gemologist and entrepreneur Cassy Saba (center) talking to Boonlorn's students. Photo by Molly Loonam

Gallery



Jennifer Boonlorn with her Heart Home T-shirt series.



From left: Jennifer Boonlorn, faculty associate at ASU's Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising, and ASU fashion students Peyton Noriega, Sydney Rumsey and Nicolina Kondos modeling the shirts.



Jennifer Boonlorn's Heart Home T-shirt series.



Clockwise from top: Sydney Rumsey, Jennifer Boonlorn, Berenis Reyes and Nicolina Kondos.

Gallery



W. P. Carey alum, FIDM Faculty Associate and lead designer at Soul Carrier Jennifer Boonlorn (left) smiles at the finished product of her Heart Home T-shirts alongside Mark Daus, owner of Xtreme Apparel in downtown Phoenix.



Proceeds from the T-shirt series will benefit people impacted by the Los Angeles wildfires.



Like Boonlorn, ASU fashion major Sydney Rumsey has friends and family in LA, so she was more than happy to step in and model the T-shirts.