

Aurora student nabs international design prize



By Brock Weir

As a first-generation Canadian, Ria Da Costa was conscious of some of the attitudes of her elders in her parents' homeland of Trinidad.

There was a time, she said, when women weren't seen as 'capable' in doing certain kinds of hands-on work, but her grandfather, Lennox, did not subscribe to the attitudes of so many of his generation and threw his support behind his granddaughter as she pursued her dreams.

Ms. Da Costa, who turned 27 last week, has been named Design Student of the Year at the prestigious Chippendale International School of Furniture, based near Edinburgh, Scotland. Along with this recognition, Ms. Da Costa undertook the painstaking task of creating a piece of furniture incorporating 2,167 pieces of wood veneer onto its surface, creating the aptly named 'Lennox Desk' which was proudly exhibited in the Scottish parliament.

'This meant a lot in terms of my confidence as a designer,' says Ms. Da Costa, who attended Lester B. Pearson Public School and Aurora High School, before studying interior design at Ryerson University. 'To be able to see my skills transferred over in another area of design was really rewarding.'

Ms. Da Costa first discovered her love of interior design as a youngster watching home design shows so popular on HGTV and TLC. These programs inspired her to undertake little projects around her Aurora home and it was through these trial runs that she found her passion.

'I have always been a little bit handy, but I think what pushed it [from interior design to something more hands-on] was I felt in order to be a successful designer of any kind, you have to diversify a little bit and sort of dabble in all fields of design. Being hands-on with woodworking was a hobby. If I could marry what I know about interior design with the 'making' side of things, I could be a little bit more diverse.'

Following her time at Ryerson, Ms. Da Costa says she knew her thirst for education had not been quenched. She then decided to look internationally for a different cultural experience. The Chippendale School was soon on her radar and its programming, along with her interest in Scottish culture, made it a top priority.

After sending in her application, the next step was an interview. International students typically conducted their interviews on Skype and Face Time and Ms. Da Costa was no exception. Once she made it through and was accepted, she found a school that instilled the philosophy of diversifying not only one's interest but also the business. The Chippendale School, after all, remains a fully-functioning furniture business with a stake in furniture restoration.

‘They encouraged us to really broaden the spectrum of how we approached design,’ she says. ‘Each term we were given a certain set of criteria. One term it was to create a piece of furniture using wood veneer instead of solid wood. I knew that with veneer, as you're using thin pieces of wood, you can get a lot more creative in how you can manipulate the wood. I thought I would really push the envelope and try patterns and repetition to create a more intricate design.’

Taking out her pencil and sketching ideas based on architectural designs she had seen around the world, she ‘played around’ with a few patterns and aesthetics until she pinpointed the perfect formula for the Lennox Desk.

Each student was made aware there was a possibility their finished product could be displayed in the Edinburgh parliament, so each went out of their way to ensure their pieces stood out.

‘I just wanted to ensure I did it and I did it well and it would get noticed,’ she says. ‘[Having it on display] was better than I imagined. I thought the design was quite good, but to hear the reviews of the exhibition was just great. People just really, really loved it and everyone wanted to go up and touch it and interact with it, which I think is the greatest compliment. If you can create something that draws people's interest, you know you have really succeeded design-wise. If I'm allowed to say so, I thought it was quite good but just people interacting with it made me realise it was really good. It helped me with my confidence as a designer.’

After its moment in the spotlight at Holyrood, the Lennox Desk is now back at Chippendale after a stint in a further exhibition. It is Ria's goal to have her finished product in further exhibitions. Ultimately, she says she would like to participate in as many design shows as possible to catch the eyes of furniture collectors and industry professionals. It is there they scope out new talent and new trends, and it also provides a venue for designers to share their ideas as well.

‘I would love to see my pieces selected by a world famous architect and exhibited in one of their buildings,’ she says. ‘Not even exhibited, but permanently set into one of their buildings.’