



Haworth College of Business

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Alumni Perspectives



Sylvan Benton, B.B.A.'22, B.F.A.'22

Getting your mind set for a creative mindset

Fostering your creativity involves caring for yourself—that is one of the key takeaways that Sylvan Benton has learned in the two years since graduating from WMU. Joining Southwest Airlines as an associate innovation product designer, Benton is the go-to person for research, ideation and developing concepts through testing. The position combines her two degrees from WMU: product design and leadership and business strategy.

“The leadership and business strategy (LBS) program taught me more than theories, it dished out skills like servant leadership, inspiring others and delivering client recommendations. Pairing those skills with my design program, the synergy is unmatched. My role at Southwest Airlines isn’t just about design; we are expected to meet others and truly understand the business. My design program taught me how to approach problem solving, and LBS taught me how to turn those approaches into real-world solutions.”

Today, Benton is using her skills to work on a variety of projects, including how technology trends in the airline industry can help customize hospitality. “We’re finding creative ways to personalize the passenger experience and become more efficient. Across the industry, technology is making travel more convenient and enjoyable, which is exciting.”

Benton has been able to craft a career based on a foundation of innovation and strategy, a winning combination that she was able to develop through key experiences at WMU.

“My years at Western represent far more than classes. I had internships at Parker Hannifin and PlayMonster, where I worked on a variety of creative projects. In addition, the LBS program allowed me to be a driving force behind Bronconess, a student-run wine brand. My on-campus jobs were critical in developing my professionalism and leadership. And piloting my student business consulting team to victory during a semester-long, in-class competition was another highlight.” While Benton’s WMU experiences weren’t always without turbulence, they taught her resilience and teamwork.

Finding Western, “competitive, but with a hand to help you climb,” Benton notes that the University’s inclusive culture, engaging professors and student services emphasized individual identity over the mere number of students on campus.

She found a similar ethos at Southwest Airlines. “We are encouraged to bring our whole selves to work. Celebrations are frequent—everything gets its moment. This approach contributes to a workplace that is personal, and where individuality, vibrancy and inclusivity are valued.”

The well of creativity for a role like Benton’s needs to be replenished for her to do her best work. “I recently discovered the importance of loving yourself outside of work. I have incorporated various activities into my routine, such as yoga, junk journaling and exploring different worlds through classes and books. Sustained creativity requires drawing inspiration from both work and personal life. Self-care practices and a dynamic work environment allow me to maintain my creative mindset.”



Jamauri Bogan,

B.B.A.'17, MBA'19

Developing a nurturing neighborhood

Discovering your passion—it is exhilarating, it is exciting and it just feels right. Jamauri Bogan found that he had a strong interest in business at the age of 12. His mother, who worked at Prudential, took him to “Take Your Child to Work Day” and that simple engagement in the business world set Bogan on his way. “During that visit, I had the opportunity to sit in on meetings with her supervisors and participate in a breakout session where I learned about the stock market alongside other kids my age. It was at that moment that I really engaged with the business world and became curious about a future in finance.”

As Bogan progressed through higher education, some key realizations shaped his perspective—and eventually his path. “I was fortunate to have no student debt due to a scholarship, was able to establish valuable local relationships, and had both passion and energy. With these advantages in mind, I decided to pursue something I was genuinely enthusiastic about. After months of guidance from my mentor John Schmitt, who was a consultant at the Small Business Development Center at Western Michigan University, real estate became my primary focus.”

Fast forward to today, and Bogan Developments is the result. The firm’s vision is to build transformational projects in urban America that give children, adults and families what they need to thrive.

Bogan has a number of projects in the works, including Zone 32, a development that provides affordable housing on the Northside of Kalamazoo and nurtures area youth. “During my time in college, I had the opportunity to engage with the community, and I recognized two critical issues,” Bogan notes. “First, there is incredible potential with

the Kalamazoo Promise, but there are also gaps in helping children access its benefits. Second, my own passion for real estate led me to see the need for families to have access to elite housing at affordable prices. Zone 32 addresses both of these issues by providing a YMCA Early Learning Center that not only educates children but also provides meals and teaches them valuable life skills. Simultaneously, it offers housing options at affordable rates.”

Zone 32 consists of 12 workforce housing units, an early learning center and an office space. Phase one of construction was completed in December 2023 and is nearing full occupancy. Phase two will add 36 affordable housing units and a potential community facility focusing on children, family and services for older adults, thereby enhancing the Zone 32 neighborhood as a whole.

The \$4.5 million project received support from the city of Kalamazoo’s Economic Development Corporation, the Kalamazoo County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority and the Kalamazoo Foundation for Excellence. It also received financial support from Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the Kalamazoo County Housing Millage, Michigan Economic Development Corporation, Michigan State Housing Development Authority, and Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy.

As an out-of-state WMU student, Bogan decided to stay in Kalamazoo and make it his home. Why?

“I have a deep affection for the area, thanks to the profound impact that Western Michigan University had on me,” says Bogan.

“Kalamazoo is a place with exceptional opportunity for growth and meaningful impact for me, both personally and professionally. Its strategic location between Chicago and Detroit provides a unique advantage for business development and community engagement.”



Jason Mengel, B.B.A.'01

Following through: directing the PGA Championship and Ryder Cup

Imagine constructing a temporary stadium in three months—seating for thousands of spectators, corporate hospitality venues, merchandise store, media center, broadcast facilities, extensive back-of-house service area. That is the logistical dilemma that Jason Mengel faces repeatedly as a championship director at the PGA of America.

“Major Championships are the ultimate example of a ‘square peg, round hole’ operational challenge,” he says. “Many of the golf courses where the PGA is held are nearing 100 years old, and I am sure course architects would be stunned if they saw the scope of a modern-day Major Championship. Each setting is different, and that is why we have staff onsite for two to four years in advance.” The unexpected is par for the course for Mengel who has faced everything from the host

site opening two weeks prior to the event, to the COVID-19 pandemic, to controversial local legislation, to economic downturns. And then there is the weather ...

While all of that could put Mengel in the rough, he enjoys the fast-paced and demanding work environment. “Going through the event cycle and watching the site plan go from discussion, to paper, to construction, to coming alive with the best players in the world and tens of thousands of spectators is by far the most rewarding part of this career. I am extremely fortunate to still enjoy coming into the office after over 20 years in this field, working alongside talented colleagues and learning from them each day.”

The goal for Mengel is for the PGA Championship to be a win-win-win-win for the competitors, spectators, corporate partners and community. The estimated economic impact from hosting the Championship is well upwards of \$100,000,000, and the broadcast of the event is essentially a 27-hour, high-definition commercial for the host community. “The PGA Championship is one of the annual occasions where golf transcends the sport,” says Mengel.

Beyond the golfers themselves and the community at large, spectators at the Championship are often fulfilling a “bucket list” goal by attending, and providing a smooth, secure and welcoming experience is at the forefront of Mengel’s work. “We put a significant amount of effort into ensuring a positive guest experience from the very first touchpoint. Everything is considered, especially maximum accessibility for all spectators, including best practices for compliance with ADA guidelines for sporting events. We want those with mobility or other physical differences to be included and valued as spectators.”

Mengel was first inspired to pursue a career in sports marketing and management at WMU Haworth, where Dr. Ed Mayo’s course on the topic eventually drove him onto the green. Personally, Mengel gained

confidence as a student, formed lifelong friendships and met his spouse Jill, B.B.A.'02, at an off-campus social event. "I'm reminded every day of the amazing impact WMU has had on my life."

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