

Re-design-(think)ing Woodstock with Sk8 for Gr8

 By Pasqua Heard ^{9 Jun 2016}

At only 25, Alison Harris runs Sk8 for Gr8, a social enterprise encouraging design thinking amongst Woodstock youth. She previously worked as an art director in an agency in Cape Town.

Sk8 for Gr8 pairs local designers with youth in need of opportunity and interested in gaining exposure to art. Over the course of a few workshops, where the children get mentored in design ideas, the designers create child-inspired skateboard decks. These are then auctioned and proceeds go to Sk8 for Gr8. Read more about the initiative [here](#).

According to Alison, she'd be described as "a bit crazy" by her friends. While this may or may not be the case, she's certainly a considerate and ambitious individual willing to leap into the unknown and has quite a story to tell because of it.



Teaching design thinking. © Tyler Walker / big red photography

Alison, the founder

■ Tell us about your transition from a formal 9-5 art director's role to where you currently find yourself.

It all started as a thought process: realising how separate work was from what I was passionate about.



Alison Harris. © Tyler Walker / big red photography

This is when I realised I needed a change. I wanted to create a business that incorporates giving back in its day-to-day activities. Since college days, I knew I wanted to use media for good. I definitely don't regret working for an agency, as th

is where I gained my experience, got to learn what hard work really was and where my network started to grow. But I am so stoked I stepped out and gave my passion a go. It has not been easy, but it has been well worth it. I have learnt so much & Sk8 for Gr8 has grown my passion for upliftment even more.

🔸 What inspired you to start Sk8 for Gr8?

Simple conversations with kids inspired me to start Sk8 for Gr8. After hanging out with many of the kids in Woodstock I came to realise that none of them knew you could pursue a career in creativity, by this I don't mean only becoming an artist or a designer, but rather I mean using creative thinking to start a business or simply to solve an issue.

I found this to be particularly shocking when Woodstock is such a creative hub filled with entrepreneurs and artists of all forms who wanted to bridge this gap and create a business that is built on its teachings. I wanted to use design thinking to create a sustainable social enterprise.

🔸 Why skateboards specifically?

There are so many reasons, but I will try to sum it up as much as possible.

With the growing skate-culture and with it standing for inclusivity, I felt it to be the best fit. Skateboarding is not simply a sport but a movement. It brings people together and I honestly see it transforming communities. What kid can say they have not gone skateboarding a try?

I also feel it speaks to design-thinking and innovation directly. Every trick created is a result of thinking differently - problem solving. Every element of the board is well thought out, from shape to size to what graphic is put on.

And finally, that freedom in skating! That sense of play. I remember as a kid running around to find the steepest hill to skate and spending hours in the street with friends and building friendships.

🔸 What are some of the challenges you've faced in running Sk8 for Gr8 and what keeps you going?

When starting something where you are the only employee, it can get quite lonely. Because, like any business, there are hurdles to jump over and that responsibility can be quite overwhelming. But that's when I realise the importance of community. I have three awesome trustees of incredible wisdom; Andy Walford, Jenny Pedersen and Kirsten Pearson, my husband who is just good at supporting this dream, all the volunteers, all the crazy-talented artists and God. I mean, how can I actually think I'm not in this?

🔸 What has been your proudest moment in Sk8 for Gr8 so far?

This is a tough one. There have been many little moments. The moment after I ran the very first workshop, the moment when Ayanda (one of the children who partook in this year's workshops) said if he were president for the day he would make all schools have art, the moment when I saw the smiles of the kids when they saw their artwork on display and quite recently, the moment when I launched the online store.



Alison Harris leads a Sk8 for Gr8 workshop. © Tyler Walker / big red photography

Alison, the individual

🔸 Where and when do you have your most creative ideas?

I can't restrict this to a particular place, but definitely in moments of peace. When my mind has time to think things through.

▣ **Which designers inspire you?**

There are many different people who inspire me for different reasons.

As corny as this may sound, my husband's work is one of my biggest inspirations at the moment. It has been amazing to see his journey as he has embraced illustrating. I love that he has no formal training, but he does not let that restrict him. His illustrations are from another world. Quite literally though, his imagination is epic.

▣ **Where do you hope to be in five years' time?**

I hope to be growing Sk8 for Gr8 beyond my single capacity. I hope to have an awesome space with a rad bunch of people working together to change space and build communities.

▣ **What advice would you give to youngsters hoping to start something big?**

Surround yourself with the right people and be willing to work flipping hard.

▣ **What has been one of your greatest lessons learnt through Sk8 for Gr8 so far?**

One of the greatest lessons has been that we will never know everything, but we must always be open to learning more.

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