

Following your Heart (from Nova Scotia Community College Student Success Magazine 2009)

When you leave one path to pursue another, the challenges can be formidable. You might be leaving a secure job or a career that you invested a lot of money in. You might have to deal with family members or friends who think it's a bad idea. But, despite the risks, when it came to the inner callings of these three graduates, each of them listened and responded. And for all of them – it's paid off.

Susan Morrison had worked her way up to a lucrative position in the public relations and advertising world. Problem was, she wasn't happy. "It was stressful and certainly not family-friendly," says the mother of two. "I used to drop the girls off at day care at 7:30 in the morning and not be able to get them until 5:30 at night. We'd all drive home crying because we were so tired and hungry. It just wasn't fair to them." Susan ended up taking a few years off while her kids were small, but when they entered school full-time, she knew it was time to re-evaluate her career options.

Knowing she couldn't face the PR world again, Susan turned to something that she loved and was naturally good at. "Baking had always been my hobby – the thing that really struck a chord in me and made me truly happy." Having heard good things about NSCC's Baking and Pastry Arts program and its instructor Jean-Luc Doridam, she decided to go for it. "I figured this was my chance and if I didn't do it, then I'd always wonder about what could have been."

Her tough decision and her hard work paid off. Upon graduation, she had multiple job offers and became the pastry chef at two prestigious Halifax restaurants. Since then, she's joined the NSCC Baking and Pastry team as an instructor. Susan also owns her own business called Morrison Baking Arts where she teaches baking and cake decorating in stores and private homes. And if all of that weren't enough, when she's not baking, she writes about it in a popular, well-read blog for foodies called "Kitchen Addictions."

"It was difficult giving up a high-paying career in order to do this, but the soul satisfaction of following my dream has made it all worth it." Susan often shares her story in the hopes of encouraging other people to take the leap of faith and follow their hearts. "I'm so happy if my story can be helpful or heartening to others," she says. "I hope that I'm an example to young people, and especially my daughters."

Justin St. Onge is one such young person. At just 19, he left university and a double major in Biology and English to follow his love of carpentry. It was a summer job as a carpenter's apprentice – taken to help pay for his education – that turned his life around. "I realized that I loved working with my hands and getting a chance to see what I'd made at the end of the day." By the time September rolled around, Justin was smitten and decided to change his career path.

"I felt like I got a really personal education at NSCC. The instructors had a lot of time for students." Justin, who is also a competitive cyclist and concert violinist, also enjoyed the chance for his class to work as a team. "We worked on projects together and as problems came up, just as they would in the workforce, we'd tackle them. The only difference was we couldn't get fired!" He had such a good experience that he became a Test Drive Ambassador, talking to high school kids about his program.

During the work portions of his Apprenticeship, Justin took the advice of one of his instructors. "He suggested I try my hand at every aspect of the trade, so I've taken jobs in residential carpentry, finish work, concrete form work, and heavy construction." Most recently, he's been working with a busy Canadian contracting company at the Halifax Airport and finds it gratifying to see such large scale projects come together.

Having passed his final tests, Justin is now a Red Seal Carpenter and looks forward to a career with lots of growth and the opportunity to travel. "There are big churches in Europe that need carpenters to work on them," he says. "They need carpenters everywhere. I'm definitely not scared of lack of work."

Lack of work has never been a problem for Nikki Bis Saunders either. In fact, the two-time graduate of NSCC, has managed to combine both her cartography and graphic design diplomas into her career path. Currently, Nikki is employed as a GIS specialist for Interpretation Resources Consulting in Halifax, while simultaneously running a successful customized handbag company.

Called from an early age to make creativity part of her career, Nikki was originally drawn to the Cartography program at NSCC's Centre of Geographic Sciences (COGS) because of the artistic aspects of map making. "I wanted to do something artistic but I also wanted to be able to find work," she says. Mission accomplished upon graduation when Nikki landed a number of consecutive government contracts. It was this real world experience that enabled her to fast track through the Graphic Design program when she applied a few years later.

After two sunny years working for an international mapping company in Santa Barbara, California, Nikki returned to Nova Scotia, and surprised herself by becoming an entrepreneur. What began as simply making purses for friends exploded into "BissBags," when Nikki posted photos of her creations on Facebook. "Within minutes, people were writing to ask if I could make them a purse like that." She began taking custom orders, based on the client's choice of design and fabric. Using only Facebook, a website, and word of mouth, the business has grown beyond Nikki's imaginings.

"Last Christmas I made 35 bags in 60 days. It was pretty nuts!" says the 31-year-old who is currently setting up a webstore for her merchandise. Nikki plans to take some entrepreneurial courses in the future and grow her business even further.

Nikki credits NSCC with helping her discover how to live a creatively-rich life and still make a living. "The College gave me the space and the freedom to discover who I was becoming."

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