

# upwardly mobile



Mark Kinsley's innovative laptop mobility cart caught the eye of Apple and took one of the product design industry's top awards—all within about a year of his graduation.

by Mark W. Anderson



**“All my life I’ve wanted to create things,” says Mark Kinsley, 26, a 2005 graduate of Columbia’s product design program. “The first time I saw some work by product design students, I said to myself, ‘This is what I want to do—what is this called?’ Turned out, it was industrial design.”**

Kinsley was initially attracted to product design for its synthesis of aesthetic beauty and user-driven practicality. But before he could really get creative as a designer, he had to learn how to stop thinking like an engineer. When Kinsley saw those first examples of industrial design, he was enrolled in the University of Cincinnati’s College of Engineering, looking to follow his father’s career path. But he was finding engineering a poor fit. “Engineering wasn’t for me,” he says. “Too much math, too much technical stuff. I was really frustrated, because all I my life I wanted to create things. So when that didn’t work out, I started looking at design schools.”

He found Columbia College, and Kevin Henry, a faculty member in the Department of Art and Design and founder of the department’s product design program. Kinsley caught Henry’s attention from the start. “Mark is an extremely hard worker who is really interested in absorbing everything he can,” says Henry. “He doesn’t seem like he has all of his filters open, but he really does. He just sucks everything in, like a sponge.”

Kinsley started his first—and only—college internship with Franklin Park, Illinois-based Bretford Manufacturing, a maker of specialized and custom office furniture. Within six months, he had parlayed it into a full-time job. A few months after that, he assumed product-design responsibilities for one of the company’s most important projects. About a year later, his first major design project for his first employer won a Silver in the 2006 International Design Excellence Awards (IDEA), among the most prestigious in the field.

The award, co-sponsored by the Industrial Design Society of America (IDSA) and *Business Week*, was for a laptop mobility cart designed for Apple Computers. Apple needed a mobile cart to transport, store, and recharge multiple laptops used for training purposes. And they wanted what might ordinarily be a boxy, utilitarian product brought up to their renowned standards of user-friendliness and sleek design. The project was one of six IDEA finalists worldwide in the field of computer product design.

For Kinsley, the award was an early culmination of a lifelong interest in design. And, perhaps more importantly, it was a validation of his decision to abandon his pursuit of an engineering career and turn his attention to the more free-form, innovative world of product design.

The laptop cart “was a year-long project,” Kinsley says. “I had very talented engineers working with me, but Bretford gave me complete freedom to design what I wanted. Apple came out [to Franklin Park] to see one of the prototypes, and they loved it.” They loved it so much that they decided to consolidate their entire product line for carts under the Bretford banner, launch a brand-new marketing campaign, and assign the company nine other projects over the next few years.

Apparently, IDSA loved it, too. “Winning that award is like becoming a rock star,” says Sean Scott, a colleague and friend of Kinsley’s who runs his own furniture design firm, Chicago-based S2design. “Mark has a passion and a natural talent for design, and for him to win that award is like instant gratification.”

For his part, Kinsley seems a little nonplussed by his rapid ascent and quick recognition within his industry. Even now, he still feels like he’s just left school and barely begun his career. “It’s hard for me to think that I’ve been involved in successful design projects and won awards,” he says. “I’ve been really blessed to grow so quickly. It’s exactly what I’ve wanted to do.”



Above: Mark Kinsley at Bretford Manufacturing. Photo: Corey Minkanic (B.A. '05)  
Facing page: Bretford Laptop Mobility Cart and PowerSync Cart designed for Apple Computers. Photo courtesy of Bretford Manufacturing.

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