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Jason Berke: What Forensics Did for Me

Jason Berke

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Alumni Corner

Jason Berke : What Forensics Did For Me Illinois State University (1991-1995)

Jason Berke



Jason is the Director of Design for Soft Home Décor at Target Corporation Headquarters. He competed for Illinois State (1991-1995) and he coached at Arizona State as he completed graduate studies (1995-1997). His favorite event was Informative Speaking which he finaled at NFA Nationals all four years. His favorite ballot feedback was from Dan Smith (Bradley University) who simply told him that he needed bring more heart and connection to his Prose and push himself to be the best he could be. Dan spoke the truth. Jason's greatest achievement was his (and his team's) finish at NFA Nationals in 1995. Jason took nine events to nationals that year and seven of them moved to quarter finals and six moved on to finals. That year Jason was the national champion in Rhetorical Criticism and Duo (w/ La'Mont Vaughn '95). He won Pentathlon (his second time doing so) and Illinois State University won the Open Sweepstakes National Championship as a team for the first time.

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Jason Berke: What Forensic Did for Me

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Director of Design

Soft Home Décor at Target Corporation Headquarters

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ALUMNI CORNER: The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program's very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni's stories.

Keywords: forensics, benefits of forensics, Alumni Corner

I consider myself really fortunate because I have a career that I really love. I am currently the Director of Design for Soft Home Décor at Target Corporation. I have the completely fun opportunity to lead talented Product Designers as we create things that make people's lives better at home. We make the linens for the tables that will host joyful and memorable family dinners. We make affordable rugs that a new apartment renter will use to ground their first "real" living room. We make the throw blankets that someone will use to cozy up on their sofa with a cup of tea and their favorite novel. But most of all, I get to bring forth my creative side, my analytical side, and the fun side of me that shines with passion. It is a tall order and big business, but I know that I couldn't be successful at my job today if it was not for forensics.

I initially joined the speech team in high school and I was hooked. I loved working hard on an activity that was so fun and rewarding (and that gave me focus and purpose). I went on to complete my education in Communication Studies at Illinois State University, an amazing school with a very successful forensics program. Joining the ISU Speech Team changed my life in more ways than I can articulate. I made lifelong friends, learned to be humble and roll with life's ups and downs. But most tangibly, forensics taught me to package my ideas, put structure around loosely defined situations and engage other's with joy and passion. These learnings would set me up for a dynamic career path that would land me in product design at Target.

I loved so many individual events and had the chance to compete in limited preparation, public address and interpretation categories. All three areas taught me the importance of having a framework in place to best package my ideas for others. In my job as a Design Director, I have to set a creative vision for our designs and present that vision to my team members, leaders, and colleagues. It requires the ability to quickly prioritize the most important elements of trend and product direction and share it visually and verbally with many stakeholders. It can be a difficult task to persuade my business partners to take risks on trends and designs that will move the needle a year or more out in the future. Many millions of dollars are at stake. My ability to

confidently present well organized, creative thoughts and read my audience has been priceless as I have increasingly taken on bigger roles over the years in Product Design & Development.

Forensics taught me how to verbally facilitate a meeting or presentation that may be going off the rails. This ability to put structure around a loosely defined situation has a huge payback in the world of retail and design.

Limited preparation events were so valuable in teaching me how to make a quick assessment of any situation and to be decisive and confident in front of others. Operating as a creative person in a corporate environment can be tough. You need to be nimble and fast on your feet. Forensics taught me how to verbally

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facilitate a meeting or presentation that may be going off the rails. This ability to put structure around a loosely defined situation has a huge payback in the world of retail and design. Months of work can end up on the cutting room floor if the design reviews spin far off topic or stir up unnecessary concern. I can't tell you how many times a strong concluding statement has set all parties up for success on next steps and set clear expectations for success. In the end, it may be toss pillows we are making- but to those involved they are very important toss pillows.

One of the most amazing parts of being in forensics is that you have a platform to share your truth, express your feelings, and move others. The interpretation events let me explore my vulnerable side and put some of my deepest emotions out in the world for others to hear and judge. Developing a certain fearlessness in self-expression is more relevant in leadership today than ever. I am fortunate to work for an employer that celebrates bringing your whole and authentic self to work every day. I express my joy and passion for what I do, quite often, to great result. I am known for my relatability, humor, and collaborating with each colleague as an individual with their own passions and motivations. At this point, I can't imagine any other way of being present at work.

I recently returned to Illinois State and spent a day with the current ISU Redbird Individual Events Team. I had a blast watching them prepare for their national tournaments. It reminded me of something. All of these professional benefits from the speech team aside,

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forensics connected me with some of the best people and best friends that I have encountered in my life. We grew up together and began our life of adulthood. I was fortunate to have a competitively successful forensics career with memorable performances and national finals. I have the amazing memory of sharing with my teammates the first national team title for Illinois State at the National Forensics Association National Championship Tournament in 1995. It is the people, though, that fill me up the most. It is the memories shared with those coaches, judges,

competitors and friends that leave the lasting mark. The rest is just icing on the cake. (And if you want to know a place to find a great cake stand, I'm ready and willing to help you out.)

Jason's Advice

Love what you do. If you don't love it, change it. If you still don't love it, find something else you love to do and do that. If you love what you do, people will fall in love with you.

