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Six years ago, my childhood friend, Sarah, told me about the Walt Disney ImagiNations Competition. The competition required you to be either a junior, senior, or graduate school participant. At the time, I already had high hopes of working for Disney, however, being only 18 years old with my whole college career ahead of me, working for Disney was nothing but a dream.

Fast forward to the fall of my junior year at Miami University, Sarah, an engineering major at Carnegie Mellon, and I were excited to finally be of age to participate and determined to compete in the competition. Every year Disney comes out with a new project statement. In years past it has been an “out of this world” project such as creating a world on Mars or a “mobile Disney”. The day finally came where the project statement was released, “Create an outdoor space on your universities campus”. I would be lying if I told you I wasn’t disappointed. Here, I was thinking I was going to get to design this whole crazy experience, but no, this project statement sounded like a typical studio project that I deal with daily. Little did I know and appreciate at the time how much this was going to benefit my team. With the project statement in mind, we concluded that an architecture student would be the best asset to our team, and I had the perfect person in mind, Erin Socha, a dedicated designer, anthropology minor, and a very good friend of mine. Sarah, Erin, and I teamed up to create a fun design for our portfolio, but it was the beginning of one of the most formative 5 months of our lives.

Through countless Skype meetings, because Sarah did not go to Miami, endless research, rolls of trace paper, meetings with professors/advisors, and sleepless nights over Thanksgiving break, we finally submitted our final project. We were finished. We were proud. A competition Sarah and I had thought about for years came to fruition. We did this project for fun and because of our love for Disney and the creative process. I can truly say we had zero idea what we got ourselves into. In the years past I always read the press release and watched videos about the winning teams, never thinking I was close to the same caliber.

When we received the email saying we were “semifinalist” I went sprinting to Erin with tears running down my face in absolute disbelief that “Disney likes us!” After working on a project for months with no intention of getting feedback or any type of recognition, this was the highest moment of my life. Two weeks later, we received another email, only this email made my stomach drop. It read, “Your teams project has been one of the favorites through the judging process. We have had many great submissions. In order to help with the judging we are requesting a Skype interview with your team to answer some of our questions”. Not only did Disney like us, Disney wanted to TALK to us.

*What did we do to deserve this?*

*What makes our project stand out more than hundreds of others?*

During our Skype interview they informed us that we were not actually being interviewed, but we were indeed a finalist in the 2017 Walt Disney ImagiNations Competition. Then the reality of the whole competition set in. No longer was this a fun portfolio project, this was a competition, which required countless hours of more work to take our project to the next level. We were assigned two Imagineers as mentors who we Skyped with weekly. The team had exactly one month to revamp our project, resumes, portfolios, and memorize an entire professional presentation to be given in front of 50+ Disney Executives.

The week finally came and Disney flew all six final teams to the Imagineering Campus in Glendale, CA. After hearing everyone’s story about how their teams came to be, I realized my team had a unique story. Most teams were randomly placed together in a class because this competition was a class assignment. Other teams held interviews and portfolio submissions to find teammates. For some, this was their third time entering the competition. My team was different. We did this project for fun, not class credit. This was our one, and only, time entering; we were also the youngest team of the finalist. We were the only team of all females, the only total interdisciplinary team, and we were teammates because we were friends. I strongly believe that our team dynamic impressed the judges more than our actual project did, which is why we were so successful once we were in California. During the award ceremony they acknowledged that fact that we were the only team that had to coordinate working from two separate locations and that our majors -Interior Design, Architecture, and Engineering - made us the “dream team”. Our collaboration and respectful interpretation of the Miami Tribe is what untimely allowed “Niihka: A New Tradition” to place 3rd out of 350 teams and thousands of students from around the US.

This experience forced me into a situation that was completely out of my comfort zone. I have always seen myself as a “behind the scenes” type of person. I believe in hard work and preparation, but I am not one for the spotlight. Now, two years into my professional career as a designer, there are times I am nervous for a presentation, but then I stop and think back to the time I stood on a stage, with a microphone and lights in my eyes, and I took a deep breath and presented to 50+ Disney Executives. For 15 minutes, I had their undivided attention to present a project I was extremely passionate about. If I can do that, then I feel like there is not much else that can intimidate me. Disney’s ImagiNations competition helped me accept my worth as a design professional. I am good enough, not just because I am naturally creative, but because I am a motivated worker, a team player, and willing to push myself out of my comfort zone to accomplish a goal.