December 2010

Dear Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald,

I am a second year master student in the Product Design program at Stanford. I found my way to this program after majoring in Mechanical Engineering and minoring in anthropology at MIT. Along the way I have done research at the MIT Media Lab, worked on Product Design teams at Apple, and practiced mechanical engineering at the design firm IDEO.

A bit about the program I'm in: Stanford's design program is unique; as the oldest interdisciplinary program at the University, it combines coursework in ethnography, fine arts, business strategy and engineering to create a unique breed of designers trained to do design strategy and innovation work. This combination of problem-solving skill sets we designers are trained to have is often visualized using the diagram on the right.

In the program, one third of the students have art backgrounds and receive an MFA from the Fine Arts department. The rest of the students, myself included, have technical backgrounds and receive an MS from the Mechanical Engineering Department. I was compelled to come to Stanford because no other institution in the world offers this combination of technical, artistic, social science and business skills.

I have always been intent on studying design, driven by a desire to make products that are not only beautiful, but also work for users of all ages and abilities. Both my mother and sister have physical disabilities, which has made me acutely aware of how poorly most systems and products accommodate use by people who have physical limitations -- be they caused by age, accident or genetics. For instance, my mother has only one hand. Watching her struggle with small acts like taking off her watch has given me empathy towards life without two hands (which, I would like to point out, is any of us when we're holding a cup of coffee or a cell phone and trying to do something else). This summer I had the opportunity to work on a design project for contact lens care, including a new bottle. During this project I pushed for a design that made it simpler to clean contact lenses using only one hand, a direct outcome of my sensitivity to Universal Design.

I came into this program with a strong resolve to integrate Universal Design into everyday products in order to better lives. Since I came to Stanford, I have come to realize that the design process taught here is much more powerful than I had ever realized. Instead of just designing single products, I am learning how to implement whole systems in order to influence behavior. For instance, in that same contact lens care project, we spent time working with eye doctors to develop training methods to improve trust between the doctor and the patient, and designed iPhone applications to assist in the training process. I have learned that design is about so much more than objects: It is about the systems and stories surrounding them.