

FASHION *Forward*

Two CALS graduates industrious in fashion industry

BY VANESSA BEESON

Two recent alumni from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, each with a Bachelor of Science in Human Sciences, exemplify considerable success in the two emphasis areas of fashion design and merchandising. Caroline Gilbert focused on the merchandising emphasis while

Kayla White chose apparel production and design.

Merchandising combines an overview of the fashion industry, consumer behavior, product development, planning, buying, business operations, and entrepreneurship. Apparel production and design emphasizes the total design and production process from inception to finished product and its ultimate sale to the consumer.

Gilbert and White have much in common. Each is originally from Starkville, graduated in 2013, and demonstrates an iron-clad work ethic that has propelled them far in the fashion industry very early in their careers. However, Gilbert and White chose very different paths.

“Caroline and Kayla both had a clear vision of what they wanted to do,” said Charles Freeman, assistant professor in MSU’s School of Human Sciences. “They each possessed the hustle, creativity, and work ethic to go out and get the job done. It can take people five to ten years to earn the positions working for national brands that Caroline and Kayla landed right out of school.”

A SERVICE-ORIENTED CAREER

Gilbert interned for Nordstrom before graduation. She worked diligently and after graduation, the company offered her a job.

She is currently assistant manager of customer service at the Nordstrom in Nashville and manages a team of six customer service associates. The team interacts with



the entire store, comprised of more than 250 team members across varying departments. Gilbert trains new hires in all selling techniques and procedures, coaches sales staff, evaluates certain metrics, and makes sure the department meets those metrics. She also troubleshoots any customer service issues.

“It’s important to keep an open mind,” Gilbert said. “Customer service wasn’t something I thought about in college. When I learned about the customer service and support side during my internship, it sparked my interest and now I really love it. I encounter all points of operations and the challenges of retail every day. It keeps me on my toes.”

Gilbert said MSU prepared her to work in the fashion industry in a variety of ways. While knowing how to identify fabrics has given her a competitive edge, having the business background has been extremely beneficial in her position at such a large company.

“Understanding merchandise planning and buying for retail has prepared me to work for a large company like Nordstrom, which has high scale planning,” Gilbert said. “Additionally, classes like accounting and personal shopping have been very useful as well.”

EYE ON DESIGN

While Gilbert was employed by the company she interned with, White took a different route. White interned with an upscale bridal designer and ended up landing a job with Drake Waterfowl Systems, a duck hunting apparel and accessories company.

White is in product development. She dictates size and fit specifications and other technical facts to the factory, everything from the length of the seam to specific washing instructions. She also evaluates current items and researches trends for upcoming products. Right now, she is trying to determine colors for the 2016 spring season. She also plans photo shoots for product and catalog shots.

“I like managing photo shoots. I enjoy styling and working with the models,” White said. “A bonus is that the scenery is



Above: Kayla White tests Drake Waterfowl products in the field. Photo by Drake Waterfowl.

Left: Caroline Gilbert outside of Nordstrom in Nashville, Tennessee. Photo submitted.

absolutely gorgeous. I love being outdoors.”

An avid outdoorswoman, White enjoys the occasional hunt while testing products.

“I grew up fishing and started hunting about a year ago,” White said. “We test current products in the field and develop new products. You have to think, ‘What am I missing? What is my jacket not doing performance-wise?’ We also test features like the fabric’s waterproof ability and breathability.”

White said both the retail and sewing classes at MSU gave her a good base.

“The retail classes have been helpful with tasks like pricing,” White said. “The product side of it has also really set me up for success. A strong sewing background helps me with specific product work like

determining fit of clothing and I’ve utilized a good amount from my product development classes too.”

White also says being open-minded is a key component to success.

“A lot of students try to find something in New York or Los Angeles,” White said. “If you open yourself up to other markets and other sectors of the industry; you can gain considerable experience and enjoy a great career. The outdoor industry is a lot of fun and a completely different world.”