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Connecting Passion and Purpose: Q&A with Changemaker Fellow Amanda Calderon '18

Mario J. Gabelli School of Business junior selected for fellowship program that integrates student leaders into Rhode Island's entrepreneurship scene



Student entrepreneur Amanda Calderon, a junior marketing major, is a change-maker both on campus and in the community.

November 2, 2016 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – If you recently bought a Boston Celtics ticket on the secondary market there is a good chance that you purchased it via student entrepreneur Amanda Calderon. In less than a year the junior marketing major has built a profitable business in the booming secondary ticket industry with her site [Courtside Broker](#).

One might think it beginner's luck, but the native of Morris Plains, N.J., has been churning out her own small businesses from an early age, making enough bucks with the recent endeavor to forgo further work-study assistance (she worked the **Annual Fund Phonathon** one year) or the typical college-student job.

Now she's helping foster the same entrepreneurial spirit among her peers at Roger Williams University and other colleges across Rhode Island as a **2016 Changemaker Fellow**. It's part of a unique statewide effort led by **Social Enterprise Greenhouse** and the [Rhode Island Commerce Corporation](#) to increase awareness and resources for student entrepreneurs in the Ocean State. A marketing major with minors in web development and graphic design communication, Calderon was selected as a fellow for her leadership in the University's professional business fraternity, Delta

Sigma Pi – Nu Sigma, and for her interests in social enterprise and entrepreneurship; she also serves as the advertising chair on the University's Multicultural Student Union and has previously played intramural sports and written for the student newspaper, the *Hawk's Herald*.

From her passion for inspiring entrepreneurship in others to leveraging her Changemaker Fellowship, Calderon recently sat down for a Q&A with PDQ@RWU.

PDQ: What prompted you to start a business at age 12?

Amanda Calderon: I really liked making beaded jewelry, and one day I showed my art teacher what I had made and she invited me to sell my jewelry in a fine arts and crafts fundraiser, which featured only adult artists. I did so well at the show that she suggested I sell on Etsy. When I made my first online sale I couldn't believe it – someone actually wanted to buy something I made – and that just got me excited.

PDQ: How did your next business ventures evolve?

AC: I wrote product reviews at age 15 and made a little money at that. Then at age 16, I started a sports blog on the NBA because I was a really big basketball fan. It had enough traffic that I was able to make money running ads.

Even though I'm from New Jersey, I'm a huge Boston Celtics fan, so when I moved to Roger Williams I went to some games. At first I was paying full price for all these games I was going to, and someone suggested I get season tickets to save money and sell the tickets I don't use. That's when I became a ticket broker selling NBA tickets through my own ticket-resale website, Courtside Broker. I buy season tickets at face value and resell them at a slight increase.

This was the biggest investment I ever made. It was a lot of risk and there was no guarantee I would make money off it. But in my first year I was able to net a 25 percent profit and still go to nine games. It's become my wheelhouse.

PDQ: Why did you choose a major and minors in marketing, web development and graphic design?

AC: I like working with data and numbers, but I also like the creative end of business, so marketing was perfect for me. For all of my business endeavors, I keep comprehensive spreadsheets and I have a system for tracking my deliveries and sales. But I also love taking photos of my products for best positioning to promote sales, and I designed all of the graphics for my ticket sales business. With this mix of academic programs, all of that ties in. I picked graphic design and web development so I'd have all the tools to have my own business. Whether I end up consulting, or building my own websites, I wanted to give myself options.

PDQ: What class or project has most fueled your passion for entrepreneurship?

AC: It's a combination of the Marketing 301 course (Advertising Principles) and working through the RWU [Business Partnerships Center](#).

The marketing course inspired me to create the Courtside Broker blog to go along with the main part of my business of ticket sales. The professor tasked us with creating a blog where we could teach someone how to do something we were good at, so I taught how to sell tickets. The blog put a name on what I was doing – I spent three hours in the Commons one day to come up with Courtside Broker as my brand name, and then I bought the domain.

It serves as something for me to show employers – a sample of my writing, and the fact that I'm confident enough to write about teaching people how to do it shows that I have expertise in this field.

And in the Business Partnerships Center at RWU, I'm working with [DESIGNxRI](#), a nonprofit that's trying to raise awareness about the local talent of designers in Rhode Island. I've been conducting an evaluation of their website – critiquing it, analyzing its navigability, and how to keep viewers on their website. My role is not to make the changes myself, but more of a marketing look at their website.

I've also done consulting work for [Just Like Nana's](#), a handmade rugelach business, through the Business Partnerships Center. I built her a website, putting together all of her resources and designing it for her target audience. My goal was to make it very simple and navigable and very visual, set it up for to be able to take online orders, and created her social media accounts.

PDQ: How will you leverage this fellowship to inspire entrepreneurship among students and connect them to resources?

AC: Being a Changemaker Fellow is very unique in the sense that it brings together student leaders from colleges and universities across Rhode Island, and not everyone is a business major. We're bringing together all these students from different academic backgrounds to make a case for why Rhode Island is a center for entrepreneurship.

I want to work with the [Entrepreneurs Club](#) on campus, and to bring some kind of workshop in for all students, not just business majors. I recently talked to a marine bio student who's interested in entrepreneurship and felt she could pursue both paths and was interested in connecting with other students who had same passion.

PDQ: Why is it important to you to stimulate social enterprise among your peers?

AC: It gives people who maybe don't have a support system or resources, a way to pursue their passions. Not everybody is cut out to sit in office every day. There's something really satisfying about seeing something you envision coming to life. I think people have ideas but don't know where to go with it. If we can find a way to pair students with a web developer, or a graphic designer, or an engineer – maybe even right on campus, a fellow student – why not tap into that opportunity to let students grow on their own?

Right now is the perfect time for a student to do it – you can take more risks now than you can when you launch a career because most don't have families to support, and as students we have access to all these different academic resources.

PDQ: What does it mean to you to be a Changemaker Fellow?

AC: To me, it means that I have the responsibility to not only contribute whatever I can to group collaboration within the fellowship, but also take what I learn back to campus and grow entrepreneurship here and to connect students to resources and whatever they need to pursue their passion. I'll network with other small businesses in Rhode Island to see if I can connect people.

When I attended this year's Changemaker Fellow ceremony quite a few startups came to meet us. The fact that there's all of this talent is in Rhode Island, and you have access to so much of it because it's a small state, makes me excited.

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