Six years after graduating college with a geology degree, I found myself pursuing a goal I never would have foreseen while wearing that cap and gown: becoming a graphic designer. I had nursed a casual interest in art since my childhood in Kenya, where opportunities for arts in the schools were scarce. I learned drawing and painting in when I got to the States, but it wasn’t until college that I found myself drawn to typography, but by then I was immersed in science and could not see a way to reconcile the seemingly disparate interests of my right and left brain.

After college I worked as an assistant petrology curator at a museum, where I got the chance to create materials and tools to help me complete tasks efficiently and make resources visually accessible to others — in short, to design. I began how design is used to address key social and environmental crises and spur technological and cultural progress. I decided that was a world I wanted to join, and that I wanted to use my abilities to serve a greater interest.
Graphic design has the potential to be a greater, more incisive influence on our world and culture. My goal as a designer is to be in a position where I can pair my desire to effect social change with my visual communication skill to find creative, effective and lasting solutions to crucial problems. As I researched the graphic design history, I found that same urge expressed by countless designers, perhaps most articulately in the “First Things First Design Manifesto.” A small group of designers called for a shift away from commercial work and towards design that had more enduring meaning to humanity. It states: “There are pursuits more worthy of our...skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention....We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication.”

I found the Manifesto to be wholly compelling. It articulated not only the breadth of experiences in which design could play an invaluably edifying role, but also my need to find a way to use my talent to address a greater good. I can imagine redirecting the immense tidal pull of consumption in this country towards a nobler goal, and having as much recognition of and loyalty to a social or environmental cause as a brand name.

This is the kind of work I want to do. I admire, and hope to one day work with, groups like the Center for Urban Pedagogy, which with their Making Policy Public program brings together design professionals and community advocates and policymakers to devise educational projects about public policy. I am interested in using design as a way to discuss consumerism, inequity, and social and scientific progress. To that end, I plan to pursue opportunities to pair with non-profit organizations working for social and environmental improvements, and to further their efforts and expand their audiences by using design to “sell” innovative ideas that will benefit society.