



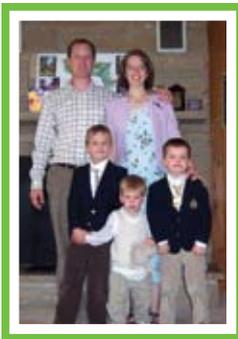
Where Are They Now?

From rising stars to surprising career twists, we catch up with the nine GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year scholarship winners.

By Darhiana Mateo

A lot can happen in almost a decade. For our GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year scholarship winners — dating back to the very first winner in 1999 — the past nine years have been marked by new challenges, accomplishments (both professional and personal) and, for some, unexpected career turns. From ambitious college graduates to industry trailblazers, this diverse and promising group has more than delivered. Here's a snapshot of what they have been up to, and what they have planned for the future.

Life's Little Surprises (Mindy Baggett, 1999)



The first winner of the GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year Scholarship would end up trading her love of greenhouses for a career in antique prints — her husband's family business. Mindy Baggett (née Froning), who graduated from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in May 2000 with a degree in ornamental horticulture and landscape design, dreamed of working for a small greenhouse operation. And the invigorating summer internship she held at Four Star Greenhouse, Inc. in Carleton, Mich., simply solidified her interest in getting started at a small retail greenhouse.

The summer after graduation, Baggett landed another internship with Chuck Johnson's Garden Center in Cookeville, Tenn., doing a little bit of everything. Baggett was offered the chance to stay on past the conclusion of her summer internship, and ended up working at the garden center until December 2000. She headed back to her hometown of Knoxville and, a couple of months later, got a job with Suzy's Groovy Garden. "In an outfit like that, it's really everyone doing everything," Baggett remembers.

In October 2001, Mindy and Cory Baggett tied the knot. The newlyweds soon moved to Franklin, Tenn. After trying to find a garden center job in the small town with no luck, she ended up accepting her father-in-law's offer to work for the family business selling antique prints.

"It was just such an appealing choice. I was in a new town, didn't know anybody; this was with family," Baggett says.

Although she says a part of her will always miss her first love — horticulture — she's more than happy with how her life turned out. The proud mother looks forward to taking care of her growing family and thriving in her new career.

Striking a Balance (Sarah Rasch, 2000)



Only days after graduating from Michigan State University, Sarah Rasch (née McQueen) joined Hortech, Inc., a perennial groundcover grower, as an assistant cultural manager. Rasch, who had three internships already under her belt — with Andy Mast Greenhouse in 2000, Ball FloraPlant in '98 and

Ball Seed in '99 — described her first professional job as "another learning curve." Previously, she had worked only with annuals, and the new job was a crash course in perennials, a very different segment of the industry. Luckily, Rasch soon grew fond of perennials' more "forgiving" nature. "I can't imagine going back. [With annuals], if something happens, like insects or disease, you could lose a whole crop. If you miss the window in spring, you have to jump through hoops to get that product sold."

After three years with Michigan-based Hortech, Rasch was promoted to production manager, working with more than 300 different varieties. Soon after, the already busy Rasch became a mom. But the production schedule proved too much for her, so she took nine months off after her first daughter, Claire, was born.

As the months passed, Rasch "grew antsy... missed being in a greenhouse," but she wanted a different job that would still leave her time to take care of her family. She landed a new job as a client service representative for McGregor Plant Sales.

Curious and observant, Rasch has been privy to the changing face of the industry since she first dove in as an eager intern at Ball. "There's so much consolidating, so much pressure and increasing

costs. It's forcing people to really look for ways to be more efficient and cost effective," she observes. But the pressures are also giving way to new opportunities to be innovative, she says.

Along with industry-wide pressures, Rasch says the biggest challenge for women in the industry is how time-consuming the jobs can be. "It was my personal challenge, finding that balance between work and family," she says. "I feel like I'm in the perfect place right now. It's really nice to have that feeling."

Making Strides (Janna Todd, 2001)



For Janna Todd (née Hogue), an early love of plants and a fascination with new varieties would prove long lasting. Todd, who supervises the propagation team at Swift Greenhouses in Gilman, Iowa, says she enjoys "looking for fresh new ideas; finding new production techniques."

Todd made sure she was well prepared to enter the field that had captured her interest as a child. During her junior year at Iowa State University, she completed a six-and-a-half-month internship with Metrolina Greenhouses, based in Huntersville, N.C. In the summer of 2002, she won another coveted internship with Swift Greenhouses, and after finishing up a semester of classes, came back to Swift as a full-time employee in 2003.

Todd started off as an assistant grower in plug production and quickly moved up to grower. After some time, vegetative production — a fast-growing field at the time — piqued her interest.

Today, she keeps busy with the hands-on growing and managing the propagation crew. Although she's climbed the ranks fast, Todd knows that, in this industry in particular, it all boils down to teamwork: "The reason for my success here is my crew."

A Native Niche (Jennifer Stark, 2002)

Shortly after graduating from Cornell University in 2002, Jennifer Stark (née Browne) moved to Montana — lured by the mountains



and vast skies — to start a landscaping business with her husband, Jeremy.

When she's not helping run their business, Valley of the Flowers, Stark is hitting the books again, graduating this December from Montana State University with a master's in land rehabilitation.

And Stark has lofty goals: "We hope to be a model of sustainability." With this goal in mind, she has gotten involved with starting a student farm that supplies the university's cafeteria and local food bank with vegetables. The nursery will have a vegetable component, she says, and their renovation plans include a solar-paneled greenhouse and windmills.

"We want to create a demonstration of sustainability and hopefully teach clients about sustainability," Stark says.

Stark sees endless opportunities with native plants, which offer a partial answer for an industry struggling with a severe drought. "People want to drink the water, not water their lawns," she says.

In fact, Stark is determined to set an example for the industry: "I want to demonstrate that we can be professional and make money off sustain-

able practices, and that there really is a niche for native plants," she says.

A Guiding Light (Emily Stefanski, 2003)



University of Florida student Emily Stefanski will graduate this month with a Master of Science in environmental horticulture, with an emphasis in marketing.

After completing her undergraduate degree in horticulture at Michigan State University in 2004, Stefanski worked

as a hard-goods buyer and manager for Wojo's Greenhouse in Ortonville, Mich. From her unique perspective on the retail floor, she paid close attention to consumers: "It's great that we can produce our 13th pink petunia," she says, "but if people don't want that, there's no sense in putting all the work into it."

Two years into her job, Stefanski was "recruited" by a University of Florida professor to pursue a master's degree. "The marketing side is really appealing," she says. "It can guide the industry to where it's going or where it needs to be." Even though the industry can be seen as

somewhat "behind the times" when it comes to a cutting-edge marketing presence, things are changing fast.

Stefanski is looking for a marketing job with a large broker/distributor company. She hopes to use her marketing knowledge to reach the Generation X and Y demographics. "We — the up-and-coming generation — can give [valuable] input."

It's up to Stefanski's generation, the industry's rising stars, to share their input and insight with a changing industry and assume leadership roles to ensure that we are moving forward, not just "doing what we've done in the past," she adds.

A Dream Job (Jessica Boldt, 2004)



After graduating this month from the University of Florida with a master's in environmental horticulture, Jessica Boldt will be starting her "dream job" with Pleasant View Gardens in New Hampshire. The official title is production research and development manager.

For Boldt, who loves both the practical and academic side of the field, ♦

Looking Back with Pride

As Cheryl Longtin, chairperson and CEO of Nexus Corporation, knows from personal experience, internships arm students with a "true sense" of the career they're considering.

Looking back at the accomplishments of the last nine Intern of the Year scholarship recipients is a source of pride for the company, which sees itself as an "industry supporter," she says. "We love our 'wall of fame' pictures of the past recipients that hang in the conference room in Northglenn [Colo.]. Mike and I understand that the industry is made up of people, and that anything we can do to strengthen the young people who are knocking on our customers' doors for employment opportunities strengthens the whole industry."

Longtin says that she and her husband, Nexus co-owner Mike Porter, take great pride in making a difference in the lives of past recipients and look forward to the opportunity to continue contributing to the success of the next generation. "In the end, all of us gain by having these talented people in the right seat when they begin their career in our industry."

it's a match made in heaven. "I've always loved production work, getting my hands dirty. But going through the graduate program developed my love of research and problem solving," Boldt says. "There's nothing like two loves together."

Always a forward thinker, Boldt plans to focus on improvement and innovation, offering creative solutions to old and new challenges. And in the process, she'll keep spreading the word about the myriad opportunities the industry has to offer young professionals. "We're not all about farming," she says. "There are great opportunities in retail and marketing, new product development, trends. We need to share with friends [and others] what this industry has to offer. That's why we're all here: because we love it."

A Head for Business (Scott Stiles, 2005)



Scott Stiles, whose parents introduced him to the industry at an early age, was running his own business, Arborview Greenhouses, while still in college. When it came time to choose an internship, the Michigan State University junior knew he already had plenty of substantial experience growing. So he went a different route and accepted an internship with Greenstone Farm Credit Services, an agricultural lender.

"From learning how to put together detailed financial trend sheets to assessing financial risks for different agricultural entities, [it] was a valu-

able education that I'm not sure could be simulated in a classroom," he says.

These days, Stiles still operates Arborview Greenhouses, now a 60,000-square-foot wholesale greenhouse specializing in the production of annual baskets and potted plants.

Stiles chose not to pursue a master's degree after graduating in 2006, but he's "learned how to think on my feet and...change plans when the market or weather throws a curveball" in the past couple of years.

As he looks toward the growth of his business, Stiles also keeps a close watch on the new direction the industry is taking. "The industry has been faced with many variables that I believe will transform [it]," Stiles says. "The rising cost of production (not just energy), scan-based trading and environmental/economical sustainability are all issues we need to be prepared to face and change with."

A Different Path (Alina Hanna, 2006)



Alina Hanna (née Lovelace) is the first to admit that her life has "taken some turns" in the last couple of years. Hanna, who will receive her master's degree in agribusiness from the University of Florida's Food and Resource Economics department this month, will be transferring all the passion and energy she had for horticulture to a new field: education. She recently accepted a job offer as a seventh-grade language arts teacher in Orange County, Fla.

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"Between deciding what was important to me in life and the tumbling economy, job searching was difficult," she says. "I wanted to use my knowledge and talents in the [horticultural] field." However, a limited search radius because of her husband's job, rising costs in the industry, and the need to be paid adequately for her education level and experience led her to look outside of the horticulture industry for work.

In the short term, Hanna looks forward to teaching this upcoming year. Long term, she hopes to become certified to teach agriculture and business. Regardless, there's little doubt that Hanna will embrace this new challenge with the same drive and determination she demonstrated in the horticulture industry.

A Rising Star (Eric Pitzen, 2007)



The most recent winner of the *GPN/Nexus* Intern of the Year scholarship is already charging full speed ahead. Just three months after graduating from Iowa State University, Eric Pitzen began his first professional job as a product database manager with Syngenta Flowers in Boulder, Colo. And although he admits to a few nerves, he's definitely up for the challenge: "It seems like I'm starting school all over again. There's so much to learn," he says.

Pitzen, who held four prestigious internships during his college career, is ready to finally enter the field he's loved since the fourth grade. "I'm not going to do things haphazardly," he says.

He hopes to learn more about trialing in particular and "figure out the industry" in general.

After years of hard work, strategic planning and a whole lot of networking, the industry has welcomed a rising star to its ranks. And his family could not be more proud. "My grandma is really excited," he says. "She's the one who got me into it." **GPN**

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