



# LEARNING WHAT DESIGN REALLY MEANS

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APPLYING THE DESIGN THINKING SHE DEVELOPED AT NORTHWESTERN, **HANNAH CHUNG** HAS BUILT AN ENTERPRISING PROFESSIONAL LIFE CENTERED AROUND SOCIAL GOOD.



Before entering Northwestern Engineering as a first-year student in 2008, Hannah Chung ('12) assumed design “was all about making things pretty.”

After her first year in Evanston, Chung had discovered the truth, illuminated by faculty mentors such as Jeanne Herrick and Walter Herbst: Design was less about aesthetics and more about creative problem-solving. “I realized I could apply my creativity not just to form or function, but to systems, collaborations, and strategy,” Chung says.

Inspired by that realization, Chung, a mechanical engineering major with a design concentration, immersed herself in design courses and independent study, blending analysis, logic, and math with intuition, emotional intelligence, and imagination. Exploring engineering and design simultaneously empowered Chung, ignited her imagination, and spurred numerous entrepreneurial pursuits.

In 2009, Chung teamed with Professor Elizabeth Gerber and two fellow Northwestern undergraduates to launch Design for America (DFA). DFA gathered students from across disciplines and challenged them to address complex problems through human-centered design. The DFA studio model has since been exported to dozens of universities throughout the United States.

“The idea of bringing students from diverse backgrounds together for the purpose of creating social impact is well known now, and it’s amazing to think we had a hand in bringing about this cultural shift,” Chung says.

Through DFA, Chung and a fellow Northwestern graduate founded Sproutel, a company that creates interactive experiences for kids with health issues. When Sproutel landed a spot in a Rhode Island-based business accelerator, Chung designed her own

virtual education program, a rather novel learning approach in the pre-pandemic era. With the blessing of Northwestern administration, Chung completed her final academic quarter via Skype—graduating early from Northwestern and completing the business incubator the same week in spring 2012.

Thereafter, Chung devoted herself fully to driving Sproutel’s evolution, enduring the inevitable ebbs and flows of the startup world, from building a team to refining processes to developing products rooted in human-centered design. Chung estimates she interviewed more than 1,000 relatives of patients to gain a better understanding of context and to formulate relevant solutions ranging from an interactive teddy bear that educated kids about diabetes to a robotic duck that provided emotional support to children undergoing chemotherapy.

“The way we interacted with children and worked to understand them really powered us and our business growth,” Chung says.

In June 2020, Chung left Sproutel to seek new professional adventures. She began teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design and advising nonprofits and startups. While design remained integral to her work, she hungered for a return to more direct applications. In particular, she wanted to deliver a richer storytelling experience—something she considers vital to human-centered design—through more accessible products.

So, Chung set off to become an author and illustrator of children’s books with positive, encouraging messages. Her debut title, *The Most Perfect Persimmon*, will be published in fall 2024.

“I remain on the beautiful path I started at Northwestern and am continuing to use design for social good,” Chung says.

DANIEL P. SMITH