Happiness by Design

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Meagan Roach

In nautical terms a roach is the curve at the foot of a square sail. In human terms, it is the verve of Meagan Roach with her uncanny knack for propelling vast amounts of creativity and momentum from a single cup of coffee.

Indeed, it is one of the three characteristics she shrewdly builds into The Meagan Brand, an embodiment of her smile, hair and caffeinated energy. No question who is at the helm of this lively vessel.

If you don’t know Meagan, you might recognize her fingerprint on the Utah State University Eastern brand. She graduated with an associate of arts in graphic design from USU Eastern in 2012 and went on to earn a bachelor of fine arts in graphic design with a minor in art history in 2013 from USU in Logan. While earning her bachelor’s, this first-generation college graduate worked part-time as USU Eastern’s first designer. Her work helped establish the fledgling USU Eastern brand that came into view following the college’s historic merger with Utah State University in 2010.

She was already, at that point, well established in the ways of the college where she was active in student government and was a mainstay of school events and activities. It was during this time that she painted a self-portrait based on William Ernest Henley’s poem, Invictus. It shows a woman vulnerable, exposed, with an unbowed head, unapologetically emerging from the night, gazing straight into the viewer’s eyes unafraid: “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul,” the penetrating stare seems to whisper.

Henley’s words felt intensely personal. She recognized early on that her education and talents were giving her the captain’s wheel and the chance to choose her own course. Against the backdrop of her childhood, this self-determination becomes especially heartfelt.

“The whole idea of doing what you love and loving what you do, that’s definitely a privileged perspective to have,” she says. “When I think of my mom, how she worked 12 years at McDonald’s, it wasn’t because she wanted to, it was because she had to in order to survive and raise her kids.”

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Roach says education, on the other hand, has given her the privilege to choose her field of work, to do what she loves and to do something that will have some impact.

Far-reaching impact would not surprise Robert Winward. He is an associate professor of art, graphic design at USU. He taught and mentored Meagan and remembers her well.

“She’s an enormously talented designer and constantly seeks innovative solutions to visual communication problems,” he says. “If she continues the trajectory she's set during her USU undergraduate career, I fully expect her to become a prominent figure in the national and international design community.”

A seriously great compliment from someone who himself is internationally renowned for his work in graphic design.

Roach can be serious too, but she’d rather do it with her trademark smile, if at all possible. It reflects her outlook that no matter how tempestuous the seas, you press on with your bow toward the waves and a beam in your eye.

“I don’t measure happiness by moments or in singular points in time,” she says. “In the overall picture of life, I think my smile is less from happiness and more from simple gratitude of everyday people and things.”

And this is from someone who grew up without a lot of things. She was raised in a trailer park in Price. The hodgepodge of aluminum housing with little or no yards was home to young Meagan but her sanctuary was always school or the city library.

She talks about suffering through bullying because of where she lived, how she dressed and her funny hair.
“But for every person that pushed me down, two or more would help me to stand back up,” she says. “Admittedly, sometimes those extra hands were characters in books, but their impact was just as real.”

She says she figured out pretty early on that the bullies in her third grade class were once her friends in the first, which meant that their apparent change of heart was more likely influenced by parents than by conscious design. That realization didn’t make it hurt any less, but at least it helped her to cease holding grudges against classmates.

“I stopped racking my brain trying to figure out why someone would treat me like that,” she says. “I already knew and so I turned my sights to the things that I could control. I planned my escape through knowledge and learning. By the time I got to junior high, that perception of not caring about labels or cliques made me a bit of a social butterfly.”

The beginnings of her metamorphosis can be traced to the first grade when, to her mother’s dismay she brought home the book “Matilda.” Because it was at a fourth-grade reading level, her mother was convinced she had wasted 13 valuable dollars.

Matilda is a story about a 5-year-old girl who loves reading but must endure a great deal of cruelty from adults in her life. Meagan found a heroine in this little girl and even discovered her own “Miss Honey” in her first grade teacher, Mrs. Geraldine Tabone. She treasures to this day a music box Tabone gave her at that tender age.

“It made me feel special because she didn’t do that for anyone else,” she says. “I think she knew what was going on in my life outside of school and wanted to show her support.”

Roach says she has come to realize that what Mrs. Tabone gave her is ultimately what so many of her teachers and mentors have given her from grammar school to college: unfailing encouragement.

“As long as I am pushing forward with everything that I have, there will always be those who reach out to stand with me and lend a hand,” she says. “Everything I am today is so much because of those who have helped me. I owe so much to them.”

Determined that she was as smart as Matilda, she forced herself to begin reading well beyond her first-grade aptitude.

“I ended up studying the beautiful illustrations for some time pretending that I was reading, but eventually by the end of the year I had made it through a good portion,” she says. “I didn’t finish the book until the middle of my third grade.”

Whether fictional or real, role models became essential fixtures in Meagan’s life, her own mother included. She admired how her mom kept the family together, earning only minimum wage, determined to see her children break free from the cycle of poverty that has trapped her.

“My mother is the most important person in my life,” she says. “She gave up so much to give me and my siblings everything we needed so we would want for nothing. My confidence started with my mom. She taught us that we mattered and were worthy of love and belonging. She raised me to be very strong and independent.”

Yes, strong as a cup of black coffee - although she prefers a dash of cream and sugar. An early manifestation of her resoluteness and autonomy came in the third grade when she declared that one day she would become a college student. It was her mother’s response that stuck with her: “She told me that she would always support me but that if I wanted to go to college, I would have to pay for it myself.”

First, though, she had to get through high school. Academically that would not be a problem, but financially, even high school presented challenges. Students at Carbon High who could not afford to pay school fees were given the opportunity to cover expenses by doing janitorial work. In Meagan’s case, however, they put her to work converting Mr. Jim Thompson’s windows into works of art. She also painted the mural of a giant raptor in the Carbon High School gym.

It was a pivotal time in this teenager’s life. Her mother was suffering from serious health issues that landed her in the hospital for months at a time. Not only did Meagan need to pay her own way through high school, she was expected to help meet family expenses as well. It was a tough time for her ? a period in which she recalls feeling particularly forlorn.

“Being young and having to shoulder that, you kind of isolate yourself,” she says. “It was a lonely time but I learned early to keep on getting back up regardless of what happens.”

Her tenacious spirit and positive attitude were the reasons Brenda Rawson, USU Eastern GEAR UP program leader, would steal Meagan away whenever she could to have her
speak to prospective students about college. As a GEAR UP scholar, Roach proved to be a perfect role model.

“She talked about how to be goal-oriented, how to succeed in college, how to be self-disciplined,” Rawson says. “Meagan was always a very proactive young woman, taking charge of her own life.”

Roach reflects that headstrong will in her business card – an image of nothing but head and hair. The black and white logo is lucid, as any good logo should be. Her coal black hair dominates the background, its tresses mirrored by curling wisps of steam that rise from the merry cup comprising her face.

“There’s a lot of ideas in all this hair,” she jests in her blog. Her coffee cup depiction easily reflects her warm, chatty and stimulating mannerism while her hair signals confidence, flair and openness. But right off it’s the optimism, sincerity and courage of her constant smile that people notice. Half the time she doesn’t even realize it.

“She lit up the room with her energy, friendliness and eagerness to help others,” says her high school teacher and debate coach Gail Scoville. “She was always positive and a delight to have in class.”

That enthusiasm as a Sterling Scholar in traditional art and a GEAR UP scholarship following high school propelled her though her two years at USU Eastern. She had the choice to attend any college in the state. She chose the college where she always planned to go, the College of Eastern Utah. It was home and it was a place where she knew she could fit in and be involved.

And choice is the operative word: the power that knowledge gave her to determine her fate and outlook on life. It is why Henley’s words resonated so strongly with her while she was a student at Eastern and why she turned to oil and canvas to proclaim her own strength in the face of adversity. She did not have to feel shameful of her origin. She could be proud of every part of who she was becoming.

“That painting was very important to me at the time because it was my way of expressing where I wanted to go and who I wanted to be,” she says. “And really, after painting that, it was almost a commitment to get there.”

A lot of people have since told her that she was already “there.” But she says she knows that getting there is more about the journey than the destination, difficult and punishing as it may be. Her willingness to continue the voyage and to confront her impediments head-on with courage and tenacity is what Winward says he most admires about Meagan.

“When facing challenges that would cause most people to give up and settle for less, Meagan believes in herself and her ability to make a difference in the world.”

Like the heroines in her beloved stories, those opportunities always come to her as moments of truth – points in time in which vital decisions must be made. When she finds herself at these crossroads, she says that is when she really begins to question who she is.

“Sometimes those thoughts can get really overwhelming and intimidating,” she says. “That’s when I find myself going back to that poem. Regardless of what happens, it’s your soul that’s unconquered basically. It’s you who decides what you are going to make of the situation you’re in. Wherever you are, make the best of what you have and do what you can.”

Aye, aye, captain.