

Source: CENTRAL FLORIDA FUTURE

UCF GRADS RUN LOCAL ART MUSEUM

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Issue date: 2/27/08

Not all college graduates are lucky enough to have their dream jobs soon after graduation. But for two UCF graduates running an art museum, it isn't only a dream; it's a reality.

Jackie Houck and Vanessa Soler, who both graduated with degrees from UCF in 2006, recently took positions at the Lake Eustis Museum of Art. Houck stepped into the role of executive director for the museum in January, and Soler took over Houck's former position as director of education and events.

"It's absolutely thrilling," said Houck, 29, about her job as executive director. "This has been my career goal, and I'm thrilled to achieve it at such a young age."

Houck and Soler make up the museum's entire staff. Their cheerful personalities, compatibility and attention to detail make them a well-oiled machine, Houck said. The two previously worked together at Jamali Fine Art in Winter Park. Houck said she instantly thought of Soler for director of education and events.

"It's great," said Soler, 24, about working with Houck. "I can't say enough of how happy I am. Not only is this my dream job, but I work with someone I've worked with before. [It's] made this transition even smoother."

The museum, located on East Orange Avenue in Eustis, collects and represents contemporary art from the southeastern U.S. The museum celebrates living artists who are local to the region, Houck said. An upcoming exhibit, featuring work from the museum's permanent collection, is art created by Eustis-based artists.

Houck said she chooses artwork that is engaging and challenging. She said the museum isn't there just to please the public, but also to push artistic thought boundaries.

"We want to open minds to new art and new experiences," Houck said.

Houck explained that museums are traditionally cold, unfriendly environments that are very elitist in nature. She said a lot of people think if they don't understand art then it isn't for them. That's not the case at the Lake Eustis Museum of Art.

"Our goal is to be as warm and inviting as possible," Houck said. "We want to engage viewers and have them ask questions. We want this to be a welcoming environment where people learn something and have fun."

Opening minds to new experiences involves making people in Lake County more aware of the arts, which is a major goal for both women.

"We are the only art museum in Lake County, and I'm just really excited to bring the arts to Central Florida," Houck said. "We're doing everything we can to promote culture to this region."

The museum offers several art programs for children and adults, some free of charge. The art programs for children are important because students in Lake County aren't really exposed to art until high school, Houck said.

One of the programs, titled "TARGET ART" after the program's sponsor, Target, is geared toward children and families. Soler said that mothers mention the lack of art in schools in Lake County. One mother said that a child was yelled at for coloring outside the lines.

"Parents and kids are so excited to have this," Soler said. "They are so grateful. Moms couldn't stop thanking us for having this opportunity for them."

Houck said that an average of 15 to 25 people attend the art programs, which creates a wonderful energy inside the museum.

"There's so much excitement, so much curiosity," Houck said. "To see that spark is very thrilling."

Houck and Soler encourage people, especially children, to be imaginative and to use bold, unconventional colors. They want them to color outside the lines.

As UCF graduates, the prominent positions they hold in the community reflect back to the education they received at UCF.

Houck graduated with her **master's in nonprofit management** in December 2006. She said that her degree program gave her an advantage over other job candidates.

"It was very convenient with it being online," Houck said of the program. "I was able to still work and gain real-world experience while pursuing my studies."

She credits the program with teaching her the necessary tools to carry out her current job. She said she's written two successful grants thanks to a course she took in grant writing. The course was important because funding for nonprofit projects is secured through grants.

Mary Feldheim, department chair of public administration for the College of Health and Public Affairs, said the nonprofit management program uses the concept of service learning. The program encourages students to take the theory they learn in class and apply it in a real-world setting. Houck did that by working while finishing her master's degree.

"In addition to her education, she also had extensive experience," Feldheim said. "She had been working in the field and at other museums. She has extensive on-the-job training."

Soler graduated in December 2006 with an art history degree. She credits UCF and her art history professors for providing her with discipline and the art education she can now share with the city of Eustis.

"We both went to UCF, and now we have these great jobs in Central Florida," Soler said.

To find out more about the museum, visit its Web site at www.lakeeustismuseumofart.org.