

Graduate and SoPA employee uses design to champion human rights

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AJ Durand, who will graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in Interactive UX/UI Design from the School of Professional Advancement, is an award-winning designer who wants to effect social change.

Early on in his studies, Aj Durand learned how digital design could be harnessed to find solutions for societal problems.

Durand's trajectory from the workaday world back to school is paved with various experiences. He taught yoga for nearly 20 years. He performs under his drag moniker, Precious Ephemera, and now works as the media content developer for the Learning Design & Development Department at the School of Professional Advancement (SoPA).

This year he graduates with a Bachelor of Arts in [Interactive UX/UI Design](#) from SoPA.

"Being of minority representation, I started to look at design in a human rights-centered way," he said.

At SoPA he was tasked with creating a project that offered a "digital solution for an analog problem." Durand thought about the danger gender-variant people face finding public bathrooms. He created a cheekily named phone application through which people could rate public bathrooms, noting whether they were accessible and safe for gender non-conforming people.

"If you're a cis person the problem is, 'Will I be comfortable if I use this bathroom?' But for a lot of trans people, the question is, 'Am I going to survive this bathroom?'" he said. "I thought this was a cool way of bringing awareness to this problem."

Durand's work has already gained attention. He is the recipient of six Addy Awards from the Ad Club of New Orleans. This includes a Mosaic Award in 2020, which highlights work from artists of diverse backgrounds, for the app. He was SoPA's first recipient of the Alpha Sigma Lambda National Scholarship and will speak at SoPA's diploma ceremony in May.

Returning to school at SoPA in his mid-30s, Durand was surrounded by peers balancing school with families and full-time jobs.

Learning alongside them, in a program almost entirely led by women, provided a unique experience he takes with him.

“I feel proud that this is my alma mater. I feel like I have contributed to my program as much as I got out of it. With women in leadership, it’s a much more collaborative experience,” he said.

This summer he will do his capstone project in Design Research and Strategy in collaboration with the Austin Center for Design, a program geared to people who want to use design for social impact.