John McNeal, the founder, owner and creative lead at 2Reveal, was previously unknown to CCSS and was located utilizing the alumni connections tool on LinkedIn, after our last interviewee had indicated she would want to be an architect if she had chosen a different career path.

Informational Interview:
John McNeal, 2Reveal
Bachelor of Arts in Architecture, 1997

Title: Owner and Creative Lead.
Website: http://www.2reveal.com/

What is your current job and why did you go down this path?: I own 2reveal. We are a computer animation studio that a partner and I started in 2002. I studied architecture at The Ohio State University and I loved the creativity that we had in the studio when creating projects and designing. After graduation I began working at an architecture firm and the fun that I had in studio was yanked away. I felt confined to doing wall sections, drawings and elevations. I hated the idea that you had to do your time and climb the architectural corporate ladder and then, maybe, once you do your time, you might be able to design. I quickly put together a 3D portfolio and got into computer animation. I worked at an architecture firm doing animation and was then able to start 2reveal. For a number of years my partner and I worked heavily on architecture because that is where our relationships and our connections were. We still do quite a bit of architectural work but now we also do quite a bit of advertising work as well.

It's been a slow evolution to get here. It wasn't like one day I said I wanted to have my own animation studio. I tried something and realized I was not really happy with it. I had to ask myself, "I don't like this but what do I like and what could I try?" I think there is something about being ok with trying and failing. I don't really see trying new things and not succeeding every time as failure. It's more like, I tried this and it wasn't for me, let me try something else. It's better to do that earlier in your life than spend 20-30 years of your life at a job and say "I hated this from day one and I just never made a move and now I have no idea how to get out of it".

How did your business develop early on?: I started 2reveal with a partner in 2002 who had a specialty in business finance and marketing. For me, architecture school was very design focused. Therefore, I focused on doing the animation and she focused on the business side of it. To that regard, I would say I learned that you need to figure out what it is that you are good at and passionate about and do that. It is absolutely worth your time, effort, money and energy to pay someone else to do the thing that you might not have the information or knowledge on. Remember that the thing that you hate is someone else’s passion. Many people I know struggled through aspects of their business because they felt like they had to be the one to trudge through it. Instead, it is so much better to pay someone for his or her expertise. Something that might take me four hours to do, a person with more knowledge in that area can do in 45 minutes. For me to research how to do something through finding and reading articles or watching a video on YouTube and then try it, and get it wrong and try again until I learn it, it's just not worth it all the time. My partner was able to do the business side which allowed me to focus on the animation side.

How would you describe a typical day for you?: When you start a business there is a time where you personally have to be high performing, as in you have to know what your craft is and do it well. As your business grows it becomes less about your performance and more about how well you can influence the people around you. I don’t do as much of the animation myself now, but I am using what I know and investing in others so they can be better artists or project managers or whatever aspect of the business that needs to be covered. As you start your business there are about 10 things that you need to be doing at any given time. Of those 10, one of those things you are really good at and nine of them you might not be. As your business grows your responsibility is to take those things that
you are not so great at and put someone in place to do that job. Eventually, you are trying to work yourself down to focusing on the tasks that you are really good at and delegating the tasks you aren’t so good at to others that might be. I spend a lot of my day as more of a visionary trying to generate new ideas and figure out what is the best course of action for the business. Then I make sure everyone is staying on track and we are reaching our goals.

How do you use your architecture degree now?: The thing I loved about architecture school, which I think is true of a lot of creative fields, is that it teaches you how to wear a lot of different hats. In architecture I would have a project where I had to design a canoe livery or a house for a certain type of person. In order to do that we need to get into the mindset of that person. I had to ask myself, “How do they think, what are their needs and what are the things that are going to be important to them?” You are empathizing a little bit and saying, “If I put myself in that person’s shoes, what would make their day go easier? What would make it go smoother? How can they be more productive? What things should I take into consideration?” I think that is a lot of what I benefit from now. Not only was there a certain amount of design sensibility and a sense of aesthetics, proportions, sketching, drawing and building models, but for me on a more practical level it was gaining the ability to take a scenario and put myself in that scenario and think “How should I look at this and how should I go about it?” That’s something I learned in architecture that I feel that I use on a daily basis that is really valuable.

What part of your job do you find most satisfying and most challenging?: I enjoy a few different things. I enjoy meeting people’s needs, whether it’s for a marketing image or a proposal or something of that nature where the client needs something created. I also enjoy the opportunities where I just get to interact with other people, being able to spend time with people and get to know them. It’s not just that I want the client to give us a project and turn it around and pay us. I really enjoy getting to know the people behind the projects just as much, if not more, than doing the work. We have done some advertising projects where a client will have an issue that they are trying to figure out how to solve and we are able to assist them. I love finding creative solutions to a challenge that a client brings us. I have realized that I really enjoy creative problem solving. Right now we have been following up with a lot of our clients and asking them “In your opinion what makes our office different then others?”. It has been cool to have our clients come back and say that they really enjoy the creativity that our team brings to projects.

What surprises you about your career?: I don’t think I ever imagined that I would be in the place I am. I remember when I was in college my dad told me that I should start my own business. I replied, “Why would I want to do that?”. To have the burden of the people, responsibility and payroll and all the other things that go along with it. I am not sure, but I think he either saw in himself a desire to work for himself after working for the same company for 30 years, or the flipside, maybe he saw in me that I could do this. I don’t know how many people actually start out saying they want to have their own business. For me, for the most part what I cared about was wanting to eat, wanting to pay rent and having to pay bills. You start doing it because you have to fill a need and then as you do it you start saying “I could keep doing this” and figure out ways to get better at it. If I look back over time I never had any plans of starting and growing a business. But now that I am in this position I couldn’t imagine working for somebody. It’s the creativity, the freedom and the ability to go whatever direction, good or bad that I enjoy. It’s a big challenge every day.

If I would have done this interview years ago, my answers would be different and I don’t think I would have had the insight I have now. Everyone has to go through that experience themselves. I take a couple of mornings a week to go to the coffee shop first thing in the morning and journal. It is a lot about self-reflection and thinking about what worked well and didn’t work well and how I can keep working at it. I don’t ever want to just throw it in neutral or turn on cruise control. I believe that if you don’t keep working at it you will fall back. It’s like you are on a hill. You’re either hitting the gas and going forward or you let go of the gas and start rolling backwards. There is no neutral. There is no park. There is no coasting. You are either going up or you are going down. Even if it’s hard and you feel like you are moving slow, as long as you are trying to keep working and figuring it out, you still have your foot on the gas and are still moving forward.

If you look back over your life the lessons that probably stuck out the most were the times you did something and it didn’t quite pan out or didn’t work. I am in a peer leadership group where the leader says “I won’t rescue you from your problems….If this is a problem that came to you it’s because you are meant to try to overcome it. If someone else swoops in and rescues you from the problem or solves it for you then you won’t learn whatever it is you are supposed to learn from that thing and it will just come right back.” I don’t know if I would have agreed with that years ago but now I think that it makes a lot of sense.

If you could do things all over again would you choose the same path for yourself?: I don’t think about it that way. I feel like I never wanted to feel like I went through life...
and had regrets. I guess I wouldn’t change anything. It goes back to the lessons learned. I went through Architecture School because I felt like it was what I was supposed to go through. It was what I was supposed to do. In no way do I feel like I was the star performer in school. I did it, I got through, I was ok. But from that I learned valuable lessons about myself and I met friends that I still have to this day. I wouldn’t change anything.

What advice would you give to someone who wanted to head down this path?: I have people who email me and ask for internships and what not and I see it as part of my responsibility to invest in people and reach out. It doesn’t have to be much of an investment but there is a high school student who I’ve emailed and she gave me the name of another illustrator who she really liked. I told her, you can see where she is and say I would really like to get there and that is great. But you have to understand yourself really well. You should know how you should operate, how you should function and how you can excel in regards to your strengths. I told this high school student to find out more about the things that bring you energy and the things that you feel like drag you down. The things you don’t want to do are the things you don’t want to do for a reason. It’s often because they are your weaknesses. So often in life it’s like a business evaluation where we look at the things that we do really well and the things we do kind of poorly on and we say let’s figure out how we can make the things we do poorly on better. I think that’s the wrong way to look at it. I think the best thing you can do is take your strengths and figure out how to make those better.

My encouragement for people would be to really understand how you function, what you do well and what things bring you down. They should ask themselves, how do you take your strengths and invest in those strengths? If you can figure that out, I feel like that is something you can apply no matter what scenario or job you find yourself in. I constantly have people take the Strengthfinders assessment because I think it’s such a valuable tool. It’s not telling you what you should be when you grow up but rather what is a strength that you have that regardless of what your career path is, if you function with these strengths in mind, you have a higher likelihood of doing well. That was one of the things I told the high school student. I said that it sounds like you are struggling with what you are good at and who you are, so just know yourself and if you can do that you can start figuring out ways that maybe you can one day be like this illustrator you really like. You can’t follow her path exactly because her path is not you. If someone wants to get into the scenario you can say I would love to do that but you have to know yourself to know the best way to navigate the waters to get there.

What do you look for in people that you are going to hire?: The first thing I look for is can I work with this person every day. Apart from resume skills I personally want to sit down with that person because I think the chemistry aspect for myself is very high. Somebody can be ridiculously talented but if their chemistry is not the right fit then I would say I don’t think this is the right place for you. The second thing is motivation. I think people can learn a lot and I can teach people a lot. I can’t teach motivation. That is just something that has to come from within. If someone is motivated I have confidence that they can learn and grow even in a position that they don’t know a great deal about. But without that motivation I think we all know people who are highly gifted or talented but the motivation is not there. To me I look for the ability to be motivated and to continually learn. For instance for someone who wants to get involved in my field, there is a lot of 3D software you can download for free. Someone who at least shows the initiative to start learning a 3D program and who says I am open to learning 3D modelling, that is at least a starting point. At least to me for someone who walks in and says they want to do an internship I want to see that they have been learning this on their own. Is there any evidence that you started doing this on your own at home? Are you motivated to work on this on your own?

If I wasn’t doing what I am doing today: If I wasn’t doing 2Reveal, the idea of being a serial entrepreneur has always fascinated me. Start a business, get it going, move on and start a new business a couple years later. Starting a business that matches people’s skills with needs has always been intriguing.