

WORK

PLAY

DESIGN

by **RACHEL FORREST**
photos by **MIKE MANCUSO**

MEET THE CREATIVES AT PORTSMOUTH,
NEW HAMPSHIRE'S BROWN & COMPANY





FRONT ROW: David Markowski, Mary Jo Brown
 BACK ROW LEFT TO RIGHT: Chris Lamy, Kirby Robinson, Nancy Evans, Terri Nulph,
 Jack Earl, Brett Davis, Matt Litzinger, Stephanie Kuhn, Matt Talbot



Some of Brown & Company's print and digital designs.

Walk up the rickety metal steps next to a hip little shopping-and-office building in Portsmouth, New Hampshire's west end. To the left is the historic brick Button Factory where Seacoast artists make furniture, sculpture, and jewelry. To the right is the door to Brown & Company Design, a 24-year-old design firm founded by Mary Johanna Brown. Step through that door, and Brown will giddily show you around an office reminiscent of Pee-wee's Playhouse or your quirky friend's array of midcentury modern collectibles. Oversized boxes of Froot Loops and Velveeta hover over the kitchen area nearby an inflatable Chilly Willy—the penguin from *The Woody Woodpecker Show*. Shelves exhibit toys such as vintage View-Masters and a Fisher-Price clock. Overhead, a gigantic wreath, complete with red and gold ornaments, hangs over a gathering space; Brown found it duct-taped to the door one morning, a gift from a client.

This is an office space you'd never want to leave, and not just because it's filled with nostalgic ephemera. Many of the 12 people who work here—web developers, illustrators, and content and branding professionals—have

been with Brown & Company for the majority of its life-span. That's in part because Brown nurtures the talent within the office by encouraging and facilitating their creative lives outside the office. Each team member's music, art, or activism informs the company's branding and design work. And it all starts with Brown herself, who is an artist, an activist, and a single mother—all roles that may have led to her gig as Hillary Clinton's guest tweeter on May 21, 2015.

"Hi there! I'm Mary Jo—a mom, small business owner, and Granite Stater—and I'm taking over this Twitter account today. Welcome to Portsmouth!" was the first of Brown's many tweets for Clinton, whose Twitter account has 5.5 million followers (and counting).

"I'm not too sure how they [found] me, but the New Hampshire campaign came to me and it all happened in pretty short order," Brown recalls. "They asked me questions about my business, and it does make sense—I'm a small business owner and a woman. I'm not active on Twitter, but I got my Twitter skills up to snuff. I wasn't all calm about it. That morning I had to give them my first tweet by 9:00 A.M., and I had to get [my daughter] Haley

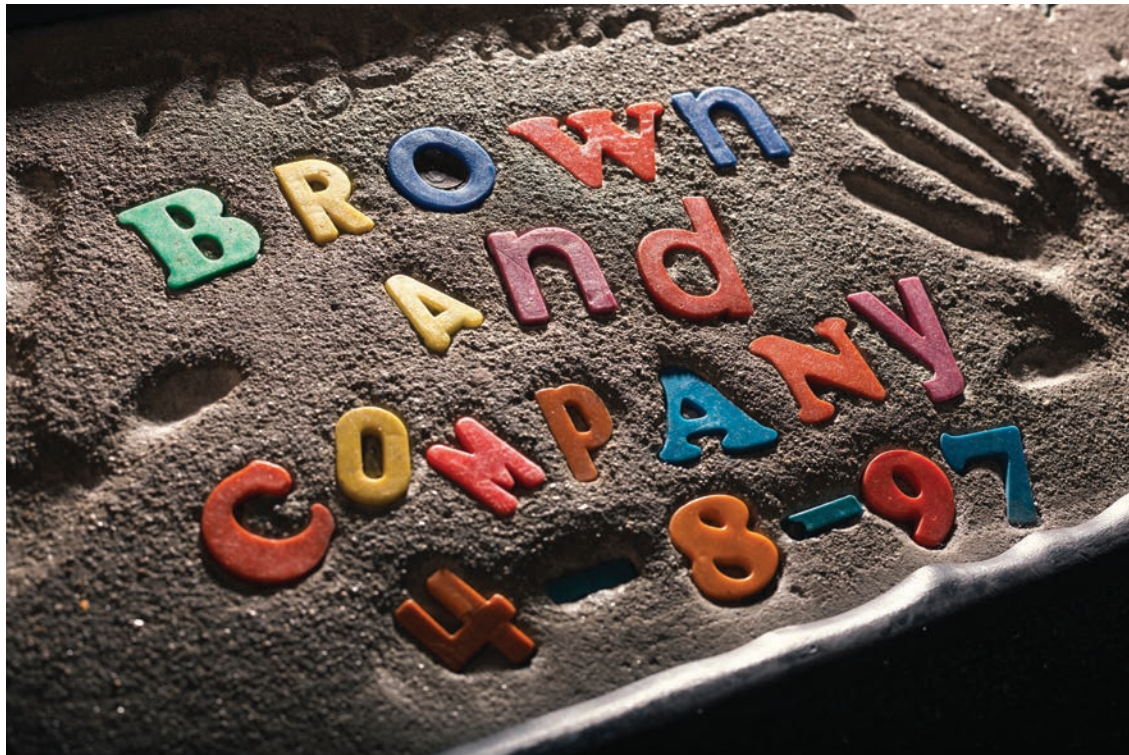
to school. I made it in time, and the swelling of national press was immediate. The headlines were, 'Who is Mary Jo Brown?' Then Hillary [returned to Portsmouth] in September, and she met Haley at her Women for Hillary kickoff. I got to speak in front of 1,200 supporters."

The onetime University of New Hampshire (UNH) art major—Brown studied copper print etching—was now in the national spotlight, partially due to the creation of a low-profile but very successful design firm.

"I've been working so long with Mary Jo and David [Markowski, Brown & Company's creative director], that I feel they are loyal to me and I to them," says senior designer Matt Talbot, who arrived as an intern in 1998. "It's because of them that we end up with really good clients, some who've been with us for over 10 years, like Telluride Film Festival."

Talbot spends his days at Brown & Company designing posters and websites, as well as working on more comprehensive projects such as a new identity for the New Hampshire Humanities Council. By night, he illustrates posters for local bands and records music with his wife, Jennifer, for their band The Honorable Mentions. He

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and fellow Brown & Company designer Jack Earl experienced cult fame when they designed fan posters for *Breaking Bad* spinoff *Better Call Saul*. The posters showed up in the writers' room for the TV series.

"The *Better Call Saul* posters were a personal project, and I thought it would be fun to do one for each episode of the show," says Talbot. "I posted them [online] and they got very popular. I had no idea the fan commitment was so strong! The line between my work at Brown and other personal work is kind of seamless."

Just past the company's "Wall of Inspiration," where each team member hangs a framed picture of someone who inspires them—Andy Warhol is one—designers Earl, Brett Davis, and Chris Lamy sit facing their large Mac screens. Davis and Lamy, too, are longtime employees—Lamy for 20 years.

Davis, who designs many of the firm's print publications, including *Seacoast Weddings*, showed his illustrations in a 2011 Paris exposition called *Greedy Bastards!* He was one of six international artists reflecting on how greed and excess take over the original intent in both the financial and art markets. Lamy is a musician who toured

with the legendary and infamous late punk rocker GG Allin's band The Jabbers in the early 1980s. He now tours with the band in Europe and recently auctioned off some rare guitars from his collection. Back in the office, the trio has an easy collaborative style that draws on all of their experiences.

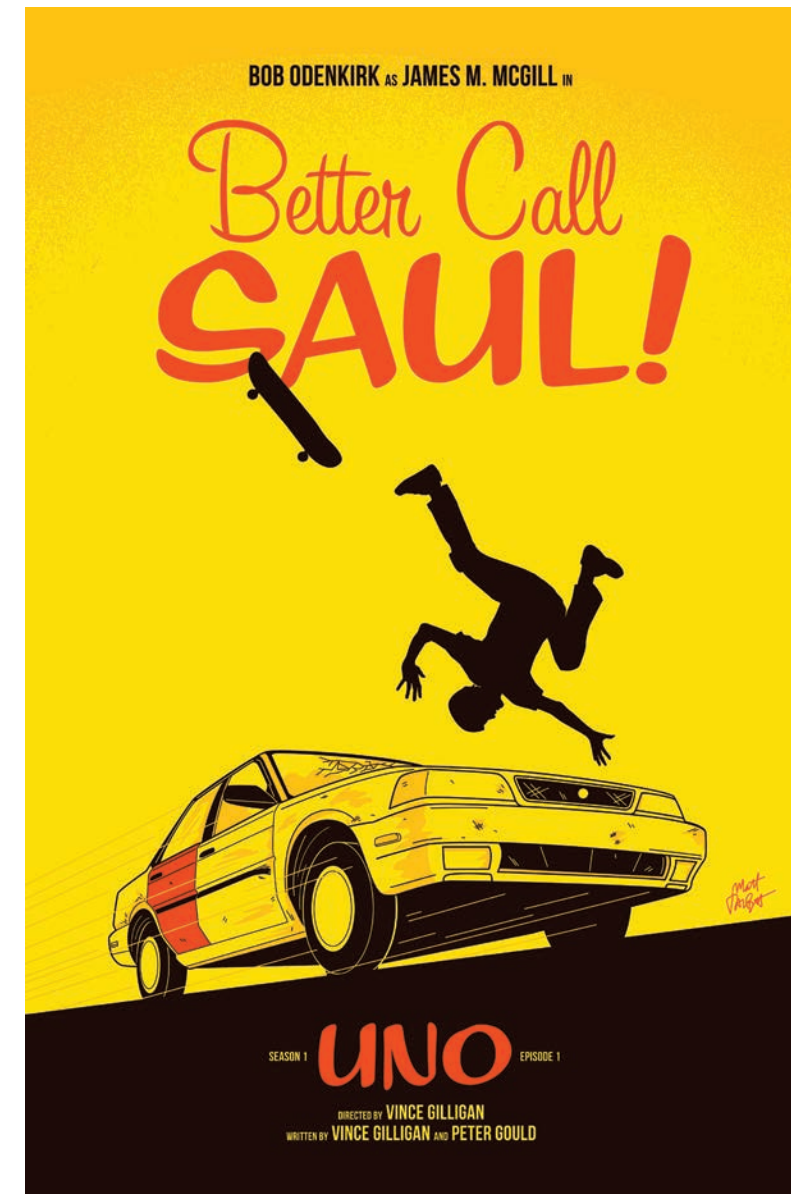
"There are two types of design—imitative and creative," says Lamy. "We always look over each other's shoulders and get ideas from each other, but [we all] have our own style. If I see Jack working on something, I can comment. I wouldn't want to design in a void. We have to keep learning. It's also generational. We're all so different, but we learn from each other."

In another part of the office, Nancy Evans works on the can design for the MOAT Mountain Brewing Company in North Conway, New Hampshire. An accomplished mixed-media artist, Evans says she likes working on projects for things you can see in stores: tangible objects that contrast with her own more abstract off-the-clock work. And creative director Markowski, who's been at Brown & Company for 16 years—well, he climbs mountains and runs marathons in his spare time.

"I bet you didn't think I still had this, David," says Brown, opening up a dusty tin box and flipping through a small ring-bound portfolio nestled in a straw bed. "He sent us a résumé, but he also sent this later. It hit on every mission we have here—not just how we work with clients but with each other. It was perfect. At the heart of how we work is collaboration, but each of us works differently. I'm the enthusiasm; he's the brains."

That collaboration produces campaigns like the one for Planet Fitness, which grew from a logo to an entire identity.

"We created the brand package: the black gear design, the purple, the hand and thumb. It's recognizable," says

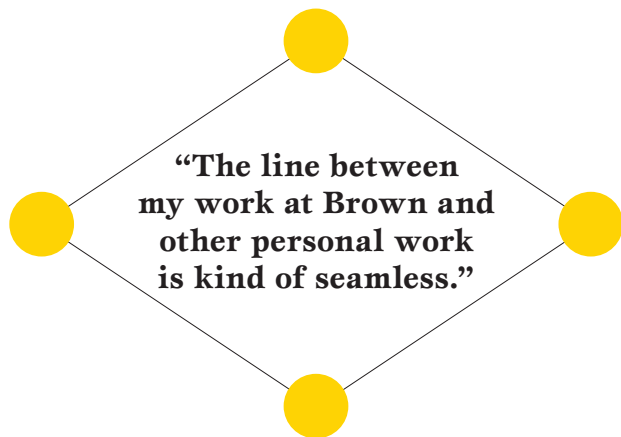


Better call Saul fan poster by Matt Talbot

Markowski. "But they extended that to the interior—the walls, the equipment. Then they sold and franchised it."

Markowski says he's most proud of the work Brown & Company is doing for UNH: taking the university's new logo and creating an entire brand book to use across multiple divisions and schools. He also singles out the firm's five years of work with Phillips Exeter Academy, which helped the school raise \$315 million.

Brown & Company is also known for its pro bono work. "Every year we have a 'pro bono pick' and donate 200 to 300 hours of work over one year," Brown says. "The first year was 1999 for A Safe Place. Now here we are, 17 years later, rebranding the merger of A Safe Place





and SASS [Sexual Assault Support Services] with their new name, Haven. Any work we do for a nonprofit we do at a discount.”

“What keeps clients here is access to the team,” says Markowski. “We pick up the phone. The designers and developers pick up the phone. We have no account executives, and we have honest strategies.”

Brown says that bringing Markowski in allowed her to take time off to raise Haley, now 10, as well as devote time to social activism. She’s the chair of the New Hampshire Women’s Foundation board of directors and helped form that organization, which came about from a merger of groups including The New Hampshire Women’s Initiative and The New Hampshire Women’s Policy Institute. Its mission is “to promote opportunity and equality for women and girls in New Hampshire through research, education, philanthropy, and advocacy.”

“It’s an opportunity to test my nonprofit leadership skills and showcase my determination,” says Brown. “I feel like [my work with the Women’s Foundation] is the most

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important work I’ve done in the state. It challenges me. It’s hard. It’s been hard to create consensus. But there are profound rewards. It reminds me of starting Brown & Company 24 years ago. We’re in such a great place, and David gives me the opportunity to parent and do volunteer work. The three labels I would tattoo on my forehead are ‘Mom. Artist. Entrepreneur.’”●

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