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**UW-Superior alumna blends business sense with creative passion**

Story by UW-Superior

The University of Wisconsin-Superior includes a network of more than 27,000 alumni found around the world – in all 50 states and more than 40 countries – that provide support for current students and new graduates.

When an opportunity arose for Alayna (Thies) Carlson to help a fellow graduate, she knew immediately it would be so much more than lending a hand to a fellow Yellowjacket.

**Illustrating a Legacy**

Carlson was invited to illustrate *Ellie’s Pursuit of the Mighty Fitz* – a children’s book inspired by the tragic sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald.

“The author, Mckenzie Williams, had received a grant from the university to write and publish the book, but sadly passed away after finishing the manuscript,” Carlson said. “Her mother worked with Professor [**Megan Muthupandiyan**](https://www.uwsuper.edu/about/faculty-staff-directory/muthupandiyan-megan/) to complete the project, and I was brought in to illustrate it.”

Carlson came to the project after Mckenzie’s mother, Missy Green, heard a performance of *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* by Carlson’s husband, musician Rafe Carlson. When Green asked if he knew any illustrators, Rafe knew exactly who to suggest.

What followed was a collaboration that honored a story, a family, and a UW-Superior legacy.

“It came together so beautifully,” Carlson said. “And the fact that it all tied back to UW-Superior made it even more special.”

**A Life Built on Connection**

Today, that sense of meaning threads through everything Carlson does – whether sketching in her Nashville studio with Rafe, designing apparel graphics for maurices, or savoring Lake Superior sunsets during summers in Superior and Duluth. Even as she splits time between states, her work is grounded by three constants: curiosity, creativity and joy.

One lesson from her student years guides her still.

“My writing professor, [**Jamie White-Farnham**](https://www.uwsuper.edu/about/faculty-staff-directory/white-farnham-jamie/?_rt=MXwxfHdoaXRlLWZhcm5oYW18MTc2MjgwOTc4OA&_rt_nonce=107811c0af), once told our class during the first snowfall to ‘remember to find a way to play.’ It stuck with me,” Carlson said. “Even now, when life feels less than ideal, I think about that – finding a way to play, to find joy.”

**Thriving in Nashville’s Creative Community**

That philosophy helped Carlson flourish in Nashville’s vibrant arts scene where she has found herself surrounded by musicians, artists and designers.

“There’s a huge demand for graphic design – logos, murals, custom art – and people really value close collaboration,” she said.

Her lifelong love for drawing naturally grew into professional opportunities.

“I’ve been drawing since before I could talk. Art has always been part of how I connect with people.”

**Where Business Meets Art**

Encouraged by her father, Carlson pursued a degree in [**business administration**](https://www.uwsuper.edu/program/business-administration/) and [**management**](https://www.uwsuper.edu/program/business-administration/management/) – a choice that gave her the flexibility to explore a range of interests.

Carlson’s business career has grown alongside her creative work. At maurices – where she now supports product operations on the data and systems side – she first assisted with selecting designs for graphic tees and sweatshirts. The role blended artistic intuition with strategic thinking.

“It’s super fun and right in my wheelhouse,” she said. “Business administration gave me a wide foundation – and from there, I’ve been able to narrow in on what really excites me.”

Her interest in business stretches back to childhood experiments in entrepreneurship.

“Ever since I was a kid, I loved starting little businesses,” she said. “I was always putting my younger siblings to work at lemonade and snow cone stands.”

**Finding Belonging at UW-Superior**

Her path through UW-Superior wasn’t without disruption – COVID-19 altered many of the experiences she had envisioned – but the academic community left a lasting impact.

“All of the professors at UWS have a strong sense of community,” said Carlson, a 2022 graduate. “They treat students like equals – not just learners, but people.”

Only after recounting these experiences does Carlson return to the moment that set everything in motion: her first visit to campus. Growing up along Lake Geneva, she never expected another shoreline to capture her heart – until she saw Barker’s Island.

“The sailboats looked so beautiful, and I knew I wanted to live by Lake Superior,” she said.

**A Journey Rooted in Place**

Now, whether creating art in Nashville or spending warm summer nights by the lake that inspired her path, Carlson remains grounded in the connections she formed at UW-Superior.

“Life after graduation is full of unknowns,” she said. “But UW-Superior opened so many doors. It’s a small campus, and you leave knowing people across all kinds of fields. That kind of network – that sense of belonging – is something you can’t get everywhere.”