

The value of a pencil

 By [Damon Stapleton](#)

22 Feb 2017

I apologise in advance for the unnecessary use of nostalgia and being a little romantic about it all. Actually, I don't.

It was ten years ago that I first saw it.

I had flown fifteen hours on an airline that didn't offer chicken or beef, or any comfort for that matter. You know those flights you get when you desperately hope there will be a little screen in front of you and instead all you find is the back of a chair. It was one of those flights. Yet, I was very happy. I had landed in London and I was here to judge D&AD for the first time. For me and many others in South Africa, D&AD had an almost mythical status because at the time, I think South Africa had only had one Yellow Pencil winner.

And winning the Black Pencil? Well, that was impossible. A ridiculous pipe dream.



D&AD Pencils.

So, winning a Yellow Pencil and then being asked to judge the following year all seemed a little surreal and quite unlikely. When you live in a small country like South Africa or New Zealand as I do now, far from the hub of advertising, it always seems like a long shot that anybody is going to notice what you are doing. But, they had and here I was.

I remember getting out of the cab and instantly realising the jacket that kept me warm in Johannesburg was less than

useless in London. This fact made me run into the hall and my eyes had to adjust to see what was in front of me. That's when I gasped. Seriously, it's one of the few times in my life that I have made a strange, strangled, breathy, involuntary noise because of what I was looking at. In front of me, was a hall the size of two football fields. It was filled with 30,000 actual pieces of work. It was too much to take in. Row upon row. Table upon table. 30,000 ideas saying 'pick me, pick me'.

Something changed for me that day.

I realised I was looking at the most beautiful level playing field. It didn't matter what country the work came from. Budget didn't matter. Reputation didn't matter. All that mattered was if the work was any good. Every idea had an equal chance. That day, D&AD was not just a hall of ideas for me, it became a repository of belief.

I instantly believed and understood that ideas were far more powerful than geography, language, money, the barriers in my own head and all the ones out there.

For me, this is what D&AD does: In an industry that kills thousands of ideas a day, D&AD gives those ideas the chance to survive and succeed. And, perhaps more importantly, it lets the people that have those ideas believe in their power again. Creating that belief is the first step to doing anything of consequence.

Three years later, I found myself in a bad suit on stage in the middle of London. I was standing with four truly special creatives and an editor by the name of Wilf Mbanga. We were slightly drunk, holding a South African flag and we had just won Africa's first D&AD Black Pencil for *The Zimbabwean* newspaper.

It was impossible and then, it wasn't.

Impossible. Belief. What you are trying to do. What you need to do it. Those things are very seldom found in the same place. Advertising award shows often get a bad rap and some deservedly so. However, on a cold London day in 2007, D&AD showed me the impossible and gave me a large dose of belief. Magically, both happened in the same place.

I think that's about as good as it gets.

There's still time to enter the D&AD Professional Awards as the deadline has been extended to 1 March 2017. [Click here](#) for more!

ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

Damon is regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia. Before that, ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Australia, before that, group ECD of TBWA Hunt Lascaris and global ECD of Standard Bank. He has won over 500 awards internationally, including a D&AD Black Pencil, Cannes Grand Prix, Grand Clio, ADC Black Cube and most effective ad in the world by Warc 100. Damon is now regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia...

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