As a high school student in the late ’70s, Ellen Bruss knew the answer to the question her parents, guidance counselor, and others posed: “What are you going to do with the rest of your life?” Her confident reply: “I want to be a graphic designer.”
Today, Bruss (BFA in Studio Art with a concentration in Graphic Design '82) is the Creative Director and Owner of her own firm, Ellen Bruss Design (EBD), in Denver, Colorado.

“Guess it worked out,” she said. But when Bruss graduated from MSU, she said she wasn’t prepared to face the worst economy in decades. She first worked as a window display person at Casual Corner and for a gourmet national foods market.

“I then moved into the rock ‘n’ roll business working for a large concert promoter who had shows from Kansas City to San Francisco,” Bruss said. “We did ads, custom stuff for bands, laminates, and more. That experience was very hardcore; very, very fast paced. That’s what I wasn’t prepared for – the pace. It took some time to adjust to it. Now when we have a job with a tight deadline and a staff member asks me if we can get it done, I just say, ‘Don’t worry about it.’”

As for how Bruss ended up in Denver, that involved an MSU connection.

“Some friends from MSU came to visit me and we were going to Denver, so I went with them,” Bruss said. “I loved the city and the weather and decided to move. It was during the off season from the summer concert series, so I started freelancing for 50- to 100-person design firms.”

One of her freelance clients provided her with office space and another moved to Janus Mutual Funds. Then, with two credit unions and Janus as clients, she picked up MCA Concerts out of Los Angeles.

“When that happened, I decided to hire a full-time graphic designer and a part-time bookkeeper, and start my business,” Bruss said. That was in 1990.

Since then, Ellen Bruss Design has developed three niches: national and local real estate development firms; consumer packaging for firms such as Hammond’s Candies, Target, and Bed Bath & Beyond; and cultural work for the Biennial of the Americas, Denver Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, and others. The firm’s work has been published in more than 400 magazines, books, and online blogs.

“Today, we’re a 12-person (and growing) design firm, including me,” Bruss said. Having grown up in the small town of Cedarburg, Wisconsin, about 20 miles north of Milwaukee, Bruss said she chose to come to MSU because she “absolutely loved the campus and really loved the program.”

She credits Joe Kuszai, Graphic Design Professor and head of the program for 25 years, with having a huge influence on her.

“I really dove into the design program, but also met a lot of people and made a lot of friends who were studying for other careers,” Bruss said. “There was a great sense of community, and you’d meet people from all over who were interested in a wide range of subjects.

There were so many different things going on and so many different people doing different things. It was a great experience. My only regret was that I didn’t take advantage of everything I could have, such as study abroad.”

Bruss recommends that students make themselves aware of as many opportunities as possible both in and out of class. And, for students like she was, who don’t know anyone else when they come to MSU, she says it’s important they learn how to get connected with faculty, other students, and alumni; to network with as many people as they can and prepare for the real world after graduation. Internships also are important, said Bruss, who had one with Easter Seals of Lansing and another with the MSU Bookstore.

“Graphic designers need to be accomplished in their area of study. They need to study the principles of design; master the various design programs; be able to build their own website; and promote themselves. And they need to keep current on all of that.”

“Graphic designers need to be accomplished in their area of study. They need to study the principles of design; master the various design programs; be able to build their own website; and promote themselves. And they need to keep current on all of that.”

But they also need life skills – the knowledge of how to function in the world, which is becoming a big thing, Bruss said.

Bruss recently became involved with an MSU female entrepreneurship group and is making plans to come back to campus this fall to speak to MSU Graphic Design students about these points and more.