TECHNICALLY, TRACY STEARNS graduated from Mizzou in 1989 – that’s when he participated in commencement, and that’s what his diploma says.

Stearns, however, first enrolled at MU in 1975 and did the majority of his coursework before 1980. “I was a goofball back then,” he says. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do.” Stearns was an art major but made the switch to Interior Design (what would later become Architectural Studies) during his sophomore year. “Once I got there, I was like ‘OK, I found my calling’,” he remembers. “I feel totally blessed that I got into interior design.”

Stearns excelled in the program, and shortly thereafter secured his first internship at the recommendation of department chair Kate Ellen Rogers. By the age of 27, he’d become a partner at the firm, which was great, except that he still hadn’t finished his degree – he was short one paper. But finally, in 1989, Stearns completed the lingering assignment and officially graduated from Mizzou.

Today, Stearns is a founding principal of 360 Architecture, a nationwide company that seeks to “inspire our people, partners, clients and community through design and a passion for excellence.” He focuses on interior design in sports, hospitality, retail and residential projects. Although he’s based in Kansas City, Stearns often works in Columbia; his past projects have included Mizzou Arena and the Taylor baseball stadium.

“Professionally, Tracy is extraordinarily talented and gifted in graphic communication and design; he lives and breathes design all his waking hours, which led to his success,” says Dr. Ruth Tofle, department chair. “Meanwhile, Tracy doesn’t take himself that seriously. Tracy is a colorful, larger-than-life character because of his outgoing personality, amazing creativity, positive spirit, hard-working dedication, and fierce loyalty.”

Stearns, who is a long-time member of the Architectural Studies Advisory Board, also comes to Columbia to connect with students in the architectural studies program. “I don’t have any children, so it’s kind of like my kids when I go there,” he says. “I help them find internships and jobs.” Stearns attends thesis student critiques and routinely participates in the department’s “Day in the Life of a Designer” program each fall. “He is also a charismatic leader in mentoring new Mizzou alumni he hires and nearly ‘adopts’ as aspiring designers to guide them into being productive professionals,” Toile adds. “His loyalty extends to being a generous patron of our program—contributing to our Faculty Scholar Endowment and also a scholarship in honor of his beloved mother.”

When Dean Jorgensen asked Stearns to deliver the May 2012 commencement speech, he initially said no thanks. But then he “started thinking about it and realized that no one will remember.” So on Friday, May 11, 2012 he spoke to 250 HES graduates about finishing his last paper nine years late and eventually earning his degree. “My message was about finishing what you set out to do,” he says of his speech, which was delivered in Mizzou Arena. “My mom was all upset with me that I hadn’t graduated. I had my diploma sent to her.”

ELIZABETH WILLIAMS’ SMILE speaks volumes. When Elizabeth graduated with her BS HES in 1987, her passion for design was just beginning to blossom. Elizabeth worked as a designer and then worked as a research intern and assistant curator at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Arts. She continued to advance herself with a Master of Arts in Art History at the University of Missouri Kansas City and a doctoral program in Art History at the University of Kansas. Meanwhile, she continued to have outstanding job experiences at the Harry S. Truman National Historic Site and as Assistant Curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Elizabeth has now advanced to the recently appointed Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, Rhode Island School of Design.

What helped her from MU’s Architectural Studies? She explains: “There are particular skills and knowledge acquired through my UMC design degree and subsequent practice that have been extremely beneficial with regard to my museum career. They include project management, ability to conceptualize and organize spatial requirements and needs with regard to exhibition planning and installation, knowledge of historical and contemporary materials and their characteristics, knowledge of architectural history and principles, and understanding of construction techniques.”