Alum finds success in L.A.

By Rachel Zarrell

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Tony Strickland

When Tony Strickland drove his car from Boston to Los Angeles after graduating from Northeastern, he didn't have a job, a connection or a back-up plan. He was armed with only his soon-to-be shattered hopes of entering the music business.

Today, with a producing gig for an upcoming animated TV series and a page dedicated to him on the Internet Movie Database website, Strickland, a 2003 alum, has found an unlikely home working behind the scenes in television.

As a Ujima Scholar, Strickland indecisively entered Northeastern in the College of Arts and Sciences, eventually landing in a major in biology with an emphasis on pre-med.

"I was really doing the biology thing because my father wanted me to be a doctor like him," Strickland said. "My experience was somewhat adventurous and challenging only because I entered the school not knowing what I wanted to do."

After seeing a friend doing promo work for Def Jam records, Strickland switched into the School of Business and changed his major to accounting.

It was Strickland’s third co-op, marketing for BMG Records, that inspired him to move in with his father in Los Angeles after graduation and to pursue a career in the music industry. But life took an unexpected turn for Strickland when he found music industry jobs in short supply.

"Because of the downloading and pirating of music ... there weren't any jobs available," Strickland said. "It was horrible. I didn't really know where else to go."

Strickland’s situation changed abruptly when a lucky break from a friend brought him to Comedy Central. A few months after moving to L.A., Strickland began working as a production assistant for the show "Crank Yankers," which featured prank calls re-enacted by puppets.

Alan Schroeder, a journalism professor with 10 years of television experience, said breaking into the entertainment industry may not be as difficult for young people as they may expect.

"Sometimes your youth is an asset," he said. "It is competitive for sure, but sometimes the fact that you're closer to that demographic and knowing what it would want to see on television really serves as a plus."

After a string of jobs on shows like "Laguna Beach" and "Queer Eye for the Straight Girl," Strickland eventually zoned in on the G4TV network, a gaming-oriented television station, working as a producer for the upcoming animated series "Code Monkeys."

The show is geared toward an 18 to 34 male demographic, and revolves around two computer programmers working for a company called GameAvision, Strickland said. The first of its kind, the cartoon is animated with 8-bit graphics, much like the Atari video games of the 1980s, which is when the show takes place.

In addition to producing, Strickland also scored a speaking role on "Code Monkeys" as the character "Black Steve," a "foul mouthed and ill-tempered" token African-American that is an accountant by day and a wrestler by night.
"I [worked on] the pilot and the network loved it, and one year later I’m producing the show and I’m also a character on the show," Strickland said. "It’s kind of crazy."

For students looking to break into the television field, Schroeder said there are many opportunities on campus to help gain experience, like NUTV.

"If you’re motivated, if you want to pursue it, I think the university offers several options in the classroom, extracurricular and obviously things like co-ops and internships," he said.

Despite his luck in finding production jobs the past few years, Strickland still maintains big goals for the future. "Code Monkeys" will wrap up in August, and as a freelancer he must then begin looking for a more permanent job.

"I want to be vice president of production at Adult Swim [on Cartoon Network]," Strickland said, referring to a network home to many late-night cartoons geared toward an older demographic. "My long-term goal is to have my own production company."

In order to succeed in the television industry, Strickland recommended staying grounded and looking for co-ops in areas of interest.

"Take internships really seriously and use them as learning tools to jumpstart your career," Strickland said. "I didn’t see it back then, [but] the background and experience I had has helped me with what I’m doing right now."