

March 23, 2010

Sundberg to start new firm with daughter

By [LYNN PORTER](#)
Journal Staff Writer

Mika Sundberg graduated last June with a master's degree in architecture and into one of the worst markets for her profession in decades.

Still the 30-year-old University of Oregon graduate is luckier than some of her fellow students, having landed a paid internship with Seattle-based Graham Baba Architects.

The Portland resident takes a train to Seattle every Tuesday evening to work at the firm, staying with her parents until Friday. Then she travels to Portland to labor Saturday, Monday and Tuesday at a “pay-the-bills” auditing job at a car dealership.

Soon she'll take on another job, this one with well-regarded, award-winning architect Rick Sundberg, her father.

Sundberg, 67, is doing a little going out on his own, too.

He is leaving the respected Olson Kundig Architects (formerly Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects) — where he has worked since 1975 — to start a “modest little practice” with Mika, whom the elder Sundberg will train, he said.

This is a change of plans. Late last year Sundberg took a step back at his longtime firm, so his name is no longer on the masthead. Still, he planned to continue as an owner/partner for two years, and then stay on as principal.

He changed his mind.

“I am not a politician so I reserve the right to do that,” Sundberg quipped.

As architecture work has fallen off industrywide, Sundberg has had more time for his “passion,” hands-on collaboration with craftspeople who build aspects of projects. It offers him inspiration about how buildings — or parts of them — are put together, he said. But it's work that would otherwise be left to interns or new associates because Sundberg's time is “too expensive per hour,” he said.

“I just was having the very best time in my life so I thought maybe it's OK to make a change in my life after 35 years,” said Sundberg, who intends to do one-on-one collaboration with craftspeople at his new firm.

The new Seattle-based enterprise will likely have five to seven employees, although initially it



[\[enlarge\]](#)

Mika Sundberg will join her father, architect Rick Sundberg, as he ventures out on his own.

will just be father and daughter, with Mika continuing at Graham Baba and for a while at her third job, they said. The firm will be based out of Sundberg's home for the next few months, and then in office space somewhere in Seattle.

The company, to be called Richard Sundberg Architects, will start out laying the groundwork to get institutional jobs in the \$1 million to \$7 million range, although Sundberg said there's little funding for that work now, and it will design custom homes.

Rick Sundberg will also focus on providing free architectural services to "vulnerable communities" through a nonprofit he is forming.

The architect is leaving behind a firm with a well regarded body of work, and that was named by Fast Company magazine as among the top ten most innovative companies in architecture for 2009 and 2010.

The award winning work has included renovation of an International District building for the Wing Luke Asian Museum, a project Sundberg headed, and for which the firm earned a Great Places award from EDRA/Metropolis Magazine, and the renovation/addition of the Frye Art Museum. The firm, best known for its custom homes, has been lauded for the design of a number of them, including Outpost, a central Idaho house, and a villa outside Hong Kong, for which it earned the International Interior Design Association Northern Pacific Chapter best in competition.

Sundberg said a lot of emotion and thought went into his decision. He has a very amicable relationship with the other principals, he said, and will consult with them about projects if needed.

"Those guys do what they do and they do it extraordinarily well," said Sundberg, adding: "I have no intention of competing with my soon-to-be former firm."

The architect expects his reputation will open some doors, but getting a fledgling firm off the ground in these economic times is "going to be a bit of a struggle," he said. "I am not putting on rose-colored glasses for this." In this downturn, projects are smaller and fees tighter, said Sundberg, which means he will spend more time marketing than in the past.

"I have to be honest that I am a little bit afraid," he said. "What do I know about sending bills out. Doesn't somebody else do that?"

But small firms can be nimble, he said, "and to be perfectly blunt, my fees will be less."

The move will also give him more flexible time to spend with his family, he said.

Olson Kundig Principal Jim Olson said Sundberg's leaving shouldn't affect the firm's projects as he has been phasing out his work over time. About 65 percent of the company's time is now spent on residential projects worldwide, he said. It also does other private and public projects, and is working on an exhibit for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and designing the Gethsemane Lutheran Church sanctuary, both in Seattle, as well as the Bellevue Botanical Gardens visitors center.

Olson said he understands his longtime colleague's decision, one that will let him spend time with his daughter. But he will miss the man he has worked with for 35 years, he said.

"Probably the main thing is. . .he's so beloved in the firm," Olson said. "I think everybody will really miss him. . . "I will personally miss him a lot."

Mika said she appreciates the opportunity to work with her father.

Most of her former classmates haven't found jobs in architecture, "certainly not full time," she said, many "have moved places they never had thought they'd go because they gotta work" and others are working in positions only remotely related to their training.

Her father has lots of experience and “knows how to show me how to do (architecture) right the first time,” she said.

And then there's that other thing.

“I feel like he has a vested interest in my training, more than somebody else,” she said. “I could work at a great firm somewhere else, but I wouldn't get the same quality or intensity of training because they don't have that vested interest in me.”

Lynn Porter can be reached by [email](#) or by phone at (206) 622-8272.

Copyright 2013 Seattle Daily Journal of Commerce