We recently caught up with Mike Fowler '10 (Art and Animation major) to see what he has been up to since graduating from Champlain. The answer is a lot! Mike is spending the year as a nomad living in different Airbnb properties and making new friends along the way.

Why did you choose Champlain? I chose Champlain for several reasons. When I first visited, Burlington just felt right. In high school, I was heavily involved in filmmaking, but my parents, who were graciously offering to help me pay for school, weren't completely sold on the idea of studying film as a career. The Art & Animation program at Champlain was a great middle ground between my technical and artistic interests.

What did you like most about your experience at Champlain, academically and otherwise? What amazes me about Champlain, especially looking back ten years later, is how much practical work experience I got. The best parts of my time at Champlain had nothing to do with a traditional college education. I was involved with the Emergent Media Center since its inception, and the projects I got to work on with Ann [DeMarle] and other faculty—with clients like IBM and the State of Vermont—were so far beyond what most college students have access to. Between the semester I spent in Montreal, and the junior and senior year game seminars, I felt that I had almost worked at a real game studio.

So, tell us what you have been up to since graduating from Champlain? I'd been learning web development—both as a hobby and professionally—since high school, and right after graduation I got hired by a company based in Charlotte [VT] called Red Barn Media Group. About a year later, I participated in the first HackVT, and was offered (on the spot, to my surprise) a job at MyWebGrocer. At the time, I knew very few folks in Vermont who were focused on frontend web development, so I eventually decided to move west to San Francisco, seeking community and mentorship. I had a solid community of Champlain alumni there, and I took a job at Findery. I spent just over a year there, and then applied to Airbnb, a company I'd wanted to work at since moving to the Bay, and a product I'd been using (and adoring) since 2012. I've been with them for three and a half years, and have worked on a lot of projects: web performance; accessibility; internal tools. By far the most exciting opportunity I've had was joining a small internal team (six of us, at the time that I joined) that worked with Brian, one of our co-founders, to start a new part of our business, what is now known as Airbnb Experiences. It was very much the oft-stereotyped startup experience—a small group of people working 15 hour days from a single room—but was by far one of the best experiences of my life to-date.

What gave you the idea to embark on this adventure of living nomadically? After I finished my work with the Experiences team, I knew that I wanted to leave San Francisco, but I wasn't sure where I wanted to move, just that I eventually wanted to land back in New England. I proposed a remote working situation—I would spend a third of my time in San Francisco and the rest "on the road"—and felt incredibly fortunate when I was given the go-ahead. Since last March I've been on a cycle of spending a month in San Francisco, working

from the Airbnb headquarters, and then two months from various points around the U.S., living with strangers (though I have always preferred the definition "strangers are just friends you haven't met yet"), friends, and family.

What has been your best experience so far? I've stayed several times—about a month in total—with a couple in Berkeley, California named Miriam and Manuel. Right now, I'm staying for the second time with a host named James. One of the best experiences, far and away, has been getting to know people who I enjoy so much that I return to them. We tend to associate the idea of home with our own homes, or the homes of people we've known for a long time, but the feeling of home is ultimately, I think, about returning to familiarity, to a place where the people welcome you as they would their own friends or family.

What has been your worst? Ironically, in direct contradiction to my answer above, the worst experience has been confronting the occasional loneliness of not having a constant home. When you're frequently moving from place to place, it's impossible—despite the lovely experiences that I described above—to feel settled and at peace everywhere you are. I have a high tolerance for ambiguity and discomfort, but it is also challenging to show up at a home that isn't what you expected. Last summer, for example, I booked a last minute stay, and while the photos of the room were accurate, I hadn't realized that the room was in a basement, nor could have anticipated that it would be swelteringly hot. I use the word "challenging" to describe these experiences, as opposed to "frustrating", because ultimately they help me appreciate how privileged I am to live a comfortable life.

What has been most surprising to discover in your travels? I've been pleasantly surprised with how this way of living has made me a more effective communicator. While I often present myself as an extrovert, I am an introvert to the core; I need time alone in order to recharge. When you're staying in a home with relative strangers, sometimes more than one, there are many times that you're forced into conversations—passing one another in the hall; making dinner at the same time. Since having the same small-talk conversation over and over again is a total drag, I've gotten much better at cutting through superficiality and getting to know people quicker, on a deeper level.

What excites you about the future? Last year I was among the founding staff of Camp Wonderful, a summer camp for grown-ups that focuses on disconnecting from technology. I've previously attended a similar camp, Camp Grounded, in California, and it completely shifted the way I relate to technology. Increasingly so, I think there is a need for intentionality when it comes to how—and how much—we use our technology, and I'm wildly excited to continue helping adults remember what it's like to play, and try new things. We'll be announcing dates soon for sessions next summer in Massachusetts!

So what's next? Where do you see yourself next? I'm coming up on a year of living nomadically, and all things have an expiration date. I've thought, and written, a lot about the idea of home in the past year, and as much as I enjoy the freedom this lifestyle affords, I direly miss having that type of sacred, personal space that one creates in a home. I will likely explore living in New York City for a time. Thinking further out, I will be exploring career changes that allow me to help others more directly, whether it's through mentorship, life coaching, or social work.