

The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of overlapping organic shapes in various colors including purple, teal, orange, yellow, and pink. In the center, a large blue circle serves as a focal point, containing the text.

# SPOTLIGHT

2021



# **SPOT LIGHT**

**2021**



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# LETTER FROM THE DEAN

The 2021 edition of *Spotlight* shows, once again, just how amazing Arts and Humanities alumni really are. As Dean of the Faculty for the past 10 years, I have met hundreds of our alumni. I never fail to be impressed by their life stories – marked as they are by creativity, imaginative plot twists, resilience and real success. As the pages of this edition show, Arts and Humanities graduates can be found in all sorts of likely and unlikely places, always doing the most diverse and remarkable things. And you can see that they are connected by their passionate engagement with the core ideas and experiences of our common humanity. In this past year, in a world turned upside down by pandemic and social/political strife, we have all relied on art, film, language, literature, philosophy and the critical exchange of ideas, like never before. We have needed them to entertain us, sure. But we have also relied on them to engage us and to help us make sense of a complex and challenging world. These are all parts of the vital contribution that Arts and Humanities practitioners make to the society around them.

I hope you will enjoy reading about this incredible group of alumni – their stories are simply extraordinary.

**Michael Milde**  
Dean of Arts and Humanities



# LETTERS FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TEAM



Francesca DeNoble  
Editor

There is not a doubt in my mind that being the Editor of *Spotlight* for the past three years has been the highlight of my undergraduate career. This role has brought me insight, inspiration, and the opportunity to meet and befriend some of the Arts and Humanities’ most outstanding graduates. I will never cease to advocate for the power of the arts and all the many things one can do with a degree in this field. Whether it’s sharing your heart’s story and becoming a bestselling author or using your artistic talent to start a business and change lives – our alumni have done it all, and they have so generously shared with us just how they made it happen. With the hard work of an impressive team of undergraduate students, we have put together this collection of interviews to highlight these journeys and successes to prove that yes, you really *can* do anything with an Arts degree. So go on and turn the page! Know that you’re engaging with some of Western’s finest and that one day, it may be your own story laid out before you.



Sophia Belyk  
Layout Editor

Working on *Spotlight* for the past three years has been incredibly rewarding. Its blossoming as a publication can be credited not only to the hard work of the team, most notably Francesca, but because of the undeniable quality the Arts and Humanities faculty has to offer in both its alumni and its current students. This year is no exception, and we have an incredible collection of articles for you to peruse. The layout for this year is simple and bright, meant to put focus on what matters most – our fantastic alumni. I am sad to be parting with *Spotlight* at the end of my undergraduate career, but I am grateful to have learned so much over these past years about the endless possibilities offered by my Arts degree. I hope you can also find inspiration in these pages, and I’m excited to see where *Spotlight* goes in the future!



# David Simmonds

**He/Him | BA '07 | Social Science**  
**Senior Executive and Visiting Professor**  
**By Margaret Gleed**

*Originally admitted to the faculty of Arts and Humanities, David Simmonds is a Social Science graduate and former member of the University Students' Council. He returned to Western in the Fall of 2020 as a visiting professor in the Arts and Humanities, teaching a fourth year SASAH course titled "Power, Privilege, and Public Persuasion: Storytelling as a Tool for Change." His decorated resumé and diverse work experience demonstrate both an education and career rich with the importance of learning and teaching with humanity.*

Crossing over University Bridge for the first time, David Simmonds knew instantly that "this is the place for me." The combination of Western's strong academic reputation, the physical environment he described as "*Saved by the Bell*"-esque, and the endless possibilities for social connectivity heavily influenced his choice. Initially admitted to the Arts and Humanities faculty, David switched to Social Science after his third day of Orientation Week. His curiosity about his future studies, coupled with the availability within Western's faculty, helped guide his transition from Journalism and Philosophy to Political Science. David discovered that "culture gives meaning to people, and [culture also] shapes meaning," and wanted to investigate the application of this rather than its theory. Making this shift from Philosophy to Political Science allowed him to address this application according to his personal interest.

Throughout his undergrad, David participated in multiple extracurricular activities including: Residence Council, Residence Life, USC Executive, and Intramural Sports. Off campus, David invested in social issues such as violence against women while organizing a White Ribbon Campaign. He joined the Creative Cities Task Force as a student representative to build a city environment designed to promote creativity and culture as a means for economic vibrance. Community holds great significance for David. He committed to programs, campaigns, and committees in any way to get involved, advising students to not "think about extracurriculars as 'extra.' Think about them as drivers for your interests." In using these extracurriculars as drivers and embellishments for his own interests, David

identified his passions early on in his undergraduate career. He then tailored his education to these interests, contributing to some anxiety when approaching graduation and evaluating future careers.

Following graduation, David worked with the Student Union Executive (USC) at Western for one year. He then applied to post-graduate opportunities at law school, business school, and Graduate studies in community building. Deciding to defer law school, David pursued graduate school following his year on the USC. That spring, he spoke at an education rally about students' access to tuition. It was after this speech that he was approached and offered a position by Deputy Minister Norman Riddell, CEO of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF). This experience ignited David's passion for public policy. After working as Policy Advisor and Special Projects Officer in the Office of the CEO for three to four years, he simultaneously worked at CMSF while completing Graduate school part-time with his employer's support.

While staying in Québec, David applied for and accepted an offer to study law at McGill University. However, the summer before classes, David worked in consulting and fell in love with his work. Before leaving the firm, the Chairman told David that if he planned to go to law school and return to the firm in four years, he shouldn't go. After speaking to a faculty member at McGill, David was told that his "curiosity [was] not about how the rules are applied, [his] curiosity [was] about how the rules are made." He was told that "being really great [at something] doesn't mean you are going to love [what you are doing]." If he wanted to make the rules and do what he was passionate about, he should continue working in politics rather than practice law. He stayed in the Savings and Consulting industry, speaking to and working with people about decision making. David attributes his passion for policy and helping others with decision making to his experiences as a student politician and community organizer. He says, "some of those things don't ever leave us. If we can listen to these [passions], we can find happiness a lot sooner, and when you find happiness, you find work."

Currently the Senior Vice President of Communications and Public Affairs at McKesson Canada, David is also a visiting Professor for Western's School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities. At McKesson, David leads company communications and relations internally and externally. He also oversees corporate and event marketing development while managing McKesson's business units' strategic partnerships in Canada. His current positions align with his passions of public policy, leadership, philosophy, and public speaking, enabling him to love his work while being successful at what he does.

After graduating with a BA in Political Science from Western, David continued his education at the University of Toronto, obtaining his MA in Education. David also attended the Wharton School Executive Education program following his education at the University of Toronto. David's experience combining education opportunities and career development manifested multiple avenues, each holding different possibilities for his future. Arriving at each opportunity, he evaluated his passions and drew on support from faculty and others in his community. For example, while initially attending Western with AEO (Advanced Entry Opportunity) status, David did not attend the Ivey School of Business after evaluating his goals, nor did he attend law school years later after re-evaluating his core passions of public policy.

When asked to reflect on his experiences at Western, David emphasizes how there is power in curiosity. In hindsight, David felt that applying his curiosity towards academics rather than co-curriculars had potentially equal, if not greater, professional benefits. However, he does not regret focusing his curiosity on co-curriculars as he maintained a position on the Dean's List and progressed onto a successful career. When asked what

he would change in his years at Western, he mentioned how "friendships matter, and relationships matter" and should always be prioritized over winning, in any sense of the word. "University is about thinking, asking the right questions, and communicating the answers to those questions whether they are right or wrong," he shared, "and you will learn that no matter what discipline you are in. So, find the discipline that aligns with your strengths and your passions and do that work, and the rest will figure itself out. You need to demonstrate excellence in what you take on, so define that for yourself. Don't let someone else define excellence for you."



**Working with David was an eye-opening and thoroughly enjoyable experience. His story spoke to how important it is to pursue what you enjoy. I found this inspiring, as I am sure it will inspire other undergraduate students. As a first-year student, listening to David explain how his education and career evolved exemplified, to me, that you can create a career when you follow your passions. David's advice resonated closely with me and provided me with more insight into planning my future. Working with David was an honour. His overall success, persistence for his passions, and evolutionary journey inspires me as I begin my university career.**

*Margaret Gleed is a first-year Philosophy student in the SASAH and Scholar's Electives programs. She is currently looking into Business Ethics research topics for her second-year course in Scholar's Electives.*



# Abigail Ainsworth

**She/Her | BA '09 | Film Studies**  
**Director & Producer**  
**By Rushil Malik**

Abby Ainsworth comes from a family well-versed in the arts. Her mother was a set designer at the CBC, her dad a music producer, and her sister a film composer. Thus, Abby's career as a documentarian specializing in the culinary arts just made sense. However, growing up, food was never the focal point of her family; in fact, Abby taught herself how to cook by obsessively watching The Food Network. It wasn't until she attended Western University that her passion for food truly began. Her Bollywood Cinema professor, Prakash Younger, gave her a South Indian cuisine cookbook. "He told me to guard it with my life. It was cool to see recipes so authentic with no food photography." This unlocked her love for food, and inspired her to combine these passions for film and food as a culinary documentarian.

During her time at Western, Abby originally wanted to be a film editor, but the thought of working inside in a dark room all day began to sound less and less appealing. After graduating, Abby had a Hollywood moment of "being at the right place at the right time" and landed a job working on a Food Network show as a production assistant, leveraging the role to learn everything she could about all facets of production.

While working at the Food Network, Abby took the initiative to create a self-funded project by gathering friends to produce a forging food show where she directed, produced, filmed, and edited the pilot. After pestering the head of acquisitions at Air Canada for six months, they ended up signing the

show for in-flight entertainment, something "huge because everyone travelling around the world could watch the show." Her persistence paid off again when the CBC Documentary Channel licensed 18 episodes, allowing her artistic freedom to make the content she wanted for three years.

Abby now runs her own production company that she launched in 2011 called Butternut Production. "I always saw myself as an entrepreneur," she offered, explaining that it can be difficult but rewarding. There are a few important things that she learned along the way, particularly organization as it is "the one thing that has really kept me on track, especially when you work for yourself." Having a routine is necessary, especially when working remotely. When asked how she keeps herself motivated, Abby responded, "I love what I do." She found her niche and is determined to create the content she's passionate about. The industry itself can be hectic, and at other times, there's just nothing going on – but Abby makes it work regardless. "At the end of the year we ask ourselves, 'What's our next year going to look like?' And then we stress as we have no jobs booked! Something seems to just come through. Life of a freelancer!"

One of her biggest projects is working on her feature documentary, *Stage: The Culinary Internship*. The documentary is about apprentices (stagiaires) who work their way up the ladder at one of the best restaurants in the world, Mugaritz. Abby wanted to know more about why anyone would want



to work tirelessly... for free. She wanted to show a Gordon Ramsey-like figure before he was famous: that moment when he first walked into the kitchen. It was difficult to convince the restaurant to agree to the documentary about their unpaid apprenticeships, rather than something more positive, such as their Michelin stars. Luckily, they eventually agreed and Abby was able to work on a stressful but rewarding project. "My biggest challenge was the editing process. I had over 200 hours of footage and now you have to do something with it." In documentary films, it isn't storyboarded – everything is real life, which means it's chaotic and, sometimes, very messy. The documentary was successful, making rounds at multiple film festivals including Palm Springs International Film Festival before winning the Best International Feature Documentary at Galway Film Fleadh 2019 and the Audience Choice Award at the Toronto Food and Film Festival 2019. The documentary is available to watch in Canada online on CBC Gem.

"If you want to go off and do your own thing, you're going to face so much rejection. Always be thinking about what's next. You can't get too down about it." Abby has great advice for documentarians just starting out: "My biggest advice for documentary filmmakers is to build a relationship with your subject before you start filming." For one of her projects, she was in a class for nearly a year without a camera in order for her subjects to feel more comfortable with the filming process. She also encourages students to think of where they want to work and then "knock on their doors." Message people for coffee (or a virtual call) and, "Don't just make it about you, make it about them!" Explain how you could add value to their business and what differentiates you from others.

Having just wrapped up a series she directed with Loblaw's,

Abby wants to focus on more commercial work. She's happy she started her career off working on documentaries and then went into commercials. "Coming from documentaries, commercials are a lot less complicated. On a commercial you have 18 people on set supporting you, in documentaries it's just you, your DOP, your sound recordist, and a little luck!" She's excited to see what opportunities the new year brings and wants to fund her life through commercial work while making documentaries. And though documentaries can be difficult to create, Abby is driven by her passions, always remembering that, at the end of the day, "If it's a compelling story, you'll learn how to tell [it] intimately."



I loved being an interviewer for *Spotlight*! Talking to Abby has been a very rewarding experience and makes me feel more secure about my future. I'm graduating this year, so I've been thinking a lot about entrepreneurship and working as a freelancer. Hearing Abby talk positively about her experiences makes me feel like it's a real possibility for me as well! I look forward to seeing Abby's next projects, and I'm excited to pave my own path using what I've learned from her.

*Rushil is a fourth-year student pursuing an Honours Specializing in Film Studies, and a Minor in Media, Information and Technoculture. She hopes to work for non-profits when she graduates!*



# Shelley Ambrose

**She/Her | BA '83 | English & History**  
**Retired Publisher and Executive Director at The Walrus**  
**By Britney Forget**

Shelley Ambrose held many roles throughout her career: a reporter at *The Globe and Mail*, a producer for CBC Radio, a Public Affairs Officer at the Canadian Consulate in New York, a producer of President Bill Clinton's 60th Birthday fundraiser, and the Executive Director and Publisher of *The Walrus* magazine. For Shelley, who always had lots of drive and energy, a dynamic career that continuously grows and evolves is one of the most exciting possibilities of an Arts degree.

Shelley received her Bachelor of Arts at Western University, specializing in English Language and Literature and History. She believes in the value of an Arts degree, emphasizing that the arts are a uniquely broad field with many different options and avenues. "The arts and cultural sector in Canada, jobs wise and GDP wise, is bigger than forestry or fisheries," says Shelley. "And I don't think a lot of Canadians or a lot of people know that it's a massive, massive sector. It's everything from museums to art galleries, festivals, and cultural destinations." Because of this, the arts sector offers countless opportunities for new graduates or professionals continuing to pursue their passions. An anomaly within the faculty, Shelley knew exactly what she wanted to pursue upon beginning at Western: journalism. Following graduation, she immediately began accumulating relevant experience by contributing to local papers and pursuing



a degree in journalism from Ryerson University. As she began her career, she quickly learned what she liked to do as well as what she didn't. "You have to try stuff out and discover what you don't want to do on route to finding your ideal roles," Shelley advises. With this in mind, she discovered that she preferred the "detective work" of producing in favour of being a writer and transitioned into work as a radio producer.

As a producer of CBC Radio's Morningside, Shelley took on a variety of roles from working in sports writing to business journalism to cooking shows. She credits her Arts degrees for providing the adaptability to achieve such a range of interesting work. Shelley believes that "the kind of thing that Arts and Humanities students are really, really good at is that range and perspective and not getting into something that's repetitive every day."

Shelley's range also allowed her to pursue multiple positions throughout her career. As she amassed more work experience, she gained a network and reputation that led to more opportunities such as the chance to produce U.S. President Bill Clinton's 60th Birthday Celebrations fundraiser. "The more experience you have," says Shelley, "and the more things you do, the more opportunities there are." One way to start building your experience is by volunteering. Shelley volunteers on a number of boards and panels, especially working to support the arts. She advocates for volunteerism as a great way for budding professionals to get some experience and generate further opportunities, noting that "you make your own opportunities when you volunteer. You don't wait for someone to give you an apprenticeship or give you an internship. You volunteer and you get to make it up yourself."

To thrive in these new opportunities, Shelley finds that the most crucial skills are the foundational ones such as organization, time management, and consistent professionalism. The arts are a great training ground for such valuable skills and for the adaptability to pursue a dynamic career. "What you learn in the Arts and Humanities is a lot of leadership qualities that are transferrable," says Shelley. "You become a better problem solver. I think you become a more empathetic person that's

open to more perspectives. You're genuinely curious about lots of different things and so you don't just have... to be an artist." When Shelley eventually landed at *The Walrus*, a Canadian non-profit publication where she worked for thirteen years, her range of abilities was stretched even further. She expressed that there was no average day for her working as the Executive Director and Publisher of *The Walrus*. Since there were limited staff when she started there, Shelley had to take on an array of new roles and learn as she went. "At the beginning, I only had editorial staff," says Shelley. "So, I was the Executive Director, the CFO, the COO, the Office Manager, the Director of Development, the Director of Events... the Board Liaison... And some of it I was just making up as I went along. I had no idea how to be a CFO, but I learned how to read a balance sheet and I learned how to do financials. And I realized if I didn't know what they were talking about, and I was running the organization, there was no one else who was going to know. So, I learned a lot."

Another challenge was keeping up with a changing world. Shelley recognized that journalism must adapt to keep up with technological shifts and reach people where they are. The adaptability gained in the arts is essential to thriving in fields such as journalism which are constantly evolving. Shelley's adaptability and drive to learn helped transform *The Walrus* from a publication that was struggling financially when she joined, to the thriving non-profit organization it has become at the time of her retirement. "We went from our survival being hourly to daily and then weekly and then monthly," says Shelley. Today, *The Walrus* has over 30 staff members and is Canada's most awarded publication.

Through the twists and turns of her career, Shelley has always

been driven by her passions. She is particularly passionate about the power of telling Canadian stories. "I just think that when Canadians can read about each other or hear about each other or see each other, it fosters a lot of understanding," says Shelley. By sharing her own story, she can inspire current Arts students at Western to follow their own passions and achieve dynamic careers. This legacy is just one of the many ways in which Shelley Ambrose continues to benefit the arts in Canada.



**Interviewing Shelley was an honour and her story is personally motivating. Shelley's career is one that I look up to as she has been a part of many exciting projects and had a true influence on her communities. Talking with her left me inspired to follow my passions, make my own opportunities, and seek a varied and fulfilling career. For a long time, I have been trying and failing to decide on the one career that I want to occupy for the rest of my life. It is encouraging to hear that I can pursue multiple passions and seek out a variety of experiences on the way to building a dynamic career.**

***Britney Forget is in her final year at Western, completing a double major in SASAH and English Language and Literature with a Philosophy minor. She is excited to start her own career story and see where new experiences take her.***



# Michelle Gill Banik

**She/Her | BA '92 | English  
Corporate Director  
By Francesca DeNoble**

After an amazing three years of reading, writing, and exploring all that the English Department had to offer, Michelle Banik left Western University with a Bachelor of Arts in hand and plans for an MBA in close sight. However, returning home to Toronto for the summer wouldn't spur desire to attend the DeGroote School of Business as planned, but rather, delay it. After casually applying to a few jobs post-graduation, Michelle soon found herself prepping to attend Ryerson University – and it wasn't for more academics. "Never in my mind did I think that I would start working and not go and do my MBA," she shared. "But it's funny how life happens."

When Michelle left one university rich with student experience for the next, she originally saw it as nothing more than an opportunity to make some money and begin chipping away at her student debt. Luckily, the transition into the working world at the Ryerson Students' Union was an easy one thanks to her plethora of extracurricular experience. With her first post-university job as a student group coordinator, Michelle found herself in a role that offered both an extension of Western's social aspects and an opportunity for experiential learning. It was here, equipped with an English degree and a preliminary interest in organizational and human behaviour, that she decided to pursue a post-graduate certificate in Human Resources. "I started to realize that being in the Human Resources profession was what I wanted to be doing in a more deliberate way," she explained, emphasizing that it was in this in-between space of

school and career that she really began to explore her interests. Fast forward a few decades, where Michelle is now a Corporate Director on the Board of Empire Company Limited, a Canadian grocery retailer that is publicly traded on the Toronto Stock Exchange. As a Corporate Director, Michelle is one of fifteen directors who, on behalf of the shareholders are responsible for the stewardship of the company. This means the Board plays a role alongside the Management team in establishing strategies, assessing performance and progress in meeting strategic priorities, and understanding the major risks to the company's ability to deliver results and grow shareholder value. As a former global C-Suite Executive, Michelle held the most senior human capital position for four years before moving on from OMERS, one of Canada's largest defined benefit pension plans. Her role as Chief People Officer meant that Michelle was committed to working with business leaders to establish the right people programs and strategies during a time of considerable growth. Michelle is a strategist, but it wasn't a Master's in Business that enabled her to become one. Rather, it was everything else she accumulated along the way: a degree in English, part-time jobs that taught her how to lead and be a team player, and a passion for helping to build or grow companies. "I've always had an interest in understanding what individual and organizational behaviours contribute to a company's success," she admitted. "And now, having spent my career focused on the human capital in organizations, I recognize the importance of two



things: establishing the right systems and experiences for people to be successful, and ensuring these efforts are supported by a company culture that values the contributions of its people. Knowing how to optimize those two things is what makes great organizations and that is what I am passionate about."

But it's not all that she does. Along with helping others be successful, Michelle also holds dear her place in two very important roles: that as a board director in not-for-profit organizations, and that as a mother. "I have always been ambitious and over the past number of years built a global career," Michelle offered. "And being a parent to a daughter who is now 13 also meant that I wanted to be more present, that I needed to be available in a different way and invest more time in family, as well as community." By leaving OMERS at the end of 2019, Michelle has been able to focus on both her daughter and on giving back in her roles as a Director on the National Board for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, a member of the SASAH Advisory Council here at Western, as an Expert Mentor with the Lazaridis Institute, and through her recent appointment to the Empire Company Board of Directors. Michelle is also passionate about the importance of fostering greater equity, diversity, and inclusion which often means she facilitates uncomfortable conversations with leaders in order to help advance their efforts toward change. "I get really energized and hopeful [by these conversations]," she shared. After the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the heightened focus on anti-black racism, Michelle found that many people saw her as a safe space in which they could be vulnerable, and "as a woman who has had the kind of career that I've had, the last thing I ever thought we'd be talking about was the power of being vulnerable." But after that momentous shift, she began

to see that some of the best leaders in her life, as well as the more impressive communities and organizations at large, were those who recognized the power of vulnerability and humility. By working with these organizations at the executive level, Michelle continues to make real, tangible change within today's workforce.

Though her time at Western began with an enrolment in the Faculty of Science, Michelle looks back on her years in university with fond memories and the knowledge that her English degree "has been a foundation that has contributed to my success in varying ways." From the ability to communicate effectively to being curious about the development of individuals and their stories, Michelle has leveraged her skills in ways that she couldn't have anticipated at the time of graduation. And while she wished that an interdisciplinary program like SASAH was around at the time of her own studies, she emphasized just how okay it is to not know what you want to do long term. "If something looks like an interesting experience, go for it," she pressed. For even though she had plans to pursue an MBA, Michelle knows that her job at Ryerson set into motion a lifetime of experiences that may not have taken place otherwise. Because while you may not realize right away what each experience means in the grander scheme of your life, "it will still shape you, and it will put something in your toolkit that will benefit you." So yes, it is okay to not have all the answers, and yes, it is enough to apply for opportunities simply because they seem interesting, because "by believing in yourself and taking those chances, those experiences make it all worth it."

***Michelle has just been appointed the newest Member of Western's Board of Governors. Spotlight offers her a warm congratulations!***



Every year I tell myself that I will forego my own interview in order to help other writers with their own, and every year I successfully lie to myself. It was such a pleasure to speak with Michelle, and I very selfishly dove into our time together so that I could pick her brain and learn from such an inspirational woman. Mother, Board Director, C-Suite Executive, and an exemplary leader for women everywhere, Michelle showed me how something as simple as answering the door when opportunity knocks can lead to a global career. So no, I'm not worried about completing a Masters, and no, I'm not stressed about where my English degree may take me. I'm actually really excited, because I know that if I'm not helping others grow their businesses, it's probably because I'll be busy running my own.

***Francesca DeNoble is a fourth-year student pursuing a double major in English Language and Literature and SASAH with a minor in Italian. She is now accepting any and all opportunities that come her way and bring with them the promise of excitement and adventure.***



# Stephanie L. Bergman

**She/Her | MA '15 | Classics**

**Planner, Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing**

**By Margaret Huntley**

When Stephanie Bergman began her Master of Classical Studies at Western, she didn't quite know what she was going to do after graduation. Like many Arts and Humanities students, Stephanie was enjoying immersing herself in her studies while planning to figure out her future later. It was during this time at Western that she began to develop a love of cycling, her favourite method of getting to class quickly becoming a ride through the cute century homes of Old North all the way to the stunning collegiate gothic buildings of campus. Stephanie remains an avid biker to this day, some of her favourite memories being those she spent on campus biking and hanging out at the Grad Club with friends.

Western wasn't merely a means of momentary peace and enjoyment before beginning the dreaded job hunt. During her studies, Stephanie learned valuable skills that would prepare her for success in the initial search. The three key skills she identified were critical thinking, research, and communication. Writing papers required her to identify an argument and consider the argument critically in order to defend it properly; the ability to

research was necessary for a compelling thesis; and strong verbal and written communication skills were integral to an eloquent and convincing paper. However, she wasn't an expert at it right away – in fact, she recalls professors being quite critical of her writing, something that would push her to improve all the more. Stephanie appreciated the support her professors showed for her interest in a career outside the sphere of academics.

During her Masters, Stephanie took a job as a receptionist at a private engineering firm in London called Stantec. As time went on, the firm took an interest in the skills she brought to the table as an Arts and Humanities graduate. Stephanie noted that it was her Arts degree to thank for her success, explaining that, "Our focus is always different from a technical expert. We [Arts graduates] bring a different focus to these technical specialists." This unique viewpoint paired with her writing skills earned Stephanie a position as a planner with the company for a number of years.

Currently, Stephanie works as a planner for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. As a planner, her responsibilities are to ensure compliance with provincial and municipal policies, ensure environmental protection, and communicate with the public. For students who are interested in becoming a planner or working in urban development, Stephanie advises to get involved in the community and get a sense of how things run on a municipal level. While she enjoys her career, being a planner was never something that was on Stephanie's radar simply because she didn't even know it was an option.

Something that Arts and Humanities students often have in common is an uncertainty about what their career will end up being. Not because there isn't anything out there for them, but because there are so many possibilities that it can be hard to know which one is the right fit. "Humanities majors are so well suited to so many different things, but you never know it," Stephanie offered. "You're just not yet exposed to all of the opportunities!" While some people, like Stephanie, are fortunate enough to fall into a career they are well-suited for, others often have to search long and hard to know what they want to do. For these particular students, exposure to all kinds of opportunities



is the best way to figure out their career path. Stephanie advises, "Don't ever downplay your Humanities degree. I was always a bit afraid of that question, 'What are you going to do with your degree?' Don't be afraid of that. There's nothing wrong with not knowing what you want to do!"

Not only are Arts and Humanities degrees well-suited to a variety of disciplines, but they nurture a specific type of thinker who is essential to confronting local, national, and global issues. Since Stephanie spends a lot of time working with engineers, she has first-hand experience with the merging of different disciplines to create a meaningful solution to problems. When she first started working at Stantec, Stephanie was afraid to voice her opinion as she felt ill-equipped to weigh in on technical problems. But after pushing herself to ask the right questions, she learned that her opinion was highly valued because, "It takes someone outside of it all to ask the right questions. And those questions need to be asked."

Something that Stephanie is passionate about addressing in her time in this field is climate change. She recalls a story from a class at the University of Waterloo, where she later pursued a second Masters, when a student said something along the lines of "going to war against big business is the only way to address the issue." After voicing his opinion, a woman with a Social Science background added that using figurative war language is often harmful to issues. This story served to further prove Stephanie's point that "if we're going to tackle the issues that our communities, our cities, and world are facing, we're going to need all those different perspectives." And that includes yours, Arts and Humanities students of Western.



**I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to speak with Stephanie and write for *Spotlight*. Oftentimes I find myself uncertain and worried about what I can do with my Arts and Humanities degree. But after speaking with Stephanie, I feel much more confident knowing that I have the skills to tackle a plethora of different careers. More than that, the world needs my perspective as an Arts and Humanities student!**

***Margaret Huntley is a third-year student pursuing an Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and minoring in Philosophy. She has creative pieces published in Iconoclast, Occasus, and Symposium, but this is her first published profile.***



# Audra Branigan

**She/Her | BA (Hons) '05 | Art History and Criticism**

**Co-Director of Online Auctions and Senior Consignment Specialist at Heffel Fine Art Auction House**

**By Azadeh Odlin**

When Audra Branigan's first choice of university didn't prove to be the right fit, she transferred to Western to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Art History. She recalls going to visit her friends who studied at Western, sharing that, "They were all in different types of programs: science, general arts, and general business," the common theme being that they all enjoyed their respective studies. "So, when I realized that Guelph wasn't a fit for me, I transferred to Western, and it was the best decision I could have made for myself."

As she reflects on her experience at Western, Branigan shares that "the professors were phenomenal. A couple of years ago was the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Visual Arts Department. John Hatch reached out to me and invited me to come. It was nice because he remembered who I was, and other professors remembered who I was, even though I'd only been there for two

years, and I hadn't gone back since I graduated, over ten years by then... The engagement by the professors is great."

While at Western, Branigan enjoyed her program and took the opportunity to do an internship with the Grand Theatre in London where she helped work on the Artist's Display policy. "I remember that there was a play based on golf," she shares, "and that they had invited a painter to display his art – he painted golf courses." Reflecting on her internship, Branigan says that she "gained a lot from helping at the Grand. It was neat. I do wish that I had been more involved with the art gallery on campus and Museum London, but because I transferred, I didn't know that many people."

Like many other new graduate students, Branigan didn't have a clear idea of what she wanted to do upon leaving Western. She was interested in corporate curating and working with corporations and art collections. The problem was that she wasn't "quite sure how to get there. I was applying to any job that sounded interesting and then eventually decided to go pursue my Masters." After researching several courses, she found a program in the UK through Sotheby's, earning herself a Master of Arts in Art Business. She found the blend of Arts and Business more interesting than a purely academic Art History course. "This was very different from just Art History, where you look at art as historical items and learn about the artists' style and how they fit in the world. This was how art fits in the business world and considers art to be a commodity. Something that people pay money for or trade. That was very interesting, and I knew that I chose the right program."

Upon returning to Canada, Branigan again applied to many jobs. She landed a position at Heffel Fine Art Auction House in 2010 and has been there ever since. When asked if going to the UK gave her an advantage over other applicants, Branigan expressed that, "The business side of my Master's program and also my strong retail background helped. I had the background knowledge of art from Western and other abilities from part-time jobs that contributed to getting the position."

Even though art auctions are a very small market in Canada, Branigan shares that "there are many opportunities – you have

to look for them and be really proactive if you want to work in the arts. Many people get internships or volunteer at art galleries or at their school art gallery, which is a great thing to do as you might get recommendations, or somebody may think of a curator who is looking for help. While the market is regional, it is active, so there are positions and an interesting market in Canada for art because most buyers are really focused on Canadian arts. Even through the pandemic," she emphasizes, "art sales have stayed active. People are always buying and selling art. It's an industry that will never disappear – it might change a little bit, but there will always be opportunities for people."

Her advice for recent graduates and current students is to never hesitate to ask questions. "Always be willing to grow because the more you learn, the better you do, no matter what. Questions are very important. I always encourage our team, especially our junior staff, to ask me if they have any questions. I don't think there are any stupid questions. It is better to ask a question than just do what you think should be done and get it wrong or be uncertain."

And when asked what Heffel is looking for in their interns, Branigan shared that they "ask for writing samples, because when working in the arts you should always expect to write up at some point." When she interviews students, she looks for confident people who can tell her a little bit about themselves and offer the bigger picture of who they are. Current students and graduates should be sure to refine their people skills, because while knowledge about art is important, at the end of the day, "You are dealing with clients and you must be both comfortable and willing to talk to people."



**I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to interview Audra. Her story proves that if you are really passionate about the arts, and you want it to be part of your life, there are many opportunities available to incorporate your passion into your job. Audra's story taught me that networking and perseverance are the keys to success. I also gained appreciation for the skills acquired through my part-times jobs and volunteer work in addition to the knowledge and qualifications gained through my study at Western University.**

***Azadeh Odlin is a third-year student pursuing an Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature in the SASAH program. Her goal is to pursue a research-focused career.***



# Jamie Mason Cohen

He/Him | BA '97 | Film Studies

Virtual Keynote Speaker, Business Workshop Facilitator, Executive Producer

By Sofia Spagnuolo

“If you aren’t invited to the party, you throw the party,” advises Jamie Cohen in regard to pursuing a career in the arts. Cohen has created a lifestyle revolving around persistence, action, and execution, and his success story begins right here at Western University.

Cohen chose Western because of the creative courses that would act as a foundation for a career in the creative industry. He graduated with a degree in Film, Cinema and Video Studies, emerging eagerly from his life in London to the arts workforce. Cohen’s dedication led him to an internship at production company, Rhombus Media, where he produced high-end art films such as *Last Night*. Cohen didn’t settle here, as he had big aspirations to work for creative genius, Lorne Michaels, producer of *Saturday Night Live* and *The Tonight Show*.

Over the years, Cohen worked jobs unrelated to his degree, including in computer development and clerical positions, but with a drive for success, the dream to work in New York City was finally accomplished. Cohen placed twenty-five phone calls to Lorne Michaels and wrote a letter that was instructed to be placed onto Michaels’ desk – that is, on top of an enormous pile of other paperwork. Cohen waited anxiously in hopes that Michaels would open the letter and give a bright, determined young graduate a shot. Three months later, he got the call.

Cohen describes his confident pitch to Lorne Michaels as demonstrating his hunger for success: “I wanted to impress upon him that I was really hungry to succeed... I wanted to know what I could offer of value to prove that.” The pitch did the trick and landed Cohen a position at the company for four years. “I worked on productions, developed projects for Australia during the Olympics, *Saturday Night Live*, TV shows, I helped run a comedy tour across the midwestern part of the United States with some of the most successful comedians of that era, before they were as famous as they are now.”

The ability to power through rejection is an essential skill in the arts industry. Cohen says, “If you want to build a career in the arts, the first thing you should be building is your ability to withstand rejection and realize that it’s not personal, and it’s more often about timing.” Right out of university, Cohen

developed an idea and was invited to pitch it to CBC. His idea was inspired by his job as a clerk as he found a story about a Rwanda genocide survivor. His idea was declined, but instead of sulking in the heartbreak, Cohen continued forward with determination. In fact, 23 years after this unsuccessful meeting, Cohen is now partnered with a CBC rep (from that meeting!) after a chance encounter on the streets of New York City.

The word challenge doesn’t exist in Cohen’s vocabulary. He takes every crisis as an opportunity, stating that, “If I’m not winning, I’m learning.” In dark times, Cohen turns to family for support. A very important relationship in his life was with his grandmother, as she always encouraged and believed in him. Now, he keeps a picture of her at the top of his “values board,” a collection of all of his accomplishments. Cohen encourages students to celebrate every win they get from their time at Western and well into their future careers, as it is important to “celebrate the process.”

Following his time at Western, Cohen continued his educational journey at teachers’ college at Brock University before pursuing a Master of Education at York University. He followed his passion of teaching and brightening young minds. Cohen then gave a live TEDx Talk in Luxembourg that now has a few million views. He describes the experience as requiring immense courage as he travelled to a castle in a foreign country and performed live handwriting analysis. This experience is what gave him the confidence to pursue a speaking career.

Cohen wasn’t finished there. He woke up every day at 4:30 a.m. before his full-time teaching job to develop his Amazon bestselling novel, *Live from Your Class: Everything I Learned About Teaching, I Learned from Working at Saturday Night Live*.

He was, unfortunately, let go from his teaching position, but he took the setback as an opportunity to dive fully into his current career as a Virtual and In-Person Keynote Speaker. He has since been a professional facilitator and speaker for three and a half years, but with the pandemic spiralling, Cohen was forced to adapt his mentality and change his goal. “In two weeks,” he stated, “I want to turn one speech at a time into a

really memorable, practical virtual experience.” He reached out to former clients, as well as Western University, and offered to give virtual talks. Cohen used the challenge of COVID-19 to “master the virtual world” and create his own opportunities. “I bet on myself,” he shared.

Cohen gives his words of wisdom to aspiring Arts students struggling with the pandemic with the belief that, “This is a great time to be going into the arts.” Cohen describes how times of crisis can manifest into the best transition of your life, explaining that “chaos and uncertainty can breed opportunity.” He encourages students to embrace the confusion and uncertainty of what’s to come next and take the time to develop their talents, saying that “jobs that have nothing to do with your degree can inspire creative work.”

“One of the key skill sets is how to pitch yourself in three minutes or less,” Cohen emphasizes. He believes in branding oneself to accentuate value and hunger, and if there is only one thing to take away from his inspiring career, it’s that “you only need one person to say yes.”



As an Arts student, I have struggled with how to get my foot in the door and develop a career in the creative industry, but Jamie Cohen has shown me just how possible it is to do. Cohen has an intoxicating drive for success and has taught me a new way of thinking that will change how I pursue the rest of my career, all through a simple interview. It was an absolute honour speaking with him, and I am truly grateful to have taken part in the *Spotlight* publication. Although the path isn’t exactly clear, I am optimistic that, in developing my talent and being persistent, I can accomplish a creative career! After all, “If you aren’t invited to the party, throw the party!”

***Sofia Spagnuolo is a third-year English and Creative Writing student with a minor in MIT. She is currently working as her own personal chef, spending more than she is making.***



# Paul Crossdale

**He/Him | BA '90 | English**  
**CEO and President benefitsConnect Inc.**  
**By Lana Khudhur**

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in English from Western University, Paul Crossdale had every intention of attending teacher's college. Before he could take the leap, however, Crossdale's friend recommended him to work at London Life, now Canada Life, an insurance group. He met up for an interview, and then another, and another, and just when he thought he could not possibly have another interview, a few more came along the way. London Life interviewed 500 people across Canada for a mere fifteen positions. The applicants were brought into London for ten weeks of training before being sent out into the field.

"They took a long time to decide on me because one: I was a first minority, and they had not hired a first minority in almost a hundred years. Two: I looked really young, and three: I had an earring. The biggest concern for them was that I had an earring," recalls Crossdale.

And so he took off the earring and launched himself into a career that would span three decades and bring along copious amounts of success. In 2000, Crossdale launched benefitsConnect Canada, an insurance group that integrates technology into

their agency by developing an operating system for the phone. "We want to be the leading-edge company with communication using technology. That is a very broad and aggressive way to look at our business. We want to be able to break insurance down, in a very simple way, using mobile disks," Crossdale explains.

Crossdale acknowledged that his English degree helped him tremendously in getting him where he is today by allowing him to develop his reading and communication skills – skills which are often not taught outside of the faculty. As such, he expressed, many non-English students return to take writing courses after graduating. He argues that because there are so many readings and assignments that have to be done within a certain period, students are forced to learn to schedule their time well.

"There was this course called The Novel... [It] was giving me problems. Every book was 500 to 800 pages long. So, you just had to keep reading, and reading... It really taught me time management," he shares.

When starting his undergrad, Crossdale was initially planning on following a career in law. However, after taking a senior law course and having a less than fantastic time, he realized he wanted to do something more. He directed his focus on teaching and was even accepted into teacher's college at York.

"You are so scheduled to think 'I have to do this, and this, and this.' At university, you are able to learn about yourself and what you want. Then you can go after it," he said.

Looking back, Crossdale does not regret skipping law school and still loves the idea of working with kids. Through his success in business, he has been able to contribute to charitable organizations, and hence, work with kids.

In terms of hiring applicants, Crossdale expressed that when he moved on to work for Canada Life, he liked to look for those who were unique.

"If I saw somebody within Arts and Humanities, I would say, oh, well that person is a little bit different... as opposed to always seeing the MBAs and the HBAs who all tend to be quite similar," he expresses.

He recognizes that a lot of Arts and Humanities students tend to believe they are not good enough to pursue opportunities

outside of their field when in truth, Crossdale believes that being an Arts and Humanities student is an asset.

"I love Arts and Humanities for the varied subject matter that you take as opposed to one narrow stream. I think the Arts and Humanities are very valuable from that point of view. It is not just a focused type of thinking. It is very wide and accepting," he states, adding that, "When you are in those very fixed disciplines you run up against something that is not in your wheelhouse, so to speak, there is nowhere to go. With the Humanities, it's varied. You learn about so much: English, History, Women's Studies. All kinds of different things that you could bring to the table."

Crossdale spoke with immense pride about his experience at Western and hopes to continue to be involved in the community. "Western gave me two things that I have carried throughout my years. One is the connection to the university itself and its alumni. I love the connection to Western... The second part is learning about myself, and what I like, and what I want to do as I go forward. Those are the two best things, I think," he reflects. Now at the peak of great success, Crossdale continues to grow benefitsConnect Canada while also sitting on the Advisory Council for the School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities. "I want to continue to be involved with Western as an alumnus and help with programs that I think are beneficial to students," he shares, using the very work ethic and passion he developed here to keep giving back to the Western community.



**At the end of the interview, Paul asked me what my dream is. I told him, and he immediately said, "You could do it." I have a strict rule against sharing my goals with anyone. However, I do not regret sharing my goals with Paul. After interviewing him, I am more optimistic as a woman, and as a person of colour entering a world that is not often famed for inclusivity. Paul's drive not only for business but also for giving back to the community is, simply put, inspiring.**

***Lana Khudhur is a second-year Honours Specialization student pursuing Creative Writing, English Language, and Literature. She has now gained more confidence in entering the field of her choosing.***



# Joel Faflak

**He/Him | BA '81, MA '91, PhD '98 | English Professor**  
**By Najla Fadhil**

Born and raised in a small town, Western University was Dr. Joel Faflak's first pick because of its proximity to home. For Joel, London was quite the big city compared to life in the country. He enrolled in Western's Arts and Humanities English program, something he knew he would be good at but did not yet recognize to be his passion until later in his undergraduate career.

In his third year of undergrad, Joel was enrolled in a full year course on Romantic literature (1789-1832) where he would encounter one of the most important people in his life and someone of profound influence. Dr. Ross had never written a lecture down, only handed the class a one-page syllabus and that was that. Ross had walked into the room, Joel recalls, and opened up the *Anthology of Romantic Literature* to William Blake's *Introduction to the Songs of Innocence* and began to recite: "Piping down the valleys wild / Piping songs of pleasant glee / On a cloud I saw a child / And he laughing said to me." And though it was an act of fantasy, Ross presented it as though it were an everyday fact. The world of fantasy, Joel explains, which seems on one hand removed from reality and everyday life, had this alternate world of imagination and a way to see into the

world and what was missing and what was not obvious to you in the world. He shares that the only way this knowledge matters to him is to bring personal experience into the classroom, as education is not just about reading from the book.

Becoming a professor at Western was a second career. Initially, Joel worked in business, describing it as a "complete leap between life and work" where he worked eighteen hours a day, seven days a week. He didn't enjoy it and found that he missed academia, for academia allowed him to use his mind. "What I missed the most was... thinking more intellectually and more deeply about things, something business did not allow me to do." For Joel, being an academic is a seamless part of life and living, and the two often converge. Everything that happens in life, Joel brings to the classroom, and everything that happens in the classroom, Joel brings back into his life.

After completing his undergraduate degree, Joel went right into a Masters. He stepped away from it to help a friend who had started a business before returning to complete it nine years later. His next step, he admits, was nothing. He discovered himself to be fed up with school and wanting to get out into the world where he could do something new. Despite this, Joel



gradually worked his way back into academia and completed his PhD in English Language and Literature, something he described to be a wonderful experience. He returned to Western in his early thirties now knowing why he was there, admitting that, "We don't always know why we go to university when we are young, especially when you're 18 years old... Very few of us know why we are there. Our parents tell us we should get an education, society tells us we should get an education." He knew returning to Western would be challenging and put his mind to the test in a way that he never had before, but it was also exhilarating. It was while completing his PhD that Joel realized Western was where he wanted to be. Here, he discovered his passion for teaching and being in the classroom. While being a TA for English 1022, Joel received no mentoring nor training, something that was terrifying at the time, but was ultimately an opportunity for him to be himself. Here, he could be fearless, finally able to share both his intellectual and life experiences with his students.

Joel explains that as part of his doctoral work, there was an increasing pressure to get his writing published. He recalls visiting a professor and seeing nine to ten books the professor had published lined up on the shelf. He stood there thinking, "Someday, I am going to have a shelf with all of my books on it." Although it sounded childish, it motivated him greatly. Publishing, writing, and researching is not a chore. He loved the feeling of fulfillment after getting something published, not because of ego, but because he was putting good work out into the world.

Sitting down to write, Joel says, is not simply about feeling inspired: "Knowing what you want to write about is important, like the mechanics of your field, and the journals you should

publish in." A great deal of figuring this out is doing the necessary work such as networking and talking to people who have published before, how they've done it and the obstacles they have faced. He also stresses that it is important to know your audience. Just figuring this all out takes at least fifty percent of the work. "But," he says, "The first thing you need to do is write what you love and write what you know about." When asked about why students should not be afraid to pursue a career in arts, Joel gushed, "Don't be scared to be in the Arts and Humanities... Whatever people are telling you about the Arts and Humanities, that it's not practical or useful in society, is not true... Do it because you love it," he says. "Do it because it's going to feed your mind and soul and do it because it's an education. It may not get you in the door for a job tomorrow, but it's going to serve you for the rest of your life."



**It is not an exaggeration to say that getting the chance to interview Dr. Joel Faflak was an honour! Joel's experiences in the Arts and Humanities and in his role as a professor are not about teaching students from the book, but about teaching them intellectually, spiritually, and academically. Getting to know what motivated him to become a professor was exciting, as well as gaining insight into his teaching philosophy: that life experiences can be relevant in the classroom and that classroom experience can influence our personal lives. His advice deeply intrigued and resonated with me. It was truly a pleasure to have spoken with an understanding, outstanding, and caring individual as Joel!**

***Najla Fadhil is a first-year student pursuing an Honours Specialization in English Language and Literature.***



# Anita Gaffney Misener

**She/Her | BA '90, MBA '02 | English  
Executive Director  
By Isabella Kennedy**

In May 2018, on what was supposed to be the opening night of *The Tempest* at the renowned Stratford Festival, Executive Director Anita Gaffney remembers the disorienting evacuation of the theatre due to a bomb threat called in about an hour before showtime. Having never experienced a situation like this before, Gaffney recalls the sea of show-goers dressed in black tie flooding out and away from the theatre. The following night, the organization anxiously went ahead with the opening show of *The Music Man*, which would become one of the highlights of Gaffney's 29-year career at the Festival.

"We had police everywhere and we'd had dogs through the building earlier in the day to look for bombs, so there was this tone of nervousness as we're sitting waiting for the show to start," said Gaffney during a Zoom interview. That nervousness soon melted away into ecstatic energy as the show's first big number "Seventy-Six Trombones" was received with a remarkable full house standing ovation. "I think there was this feeling of 'we're not going to let a bomb threat stop the theatre.'"

Certainly, few things could stop the Western University alumna, whose driven and passionate approach to her work earned her selection as one of Canada's Most Powerful Women by the Women's Executive Network in 2018. As the co-leader of the Stratford Festival, Gaffney oversees its business side, including its \$61-million budget.

"One of my superpowers, which I think I got from doing a BA, is that I can take a whole bunch of disparate and seemingly unconnected ideas and shape them into something," Gaffney

shared when asked how her degree from Western has served in her career. In particular, she emphasized the importance writing has had: "I feel like if you can't write it down and you can't communicate, it makes it really hard to get other people to come along with you."

Gaffney has recently demonstrated her own ability to inspire people and make them believe in the success of her projects with the new Tom Patterson Theatre. One of her proudest moments of her career was being the project lead on the \$100-million enterprise. "That was a big financial project to take on," said Gaffney about the theatre that has yet to have its opening show due to the pandemic. "It was a challenge to convince the city of Stratford that it was a good idea, it was a challenge to raise the money, it was a challenge to build it and stay on budget, and it was a challenge to make something that was beautiful – and the building is. It is worth coming to Stratford to see the building." Despite these impressive career milestones, Gaffney was not always sure about what her future held during the years she attended Western. "I was lucky in that my parents really valued education and they weren't pressuring me to decide on a career, so I felt, certainly in the first couple years of my English degree, that I could study really what made my heart sing and not worry about what job that was going to lead to." Taking the then newly introduced Women's Studies courses, Gaffney remembers spending her time studying in reading carols in the University College building before its renovations. "I always had a lot of roommates, so I didn't study a lot at my house,



and that was my kind of sanctuary," she said about UC. Her roommates and her still keep up with one another, bonded by their shared experience as the first women to live in Sydenham residence. "The urinals were still in the bathrooms; they were crudely covered up."

In 1990, her fourth and final year at Western, Gaffney was unsure about what to do next. "I was panicking like everybody else," she said. She took her LSAT, applied to law schools and different kinds of Master's programs, but eventually decided to move back home to Stratford and work as a legal secretary at a law firm for one year. However, after a few months, Gaffney received some advice from a counselor at Western Law. "She said: don't just wait around to get into law school, go and have some life experience that you can bring to the career – good advice." It was then that Gaffney decided to apply to communications departments across southwestern Ontario and eventually landed an entry level job with the Stratford Festival. It was a match built to last: "My heart sang when I went into work, I was so happy to be there," she recalled about her first years. "You could probably pay me in tickets and I would do the job," she says with a laugh.

Due to her meticulous work ethic and passion for her projects, Gaffney quickly moved up at the Festival. The work was challenging, and Gaffney learned much from her mentors, such as one journalist who was the Director of Communications. "He was so rigorous about storytelling and human interest – you know, being really clear in communicating. It was like a university degree working with this guy," she said. Eventually, after about ten years with the organization, Gaffney decided to return to Western to complete an MBA to expand her skills so she could continue moving up at the organization.



**Despite being in the midst of a global pandemic, interviewing Anita for *Spotlight* was an absolute pleasure as she managed to make our Zoom meeting feel welcoming and personal. She speaks with this eloquent confidence about her career and life that is truly inspiring to listen to. As a woman coming out of Arts and Humanities, I felt so empowered after talking with Anita who has been in my exact position, even with my same interests, and has made such a successful career for herself. I logged out of our interview feeling excited for my own future, both grounded by her advice and motivated by her story. My biggest takeaway is to not worry about my future but rather simply find a path that "makes my heart sing" and follow it diligently.**

***Isabella Kennedy is a fourth-year student athlete pursuing an Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English language and Literature. She writes poetry, loves batting practice, and aspires to become a journalist following graduation.***

Her advice for new BA graduates is simple. "You shouldn't be so worried, because I know you're probably very worried about what you are going to do next. Arts and Humanities students have really important skills to bring to a wide range of industries, and that's what is intimidating about it, because you can do anything," she said. Gaffney ended the interview with this final remark: "Your life is going to take lots of twists and turns so whatever decision you make for tomorrow is not going to be the decision forever, so keep that in mind."





# Nick Haffie-Emslie

**He/Him | BA '07 | Film Studies & Philosophy**  
**Co-Founder, VMG Cinematic**  
**By Isabella Elias**

Professional basketball player Fred VanVleet doing an ASMR video with Canadian Tire may seem like a strange string of words to find. Yet, just that can be found among many other unique projects produced by Nick Haffie-Emslie's Toronto-based online video production company, VMG Cinematic. Thirteen years running, VMG Cinematic has garnered over a 100-million views creating quality videos for brands to enhance their online presence in the daunting age of social media.

Before starting the company with his co-partners, Nick's time at Western as a Film Studies major and student filmmaker was one filled with great adventures. Nick built important relationships with people who shared his passion for film like VMG's co-founder, Mark Campbell, and many others who he would later go on to collaborate with. The Western alumnus recalls, "When making our student work, all that mattered was getting it in front of people." When Microsoft held a student-wide competition called Imagine Cup with film and photography categories, Nick and his friends decided to give the competition a shot. They made it to the finals and earned an all-expense paid

trip to Brazil. The next year, they made it to the finals and flew to Japan. The following year, Nick's team won the finals in India, barring them from submitting again to the film category, but not stopping them from competing in the photography category the year after that as they boarded a plane to Korea. Nick had the opportunity to meet with creators from all over the world and show his work to other people. He reflects on how Western's theoretical-based Film Studies education helped him understand the way images can make meaning, and how much thought and nuance go into creating expression in film and how that can really influence a person's work.

For Nick, figuring out what to do after graduation was all about finding a niche in which he held more knowledge than other people. Back in 2007, social media was a tool that young people knew how to navigate fluently and didn't require decades of experience. At a time when Facebook was only accessible to students, Nick and fellow filmmakers posted their short films on the platform. As their videos attracted engagement, they realized that online marketing was a way to bring a lot of value to brands while being taken seriously as recent graduates in the industry.

Nick shares how his beginning included many false starts: seeing if something works and trying again if it doesn't. One of their earlier projects was a web series for 2, a magazine that featured couples getting style makeovers and trips to destinations around the world. The web series gained a lot of traction, prompting other brands to become interested in sponsoring them. This was one of their first calling cards as Nick followed the path he found success in.

Despite this success, Nick reminisces on how school can be such an anxious time period, especially when the impending future is so vast. Although he followed a linear path after school and stayed within the practices of his degree, many of his friends in film found themselves in careers they had never expected. "There's just too much out there and you have to stay open and go do something that seems cool," he explains. "You're going to meet people and it's too hard to plan. You just need to stay open to new experiences and build your own network and you'll

learn about jobs that you didn't even know existed." He advises students to get acquainted with others in their field through networking, Facebook groups, and meetups, as these can lead you to new opportunities.

Although Nick's background is in animation and motion design, "these days I do a lot less animation and a lot more emailing," he shares. His responsibilities include HR and technology, as well as the initial stages of working with a client to understand their particular brand. Many clients know how to describe in words who they are and what they stand for, but they may have difficulty conveying it through video. VMG Cinematic focuses on expressing the emotional qualities of their message through movement and motion. They throw ideas and concepts into a pitch deck which they wrap together to create videos that clients feel are innovative yet solid, trustworthy, and native.

When the pandemic hit, VMG Cinematic adapted by putting

together a remote recording box, which was essentially a whole studio packed into a suitcase. It includes camera, lighting, audio, and teleprompter that clients can then unbox, plug into their laptops, and receive direction over Zoom. Through the adversity of the current climate, they created a new tool that will continue to help remote clients even after the pandemic.

As students make the daunting leap from school to career, Nick's advice is this: now more than ever, all the information you need to learn something new can be accessed for free online. You have to find a learning style that works for you, in a subject that you have genuine interest in, and "you need to replace that school structure with structure that comes from your own motivation, passion, and interest." Ultimately, it's about harnessing your passion and trusting it to guide you through the future in front of you.



From submitting to film competitions every year, to sharing short films online, to creating a company and making it even stronger during the pandemic, what I learned most from Nick is the value of persistence. As someone with their own creative dreams, it has always been difficult for me to maintain projects because the fear of failing always took up a corner of my mind. I'm grateful I had the pleasure of speaking to Nick because his journey opened up my eyes to the knowledge that failure isn't real – it's an opportunity to learn something new and to try again. The future being so open-ended is intimidating, yet on the flip side, the open-endedness is the most exciting part because it means you can do anything! As Nick said, there is too much out there to predict where you will be, and I believe that is something we should embrace.

*Isabella is a fourth-year student pursuing an Honours Specialization in English Language and Literature. She enjoys writing for her blog, creating YouTube videos, and curling up to watch a good Studio Ghibli movie.*



# Antony Hare

**He/Him | BA (Hons) '98 | Philosophy & Economics  
Illustrator & Art Director  
By Joyce Leung**

From outlining supply-and-demand graphs on paper to sketching character models on a digital canvas, one idea has remained consistent: “Design can be a universal human problem, and creativity is important for everyone as an unconventional problem-solving process. If you realize that there is a constant problem to something, there is also possibly a creative solution for it.” This idea was something that Antony had come to realize over time throughout his undergraduate years and post-graduate careers.

For Antony, design was something that he was interested in even before pursuing a postsecondary education. He began freelancing in graphic design during high school but was not particularly inclined to study fine arts and was unsure about the professional design industry. Instead, Antony went on to study Philosophy and Economics at Western, a non-traditional combination of academic disciplines that offered him a myriad of enriching experiences for personal development. At the intersection of these two majors, he often spent time exploring different theories of the surrounding world. Sometimes he would be navigating between the definite or indefinite possibilities in the directions of economic growth, other times the underlying hierarchies of materials that humans interact with on a daily basis. Having the opportunity to tackle a diverse set of theories and problem set models was not the only aspect that Antony enjoyed. The experience also furthered his critical-thinking skills by constantly inspiring him to challenge the existing ways of how he interpreted and understood his surrounding world. Aside from developing an analytical approach to the different sets of information that lay before him, studying Philosophy and Economics allowed Antony to adopt a special blend of individual curiosity and resilience. He learned to not simply settle with just one single solution, but to tackle a problem from multiple angles and consider the various solutions for it.

In fact, Antony found that the newfound skill sets he gained from his Humanities education provided a clearer direction for where his interests lie within the arts. After graduating from Western, Antony studied at OCAD university for one term, learning about topics ranging from sculpture-making to

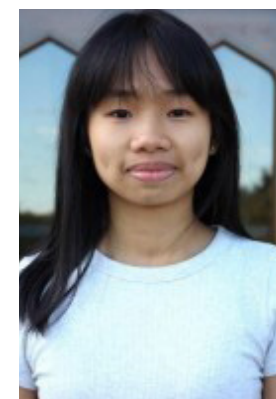
creating 2D illustrations. Despite the fact that it was his first time creating an official portfolio, the additional education experiences provided an open space for Antony to discover the one element that he was interested in: web design. “I thought I would become a professor, and I always had an artistic practice on the side,” Antony shared, “but then when the web came, I started designing websites, and I thought, ‘this is the best!’ I [realized] I really liked making graphics and designing software on the computer. It was a hobby that turned into a real career that I can see in the world.” During his time at OCAD, Antony applied his skills to an internship position one summer where he worked as a web designer for the London-based computer repair service known as “Nerds on Site”. In addition to designing the logo for the company, Antony also put his academic knowledge into practice by designing the early versions of its websites. His engagement with art and design did not stop there. He went on to continue his studies at the University of Nottingham, and during this time, continued to practice drawing, creating illustrations, and learning about animation. With these post-graduate experiences in hand, Antony jumped right into his first job as a web designer at Nurun Inc., an IT service management agency.

Having participated in design projects in a professional environment, Antony continued to branch out into various design-related careers. Working as a communications designer and art director in multiple agencies, Antony regularly transitioned between designing and refining website content as well as managing close communication with clients like Fox, Mars, and Procter and Gamble to ensure that the designs corresponded with their expectations. Throughout these ongoing professional pathways, Antony recalled that one of the closest relationships he holds towards the industry itself was through his freelance illustrator position at Vanity Fair. Although some freelancing positions may only last for a short period of time, Antony found a profound value in his time at Vanity Fair — not just in the portraits and illustrations he makes for its publicity initiatives, but also in the bonds that he developed with the magazine’s art directors. He recalls that after

creating the designs, he would receive a hand-signed thank you note from the editor every issue. It was moments like this that made him feel his work had truly had a meaningful impact on other people.

Beyond drafting and publishing, Antony realized that design itself is not just limited to one individual but is often a shared journey. As a Western alumnus and experienced creator, Antony mentored several graphic design students in the Larry Myny Mentorship program at Fanshawe College. More than just a mentor providing feedback for the mentee, Antony explained that the relationship runs both ways. The mentees share their

unique perspectives of design which, in turn, expanded his own understanding of the field in his eprofessional journey. “I don’t know if I always had the best advice,” he shared, “but having someone to listen to... it’s deeply fulfilling.” Antony’s advice for current Arts and Humanities students is to “try to be as present as possible, to meet as many people as possible and to establish solid relationships based on a real, mutual interest in a subject.” He continued his personal words of encouragement, highlighting that, “Whatever you’re doing, if you love it, if it [feels] natural and you’re learning, just dive into it.



**It’s always an intriguing and valuable experience to hear about the individual transitions that others have made since their undergraduate days! Many may think that their degree should directly correspond with their subsequent career, but Antony’s personal story has reaffirmed an important idea: your degree is not only what you think you’re learning, but often, it is the transferable knowledge and skill sets that you pick up on the side. Like Antony, I also found that the subjects I’m currently studying have constantly challenged me to examine the world in different ways and encourage me to explore the opportunities that lie beyond my studies. These insights have helped solidify my personal and professional plans for the future. A sincere thank you to Antony and the *Spotlight* team for this unique opportunity!**

***Joyce is a second-year student pursuing a double major in SASAH and Linguistics. She is constantly trying to understand the vocabulary uses and grammar systems of various languages, as well as learning different soup recipes on the side.***



# Ian M. Hull

**He/Him | BA (Hons) '85 | History  
Lawyer & Co-Founder  
By Alexander McLeod**

This one is for all the people worried about the endless choices that undergraduate students have to make about their future. Whether you've just come to Western or are about to graduate, you should read this. Ian Hull, Estates and Trust lawyer and co-founder of Hull & Hull LLP, had the same things on his mind as many students do during their time at Western. The only thing that wasn't on his mind was his choice in school, having reasoned that he "didn't want to go to Queen's" and therefore, chose Western. In order to not close any doors, Hull took a general arts approach and enrolled in a variety of courses in his first year. He took English, History, and French among other things, reflecting that it was your "basic coming out of high school not knowing what to do" course selection.

In the end, Hull chose to major in History in spite of his fondness for political science. Important to note is that at this time, History was a part of the Arts and Humanities Faculty at Western, not Social Sciences like it is today. He found himself enjoying History because of both the content and the professors who were "ridiculously great and fantastically famous." Hull deduced that he was a good essay writer, a skill that he would go on to use every day as a lawyer. American and Canadian history were two of the aspects that really drew him into the program, the American civil war being a particular passion of his.

For Hull, a History degree meant one thing: a continued education. He considered doing either a Master's degree, going to teacher's college, or pursuing law school – something that many undergraduates might find themselves debating. For Hull, the decision was made just a tad bit easier because his father was a lawyer and he wanted to give it a shot. Not getting into law school, he said, "would send its own message." Apt advice for undergraduates today: if you're uncertain about what to do, there's no harm in applying to more than one post-graduate program.

However, Hull's choice of going to law school came with its own set of new decisions. Despite becoming a recognizable lawyer in his field and writing six books, Hull didn't know what type of law he was interested in until after his articling, where he then took a crack at corporate law. After two years, he found that

he didn't love the corporate world as much as he'd anticipated. This led him to work with his father – the other Hull in Hull & Hull – and eventually co-founding the law firm he works for today. To Hull, this choice has led to a successful career and a discovery of passions. As a lawyer, he says that "helping people is what gets me out of bed in the morning." In addition to helping people, being in the courtroom is one of his favourite parts of the job. He's even had a chance to appear at the Supreme Court of Canada, an experience that, alongside working with his father for 18 years, highlights his career.

When asked about his favourite memory from Western, Hull had two things on his mind: his academic experience and the extracurriculars. While he may not have immediately gone the political science route, Hull looks back fondly on the USC's club's system and his own extracurricular involvement. He was involved on an executive level for the Conservative Club as well as his fraternity. Western taught Hull how to be an independent thinker and learn organizational habits that are meant not just for work, but for creating that integral balance between career and life. "University," he shared, "is when you become good at managing life." Outside of his organizational skill development at Western, Hull pursued a great deal of essay writing and public speaking opportunities. Through the Conservative Club, he represented Western in 1984 at the provincial leadership campaign and met many interesting people who went on to become politicians.

Thanks to his success and experience in Estates and Trust litigation, Hull has had the opportunity to come back to Western and teach a course. He taught alongside fellow alumna, former co-worker, and sometimes courtroom opposite Kim Whaley. Hull may not have gone to Western for his law degree, but he emphasized how he truly enjoyed returning to campus to teach, especially because, as an undergrad, he used to sneak into the law school's quiet areas to study. When he's not working, Hull takes pride in his involvement as Chair of the Board of Directors for the Law Society Foundation, who run Lawyers Feed the Hungry, a province-wide program that works to provide meals for those in need.

In response to a final question, Hull advised that students shouldn't be driven by money when considering future career paths. "Whatever you end up doing, do something you enjoy and have some passion for, because you're going to be around it a lot... If you're passionate about it, you'll do well. If you do

well, you'll thrive, and you'll be happy." Sometimes, decision making can have a little bit to do with luck, but if you love what you do, know that it will all work out.



**Interviewing Mr. Hull was an enlightening experience, especially for a History student like myself. Many of his choices are ones that I found or find myself contemplating. Speaking with him relieved some of the pressure that we feel while making these life-impacting decisions. Though he made decisions moving towards a specific career path, it seems like regardless, life lets you explore what you enjoy. Change is always a little daunting, and I think that one of the things this interview showed me is that not making all the choices about your future at once can help alleviate that. Make a decision – you can always change it if you don't like it. A degree in the Arts and Humanities – or Social Science – doesn't mean McDonald's is in your future as some might have you believe. Rather, it can be a stepping stone to big things!**

***Alexander McLeod is a fourth-year student finishing a degree in American Studies, with minors in French and Spanish. In his spare time he enjoys all manner of winter sports, including running in a T-shirt.***



# Eternity Martis

**She/Her | BA '14 | English & Women's Studies  
Journalist-in-Residence at UBC and Adjunct Professor in UBC's Gender, Race,  
Sexuality and Social Justice Department  
By Sierra Joseph**

For Eternity Martis, Western University wasn't her initial number one for postsecondary schools. In fact, it took discarding the viewbook and fishing it out of the trash at the last minute to convince her that it was time to leave Toronto. Western – and, consequently, London – offered what was to be the beginning of the next chapter of her life. Upon entering as a Social Science student, Eternity began a degree in Social Work before being pulled to the Arts and Humanities. She was initially drawn to Social Work because she faced the same stigma that students today continue to identify with – that she would never make money as a writer, that no one ever “made it” by pursuing a career in the arts. But despite the nay-sayers, and perhaps because of a slight aversion to the math component of Social Science, Eternity would take a faithful step forward into the Arts and Humanities to complete a double major in English Language and Literature and Women's Studies with a certificate in Writing, and never look back.

While she greatly enjoyed Women's Studies, Eternity admitted that it could also be deeply upsetting. Considering herself to be a teen feminist at the time, Eternity thought she knew everything concerning women's oppression – until she took a seat in her Women's Studies lecture, that is. “It was like you get hit with this wave of you think you know, but you know

nothing,” she shared. And so, she continued to learn, finding her voice by hearing it reflected in the feminist theory and literature she took up in her classes. It was in passages by bell hooks that she experienced her aha! moment and everything changed: “I learned more about what was happening in the world through Women's Studies than I did through any other courses I took.” Eternity found her community at Western in spaces of writing and performance. She wrote, performed, and directed for Purple Sex and in *The Vagina Monologues*. And when she found a lack of space for Black women and other women of colour, Eternity created one by putting on *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. The production brought together more women of colour than Eternity had ever seen before on campus. In finding and making these spaces, she found that “it's important to have community on campus when you're so alienated and isolated constantly. As a woman, as a person of colour, as a woman of colour, as a Black woman, as a queer person, as a trans person, you need to have something on Western's campus.”

What Eternity began in academic work and community spaces at Western would go on to lead her career forward. Her 2020 memoir, *They Said This Would Be Fun: Race, Campus Life, and Growing Up*, is a compilation of her experiences at Western and everything she learned from her course work. In her fourth-year memoir writing class, Eternity wrote what would end up becoming a chapter in her book, as well as a draft book proposal that Professor Arntfield said was important, valuable, and could be a real commodity someday. That external validation motivated Eternity to turn the vision of her book into a reality. However, in spite of the success that retelling her years in undergrad has brought her, Eternity's time at Western was far from perfect. She dealt with racism, sexism, and all of the experiences that come at that intersection of being a Black woman. Eternity has since returned to campus for speaking engagements and to facilitate training with the Orientation Program, and though she recognizes the hard times that took place, she still sees Western as home. While the sadness may linger, Eternity pushes through the memories of a difficult



university experience in order to see how students have changed. Now, they ask tough questions and engage in social issues in a way that Eternity believes can turn Western into a more comfortable space moving forward.

After her undergraduate degree, Eternity pursued a Master of Journalism at Ryerson University. It was here that she learned how important the critical thinking and research skills she developed at Western are. She was able to see how undervalued and under practiced these skills are, especially in a field that is so determined to find objective truths. Through analysis practices in English and Women's Studies, Eternity learned to see something and theorize about it deeply. And while telling stories is what she always wanted to do, it wasn't in the traditional news journalism sense. She valued personal journalism, which at the time, wasn't widely accepted. Just as she followed her passions from Social Work to Women's Studies, she followed her heart to writing personal essays and memoirs that others could connect to. Determined to follow her interest in personal essays and writing related to identity, Eternity found herself moving towards publishing where she would be able to help amplify others' voices, too. She was comfortable behind the cameras if it meant sharing the stories and voices that she knew needed to be heard.

Alongside being a published author, Eternity also worked as an instructor at the Ryerson School of Journalism. She designed her own course, “Reporting on Race: Black Communities in the Media” where she taught students the skills needed to tell the stories they care about, including those to do with race. Now in a similar role at UBC, Eternity operates as the Journalist-in-Residence and Adjunct Professor in the university's Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice department. Now more than

ever she is able to create the spaces and academic courses that she strived to find as a student. For all those moments in which she did not see herself reflected in course content, Eternity has made sure to be intentional in the diversity, intersectionality, and inclusion in her own classroom.

One thing Eternity has always deemed important is following what you are drawn to. There will always be chatter about what others are doing and what they want you to do, but she stresses that you must always “think about what you want and what your intuition, your gut, tells you.” Initially, Eternity was told not to pursue a degree in the Arts and Humanities. Afterwards, she was told not to go into personal journalism and discussion about race and gender. Each time, however, Eternity remained strong and stuck to it because she knew that is what she wanted to do. “So even when nobody else has caught up with your idea or your plans for yourself,” she expressed, “you need to believe in those plans – because it does pay off!”



Participating in *Spotlight* was an incredible opportunity because Eternity had great insight not just as an Arts alumna, but specifically as a Gender Studies graduate. It was wonderful to hear how the education and experience I have can adapt to the professional world. Whether it be in critical thinking or research skills, I know what I am learning is valuable beyond my time at Western. Speaking with Eternity reminded me of the power of stories and the importance of sharing our narratives. Hearing this from a woman of colour was especially meaningful as a woman of colour myself. Just as feminist theory put into words Eternity's experience, her responses put my experience into words. Through talking with Eternity I have learned to embrace my voice, education, and lived experience to lead me forward, and for that I am forever grateful.

***Sierra Joseph is a fourth-year student in SASAH and Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. She is now seeking opportunities to present themselves and is very aware of the financial implications.***



# Kim Mason

**She/Her | BA '89 | English & Anthropology**  
**Senior Vice President and Head, Private Banking Canada, RBC**  
**By Mary Hamilton**

“You’ve heard of imposter syndrome before, I’m sure,” Kim Mason begins.

When we spoke in mid-December, the feelings of imposter syndrome Mason mentioned were undoubtedly running high amongst Western students who, secluded to their homes and dorms, lie in wait for marks and final exams from professors they may never have spoken to. Excitement for the winter break and upcoming semester, for some, their last ever in university, is weighed down by uncertainty of where an Arts and Humanities degree may fit into an indeterminate future.

It’s hard to imagine that someone of Mason’s position and skill has ever experienced the imposter syndrome she speaks of. Her path is one atypical of an Arts and Humanities student, but yet, an impressive illustration of the possibilities afforded by such a dynamic degree.

Originally pursuing English and Anthropology with the intention of becoming a journalist, Mason was hired as a student worker by the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) in the



summer between her first and second year. Here, she worked until her fourth year, where she was then offered a spot in their management training program. After being trained extensively in each sector of branch management, Mason began a lengthy career in the world of business and finance, spanning dozens of positions within RBC before landing her current role as Vice President and Head of Private Banking – one that she describes as “the beautiful amalgamation” of the many positions she has occupied. In her current role, Mason has earned a series of awards, honouring her work as a woman in business and finance, including, but not limited to, a place on the Top 50 Atlantic CEO List in 2012, 2013, and 2014. She is even an active Western alumna, serving as a member of the Advisory Council of the School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities (SASAH).

However, Mason’s accomplishments extend beyond her rotation of job titles, her professional accolades, and even the prestige of her current position. Speaking with her, it is clear that many of her most impressive accomplishments exist beyond her resumé and are rooted in a core values that she credits to her Arts education.

Following her graduation, RBC made swift moves to advance young Mason’s career with the company, and at only 23, she became the youngest female Branch Manager in the company’s history — a feat she attributes not only to the support of the company, but to the values she acquired during her time at Western.

Empathy and confidence are two recurring philosophies of Mason’s, as well as the idea of intellectual curiosity, but it is communication, specifically, the ability to effectively communicate a message, and connecting with people that she refers to as “the heart of the Arts and Humanities.”

“[At Western] I learned that how you deliver a message really matters,” says Mason. “It matters in terms of how people receive your message, and it matters in terms of the success of its outcome.”

Even with the many opportunities and advancements RBC afforded (Mason notes that in her three decades with the

company, she has likely worked upwards of twenty separate careers), she elected to return to school in 2004, this time at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Business for the year-long executive MBA program.

“It wasn’t that I felt deficient,” she explains of her choice to return to school. In addition to wanting to “round [herself] out” by learning to use the formulas and models taught in business school, Mason also missed the academic environment she had first experienced at Western, adding that her time as an undergrad had “fuelled a thirst for education.”

As for why Mason chose the Rotman School of Business over Western’s Ivey speaks again to the many accomplishments that won’t be listed on her LinkedIn. Not only did she complete her MBA while managing RBC’s North American flagship branch in Toronto’s financial district, but she was also balancing a second full-time position: motherhood.

“I ended up choosing Rotman for my family,” Mason explains. “I had three young kids at the time — ages seven, five, and three — and it just worked better for me.”

Though English and Anthropology are seldom thought of as the prefacing disciplines for an MBA, Mason assures that the similarities between the two degrees are unmistakable.

“It comes down to being able to relate to people, connect with them, and communicate,” she says, going on to note that these principles have been guides in both her professional career and her graduate studies. “A lot of this,” she affirms, “you get just from your undergrad.”

Looking toward an uncertain future in many respects, Mason sees hope for current Arts and Humanities students and recent graduates, offering parting advice for those anxious for both their academic and professional futures.

“The people that show up are the ones that come prepared,” she says. “They have comfort and confidence in their experience and they bring that into the conversation and are able to talk about it openly. I think it’s when we try too hard to show up in a way that we think our audience is listening for that we miss the mark, so be true to yourself and celebrate the fact that you were smart enough to get a degree in the Arts and Humanities.”



**Kim Mason speaks of the Arts and Humanities in a way that makes it nearly impossible to feel anything but pride as an Arts student. Her understanding and appreciation of the discipline make her, I believe, uniquely qualified to speak to its value and versatility. I’ve had my fair share of doubts – in everything from my degree to my job prospects down to my choice of classes – and found her advice about being confident in the power of an Arts degree to be most comforting. I feel immeasurably lucky to have been paired with Kim for this interview. Hopefully, this interview can provide other Arts students the same reassurance it has given me.**

***Mary is a second-year student pursuing an Honours Degree in English and Creative Writing. She can usually be found with her headphones on and her hood up.***



# Meghan O'Hara

**She/Her | MA '12, PhD '17 | English**

**Education and Outreach Coordinator at the Grand Theatre**

**By Maatini Kaneshalingam**

Meghan O'Hara always knew that she wanted to obtain a PhD in English. When she was in high school, she had a conversation with her parents about career options and her dad brought up the idea of being a professor. After she learned the details of the job and its requirements, she was instantly hooked: "I liked the idea of having the PhD," she explains, "that was incredibly appealing to me." With that goal in mind, Meghan would embark on a new academic journey. She completed her BA at McMaster University, pursuing a Double Major in English and Comparative Literature before diving right into her graduate studies.

Meghan was drawn to Western because of the strong scaffolding and support system within the Arts and Humanities program, as well as several of its renowned professors – many of whom she would go on to work with. Although she always knew that English was her way, a year into her PhD she found herself with a new area of interest: Theatre. Fortunately, her background in English suited the change very well. She was able to study Theatre as an audience member would, and it allowed her to take on a theoretical point of view rather than doing a practical acting study. Her topic of research for her Dissertation focused on answering the question of 'liveness' and what makes theatre 'live'. In order to find her answer, Meghan had the amazing opportunity to travel to different cities, both in and outside of the country, to watch various performances. She noted one play in particular, *Sleep No More*, organized by immersive theatre company Punchdrunk, which was a version of *Macbeth*, describing it as "[Happening] across an entire building [that] you [can] walk through. It was so cool!"

After wrapping up her academic journey of 10 years, Meghan was faced with a problem that many students will go on to experience: doubt. Throughout most of her academic career she focused on becoming a professor. Going into graduate studies, she knew that it would be challenging to make her way into a professorial job, and as she was finishing her PhD, she knew the tides would not necessarily be turning in her favour. "I had a real think about what I wanted my life to look like outside of my career," she explains. "I thought about potentially moving

cities multiple times in the next couple years... at the time I was like, 'I'd love to be a professor, but I don't know if [it still] fits.'" Despite not getting her top career choice, her passion for Theatre gave her another path. "I had always thought to myself that if the prof thing doesn't work out, an amazing second option would be to do something with education in Theatre – but I had no sense that it was actually a job!" As she applied for multiple jobs that summer, an opening for an Educator and Outreach Coordinator popped up at the Grand Theatre in London. With her interest piqued, Meghan waited a full month after applying before hearing back from them. Not only did she love the sounds of the position already, but she also felt a great connection with the interviewers. A couple of days later, Meghan received the exciting news.

In her current role as an Educator and Outreach Coordinator, Meghan is in charge of planning and executing the educational programming at the Grand Theatre. One of the programs she is in charge of is the High School Project, a program where the Grand puts on a professional level production at no cost and invites 75 high school students to participate. Both performance students and backstage students get trained by Meghan and her team to do various tasks in order to put on a successful show. This year in particular, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Grand Theatre had moved their High School Project online. Though they could not hold an in-person show, Meghan and her team made the program accessible to students by formatting it similar to that of a course. They taught students about the entire theatre production process, and invited a new, diverse group of individuals into the program. Along with organizing programs for youth, Meghan also writes editorial articles that appear in the house programs for many shows in addition to managing pre- and post-show talks.

Though Meghan is focused on her career at the Grand, her initial interest in teaching is not out of the question. "[I] would love to come back and teach a one-off course related to my interests," she says. "Western has this non-profit management program, and since I've spent three years working at a non-profit, I thought it'd be really cool to combine the academic part

of my life with the industry part and teach people about that." Meghan loves teaching and truly values her role as an educator. "I've come to really love the theatre industry... I started my grad work as an outsider and now that I've seen the inside, I enjoy what that makes possible for me to do."

Meghan has come a long way from her former student-self, but as the progressive and goal-oriented person that she is, she continues to strive to reach new heights. She hopes the next steps in her career are to move into an advanced version of her current job and taking on a higher leadership position. Whether it be at the Grand Theatre or a different company, Meghan's goal is to create new programs and further the connection between arts institutions and community. As a word of advice, Meghan urges students to carve out space for personal goals and needs. "It's doing a disservice to yourself," she shares. "That's such a problematic viewpoint because we all need leisure time." To students who are ready to enter the work field, Meghan notes that, "There are a huge number of skills that you learned which are valuable and applicable in the workplace." Students face many uncertainties throughout their entire academic journey, but it won't stop there. Going forward, there will be many changes, and like Meghan has experienced, being open to opportunities and flexible to change goes a long way. "You don't have to lock yourself into anything," she says. "Nothing has to be decided at any point, and you can always change your mind whenever you decide you want to."



**It was an absolute pleasure to get to know Meghan and learn about her academic life and career. Many students can understand the feeling of not knowing which direction to go at end of their undergrad. After speaking with Meghan, she made me realize that there are multiple opportunities out there (some that appear unexpectedly) and that it is never too late to change your decision. Meghan's determination is awe-inspiring and reminded me that when you stick with your goals and believe in yourself, you can climb any mountain ahead of you.**

***Maatini is a fourth-year English Literature and Creative Writing student and likes to paint in her spare time. She has been creating an itinerary of all the cities and countries she will be travelling to after the pandemic.***









