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The background is a repeating pattern of large diamonds. The colors are yellow, red, and blue. The yellow diamonds are the most numerous and form the base pattern. Red and blue diamonds are interspersed, creating a vibrant, geometric design.

LIGHT

2020

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	Letter from the Dean
6	Letters from the Spotlight Team
7	Sandra Bialystok by Samantha Henderson-Whaley
9	Mark Campbell by Rushil Malik
11	Elaine Cougler by Jill O'Craven
13	Fiona Cuddy by Francesca DeNoble
15	Sarah Emms-Pilon by Mary Hamilton
17	Jason Last by Sierra Joseph
19	Kelly Mckenzie by Eva Alie
21	Caitlin McCullough by Celine Tsang
23	Elan Paulson by Bianca James
25	Daniel Perry by Kaitlyn Lonnee
27	Juan Carlos Rocha Osornio by Francesca DeNoble
29	Kristyn Rolanty by Rose Ghaedi
31	Mackenzie Sinclair by Peter Dickson
33	Meagan Timney by Bailee Mielke
35	Kimberly Whaley by Erin Anderson
37	Alexandra Kimball by Francesca DeNoble

LETTER FROM THE DEAN

Arts and Humanities alumni are extraordinary – undisputed fact! As Dean of the Faculty since 2011, I have had the opportunity to meet hundreds of our alumni, and hear their remarkable stories – stories of creativity, resilience, and success. It really is true that you can do anything with an Arts degree: artist, banker, communications specialist, designer, environmentalist, fund manager and on through politician, teacher, writer.... We are connected by our deep commitment to the crucial elements of our common humanity that can only be found in art, language, literature, philosophy and the wide world of ideas and culture that animates the Arts and Humanities. In our complex, unstable times these elements provide the indispensable foundation for meaningful reflection. They let us make sense of our world.

Please enjoy meeting some of our amazing alumni in *Spotlight*.

Michael Milde

Dean of Arts and Humanities



LETTERS FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TEAM



Francesca DeNoble
Editor

I've said it before and I'll say it again: working with the Arts and Humanities alumni every year is an immense privilege, and it is not entirely without self-centred motives that I continue to beg for this role. After all, I get to meet, interview, and collaborate with some of the most talented individuals who are living testimonies that your degree is what you make it and your future is limited only by the size of your imagination. Want to use your love of languages to be the President of a national company? There's an alumnx for that. Or maybe you're thinking about using your passion for art to build your own collection and help curate exhibitions that will travel around the world? There's an alumnx for that, too. Needless to say, if you can dream it, Western's Arts alumni are doing it. With the help of a wonderful team of undergraduate students, we have compiled this collection of interviews to highlight the paths to success that our alumni have journeyed to prove that yes, you can do anything with an Arts degree. So read on and get inspired! Know that you're participating in the amazing phenomenon known as an education in the Arts and Humanities and that one day, you too will have a magnificent story to share.



Sophia Belyk
Layout Editor

Working as the layout editor for Spotlight again this year has been just as exciting as the last! We've had incredible growth in the past year, from 8 interviews to a whopping 16, the difference you can probably feel by the weight of the copy in your hands (if you're reading it digitally, you'll just have to trust me). It's exciting to see the interest that Spotlight is generating, and I can only hope it continues into the next years. This year's publication has a softer colour scheme than last year, and its design is more angular, but the one thing that will never change is the exceptional quality of our alumni and their stories. Though their careers have differed greatly – we have a lawyer, several published authors, and a UX Research Manager for Google on the roster, among many others – what they all share is a passion for the Arts and Humanities that have carried them forward. Spotlight is both an opportunity to appreciate our wonderful alumni, and to showcase our eager and talented undergraduate students. We hope you use it to get inspired. You're on the road towards your own great story, and we hope to see you on these pages some day!

Sandra Bialystok

BA (Hons) '99
Comparative Literature
BY SAMANTHA
HENDERSON-WHALEY

Sandra's decision to come to Western University was, as she put it, a bit unconventional. She applied to university early, opting out of grade 13, and while she originally had her heart set on McGill University, a visit to Western's campus instantly changed her mind. She recalled meeting with an academic advisor on campus and learning about the comparative literature program, gushing that, "It just seemed amazing, it seemed like exactly what I needed to be doing." Just like that, Sandra's interest was piqued – and thus began her lengthy educational journey and fascinating career.

At Western, Sandra only became more assured than ever that she had made the right decision in choosing comparative literature. She credits one course in particular – a Dante course taught by James Miller – as being one of her favourites as well as one that continues to inform her to this day. "That was such a formative course just in terms of the rigor, the passion for the literature... Just the people who were in it, we felt like we were doing something together that nobody else could understand." Sandra later went on to have James Miller as her supervisor for her undergraduate thesis, in which she included Dante.

For Sandra, the comparative literature program at Western was not just an area of study, but a passion. A decisive and self-assured student, Sandra adored her education, maintaining the same career goal for the entirety of her time at Western and beyond. In fact, it wasn't until she had finished her PhD at the University of Toronto that she came to the decision that the path of higher education was no longer for her. "When I started my undergraduate [degree], I knew what my career was going to be. I was so sure, and yet I was so wrong!" While Sandra had always dreamed of being a professor, years of completing her own education left her ready for change.

It was after her PhD when Sandra moved to Geneva, Switzerland, with her husband and son and decided to use her skillset to do something completely different. Her conviction to make change in the world led her to do an internship at the International Labour Organization (ILO) doing comparative research on comparative religions. At the ILO, Sandra was

grateful to have been interviewed by someone who understood her, saying, "It wasn't an easy sell all the time to say 'I have a background in humanities and here are all the things that I know how to do.' Not everybody gets it. Sometimes you have to be patient, you have to learn how to sell your skills in a different way than the academic way – which isn't easy after spending so long on an academic track."

Sandra's career in this field has grown from working with the ILO to working in communications at the Geneva Centre to just recently transitioning to ALIPH, the international alliance for the protection of heritage in conflict areas. The Geneva Centre aims to help countries remove landmines and other explosives leftover from times of conflict so that people can use these lands safely. Sandra worked at the Geneva Centre doing what she called "the digital stuff" – she did the website, social media, and a very successful virtual reality project that detailed what it was like for people to return home not knowing whether or not their home was contaminated by explosives. When asked about her pleasantly surprising career path, Sandra said, "Who would have thought, you know, when you're sitting at Western studying Dante, that you're also going to one day understand how landmines work? It's so cool!"

For Sandra, working in communications at ALIPH entails press releases, maintaining the website, and detailing the importance of ALIPH as an organization and the work they strive to do. Sandra eloquently encapsulated the work she does as storytelling, an extension of her background in the humanities that is being applied in a very unique way. She is thrilled about the room available at ALIPH to try new things in order to see what works and what doesn't, as well as the ability to learn from these missteps and create a successful organization. "It's awesome because I get to work on cultural things again, which I haven't done since my PhD, so how cool is it that it's come full circle?"

Another important aspect to Sandra's story is her work-life balance. When her sons Gabriel and Raphael were young, it was difficult to find full-time work. While she was searching for

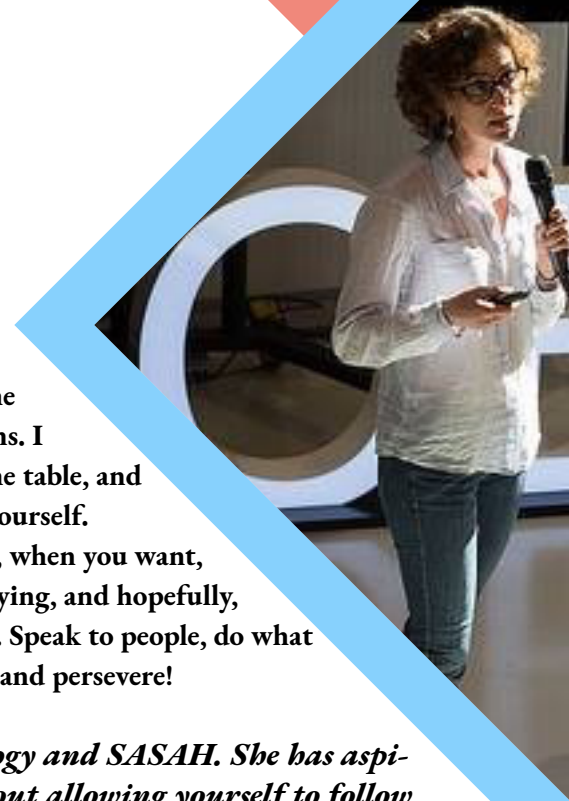
a job, she was also working part-time at the Canadian Review of Social Policy as a managing editor and doing independent consultations. This period of time of not seeing movement in her career was discouraging, but Sandra mentioned that it is in times like this that it's so important to stay positive. Her husband Nikola had said, "Focus on what you can do now in your work life, but also on being there for the kids because your [work situation] is going to change." It wasn't instant, and it wasn't easy, but eventually Sandra was able to get back to full-time work. She offered, "Work-life balance is always a flux and it always depends on where you are in your life. The decision that you make one year might not be the right one for another year, but the kid component – at least in my case – has always been a really important one."

And to the arts students who have questioned or have been questioned about the value of their degree, Sandra has some wisdom to offer. First, she says that you can't go wrong by studying what you love, so stick with it! Second, after your degree, "Be open to possibility and be daring in what you want to achieve." According to Sandra, a big part of this is networking. You can't go wrong by approaching people for the sole purpose of learning from and about them. It's okay if you aren't certain of your path, or if you learn things about yourself and have to make changes along the way just like Sarah did: "I didn't know where my arts degree was going to take me, but I did what I loved and what made sense to me at the time. The fact that we can do that is astounding, given all of the privilege that I have, that we have, to take these arts degrees. You don't know where it's going to take you, and isn't that exciting?"



I loved being a part of *Spotlight!* My conversation with Sandra was rewarding, and I admire the courage and conviction with which she tackled her roadblocks and discovered her passions. I learned a lot about what arts students bring to the table, and about the patience you must have in others and yourself. Sometimes things won't work out how you want, when you want, but the important thing is that you don't stop trying, and hopefully, you will see your goals realized. It just takes time. Speak to people, do what you love, and be brave. Take a chance on yourself and persevere!

Sam is a third-year student pursuing a double major in Criminology and SASAH. She has aspirations to go to law school, and has learned much from Sandra about allowing yourself to follow unexpected career paths.



Mark Campbell

BA (Hons) '06

Film & Economics

BY RUSHIL MALIK

Growing up, Mark Campbell always had a love for film. His father was an engineer by trade, and Campbell discovered that creating films was, in many ways, similar to what his father did. To him, making films was equivalent to building Lego; building blocks and pieces were put together to make it coherent, it was all just structural, and he had to fit the pieces together. He loved watching movies like *Indiana Jones* and *Back to the Future* and felt that he too wanted to create something similar. He began creating films with his brother at the age of 10, and thus his passion – and future career – had launched.

Mark came to Western University because he wanted flexibility, and his major in Film Studies allowed him just that. He was able to complete a minor in Economics in addition to his major, as well as take electives ranging from physics to history. He turned himself into a perfectly well-rounded student: he was able to express himself creatively through film, and yet learn about the “principles of business” through his minor in Economics. He would later seamlessly merge these two studies through the creation of his company, VMG Cinematic.

During his time at Western, Mark created multiple films, but it was one film in particular that gave him the confidence to continue pursuing film. His short silent film *Coin Laundry* became largely successful, later making tours around the world and as an in-flight movie on Air Canada flights. When asked who some of his favourite people at Western were, he spoke highly of his professors including John Palmer and Micheal Zryd, also emphasizing that he would be forever grateful for marrying his Saugeen sweetheart.

After graduating from Western, Mark launched his career by working at a start-up company, UnderPar.com, that was founded by Western graduate Mike Bourne. At UnderPar, Mark gained a love for the world of commercial filmmaking with clients including the PGA (Professional Golf Association) and a number of other large brands. The start-up environment gave Mark a taste of starting his own business and learning the important skills of “problem solving and being nimble.” He continued garnering skills at his job until he reconnected

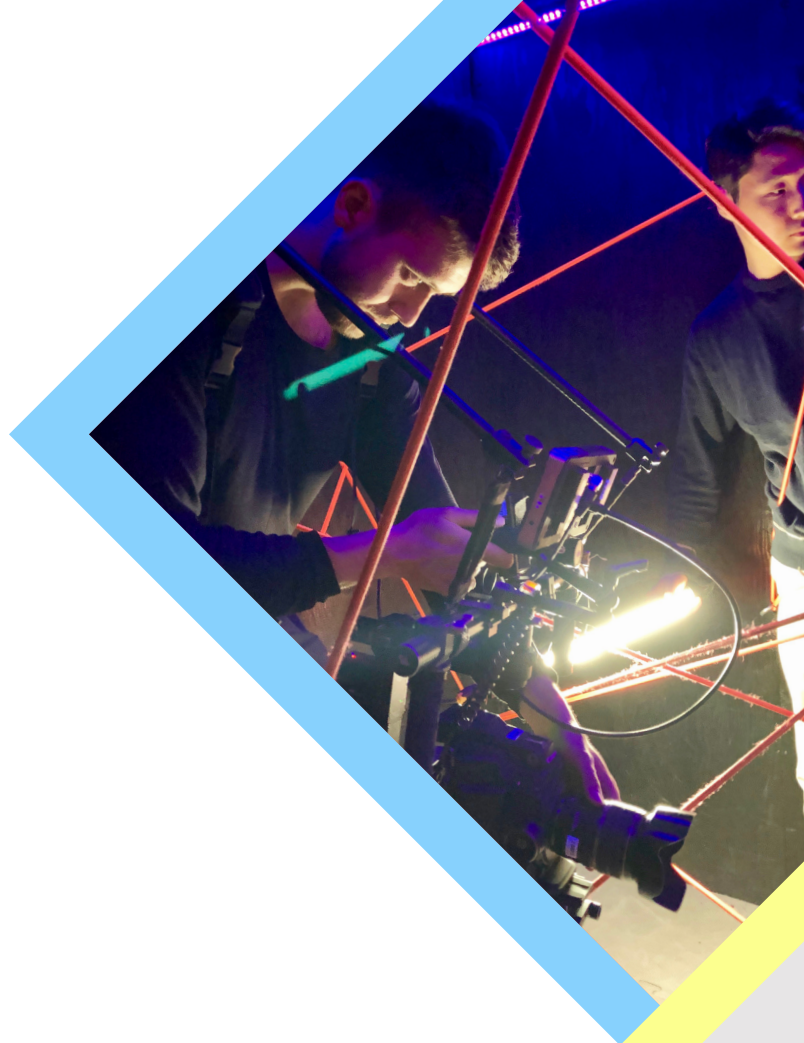
with several Western classmates, Nick Haffie-Emslie, Jeremy Houghton, Evan Aagaard and Brent O’Hagan. After reconnecting with his fellow peers, the group quickly realized they had similar goals and dreams. In 2007, Mark and his four classmates decided to go into business together as they launched VMG Cinematic. Today, it is run by Mark, Nick, and Mark’s brother, Reid.

VMG Cinematic specializes in online video content for brands. They started their business in a small bedroom in Mark’s parents’ house when Mark was only 25 years old. Presently, they are located in Toronto and have over 17 full time employees and employ a range of freelancers. Their work ranges from creating ASMR videos for Canadian Tire featuring the Raptors’ Fred VanVleet, to creating hilarious content for Diaper Genie. They have over 100 million views and counting and have created a very successful business.

Mark had never seriously considered starting his own business, but “it just came to be.” “At first, I was just living at home and saving up money, making videos as a hobby. Soon after, word of mouth got around” and Mark snowballed clients. He started his business at a very young age, stating that it was a good choice because he was fortunate enough to live at home and thus able to save money to invest back into the business. Although Mark didn’t have a background in marketing, he learned it along the way. “You fail pretty hard and often, but you learn from your mistakes.” With this in mind, Mark has continued working as the CEO of VMG Cinematic for the last 13 years and looks forward to many more years in the business.

“What I love about my job is that every day is different.” Everyday Mark is either “planning or pitching new concepts to clients or in the field with the crew, from filming with pro athletes to robotic surgeries.” There are new locations and he loves seeing behind the scenes of other companies and seeing how things are done. Mark sees the industry growing and is excited because “it’s doing better than ever”, and “more companies need videos than ever before.” Videos are approachable because of the costs and how easily they can spread. The industry is smaller than

most people think, which is why “your company’s reputation matters a lot.” Mark looks forward to continuing to work as a CEO for a company he built. He’s excited to expand his company by getting involved in machine learning in order to automate production processes and move into the US market. Mark also has some great advice for current students and recent graduates: “Prove your value.” Make sure to research the prospective companies you wish to work for and show how you can provide value to them. For those specifically in film, creative work is great, but creating commercial work will give you real world experience. Finally, hand-delivering a resume can really make you stand out. Mark, like many others, didn’t know that one day he would become an entrepreneur. He learned a lot during his undergraduate degree at Western, as well as in the real world through his jobs and hands-on experience. And it was all of this, everything compiled together exactly the way it was meant to, that led him to what he now realizes is his dream job: working for himself at the company he founded.



Being an interviewer for *Spotlight* has been a rewarding experience. I was lucky enough to interview Mark Campbell who also majored in Film Studies. To see how he’s been using his degree and skills he acquired from Western was an eye opening experience. It can be overwhelming to think about the future, especially when there are so many possibilities, but asking questions and listening to someone who has a stable career is very motivating. I look forward to seeing the growth in Mark’s business, and I’m excited to pave my own path using what I’ve learned from him.



Rushil is a third-year student pursuing an Honours Specialization in Film Studies, and a Minor in MIT. She hopes to work for film festivals when she graduates!

Elaine Cougler

BA '68

English & French

BY JILL O'CRAVEN

Elaine Cougler has done many things in her time following her education at Western University. She has learned many things, taught many things, and been many things to many people – and yet, decades after receiving her degree, she still continues to learn, grow, and teach every single day. “I’ve done a lot of things in my life, and I’m a person that looks ahead, not behind,” she tells me. “I think it’s really important to be a lifelong learner... My husband and I, we don’t sit and watch TV all day. We have these projects that we’re working on all the time.”

Elaine truly believes in the value of learning – learning everything and always learning. “I never took a course that didn’t help me in some way,” she says. “And I’m talking even taking a night school needlework course when I was a young mother... or a high school night school accounting course... I’m married to an accountant, and I do the books! I just think that no matter what you do, to learn more will inform the rest of your life.” Her love of learning first played out by becoming a teacher. After earning her teaching certification from Althouse College at Western, she worked in high schools teaching English and French. But her students didn’t just learn verb tenses or literary analysis – Elaine sought to teach them the very value of learning and the importance of failure. “I think it’s really important to look at the failures that a person has had from the point of view of what you’ve learned from them,” she explains. “When I was teaching high school, I would have kids who were having problems with this or that, and I remember one day telling a class, ‘Well, you know, I failed Grade 11 geometry.’ And they were amazed. But my point was, that [failure] taught me something.”

She learned that math and science – memorization and multiple choice – just weren’t her things. She respected their value, and respected people who enjoyed or were skilled in those fields, but she knew they weren’t for her. But essays, creativity, languages – *those* she excelled at. Those she pursued. She turned those into her tools, her craft, and her career. She taught languages and literature for many years, at several different schools, and found it deeply fulfilling. “I loved being a teacher,” she says. “I made a difference to a lot of kids, I think. But the thing that was the best



was becoming an author at this time in my life.”

Becoming an author was an unexpected change, and one that came late. She was 60 years old, spending time with her son, when out of the blue he asked her if there was something she had wished she’d done and had yet to. “I didn’t even think,” she says. “I just said, ‘Write a novel.’ And it surprised me as much as it did him... But he said, ‘If not now, when?’ And that – it was pivotal.”

A week later, she purchased *How to Write and Sell Your First Novel*, and a few years after that, she published *The Loyalist’s Wife*, a historical fiction novel set during the American Revolution. The novel quickly expanded into a trilogy, followed by a creative non-fiction book on Ron Calhoun, who was instrumental in organizing Terry Fox’s cross-Canada marathon and many other fundraising runs since. “I was always really happy with what I did,” she says. “I loved teaching French, I loved teaching English, and I really was happy in the classroom. I’d like to think that I was pretty successful at it. But when I started writing and having books come out... it was something that spoke to my soul. It was really me. And I was sixty years-old when that started.”

She wonders, sometimes, why it took so long for her to pursue her passion – why it took so long to take the chance, or even realize that it was something she was interested in, and her best guess is that it’s a result of how she was raised. “We were always supposed to think of other people first,” she says. “‘Don’t put yourself forward’ sort of thing and... I think that mindset made me take longer to find myself and to be brave enough to just try all kinds of things... It’s taken most of my life to realize that I have gifts too. Now I’m not afraid.” Similarly, Elaine’s singular regret from her time at Western is that she didn’t participate in more extracurriculars, particularly theatre and singing. “I

always regret that I didn’t step up and do those things,” she says. “I didn’t even try out for choir until my last year at Western.” Later in life, she did go on to join several local musical theatre productions and sing with different choirs.

Through her writing and the opportunities that have come with it, Elaine is always careful to not let things become stagnant. She’s attended conferences and conventions, given public talks, started writing critique groups – and she is always careful to recognize when things start to become routine and no longer bring her value. “When I got to the point where I wasn’t learning anything from any of those things, or they weren’t serving my purposes, I was never afraid to move on,” she says. “And I made a lot of friends, and still kept all the friends, but moved on so that I could find the next thing that I needed to know.”

What’s next this time? That’s hard to know for sure, but she’s certainly not slowing down anytime soon. She’s a member of the London Writers’ Society, helping to mentor aspiring authors and answer their questions about the craft and industry. She gives talks and runs workshops based on her life, her books, and what she’s learned in writing and researching. Her book on Ron Calhoun was only released a few months ago. It’s hard to say precisely what the future has in store for Elaine Cougler, but as long as it teaches her something new, she’s looking forward to finding out.



It was an absolute joy to speak with Elaine and to hear about all the different places her life has taken her. It is always comforting to be reminded that there are so many options for what to do with my degree, that I don’t have to pick just one, and that it’s never too late to try something new. I’ve always been passionate about writing and recently discovered my interest in education, so having the chance to learn from someone who has done both was very useful. And on a more self-congratulatory note, having a published author compliment my writing was a great feeling! I’m grateful to Elaine for her time and for sharing her story, experience, and wisdom with me and all Spotlight readers.

Jill O’Craven is in her final year at Western, enrolled in the SASAH program as well as pursuing a Major in Classical Studies and a Minor in Creative Writing. She has never met a written medium she didn’t like or a subject she didn’t want to learn about.

Fiona Cuddy

BA (Hons) '99

French & Spanish

BY FRANCESCA

DENOBLE

After graduating from Western University with a combined Honours B.A. in French and Spanish, Fiona Cuddy walked into a London call centre in search of a new job. The new location was hosting a job fair, and after waiting in line for several hours, providing a detailed resume and application, and devoting her afternoon to learning about the company's "culture", she was promptly turned away due to a failed math quiz. "I studied languages," Fiona explained. "I'm *terrible* at math in my head." Unimpressed with her results, Fiona returned to the call centre the following day. "I skipped the line, went straight to the people that were managing the entry...and sat down in the interviewing section like I was supposed to be there. I waited until [an interviewer] was free, and then I walked up and said: 'Do you have a minute?'" Not only did Fiona land herself an interview, but she also got the job – and kickstarted the theme of her career in the process: "I'm not taking no for an answer. In a polite and respectful way, of course."

A handful of jobs and several years later, Fiona now operates as the President of Qualified Financial Services (QFS), an insurance Managing General Agency that works as an intermediary in delivering life insurance products into the hands of consumers. Responsible for the day-to-day operations, strategic direction, and the overall success of the organization, Fiona admitted that she fell into the insurance business more than anything. After networking her way into the industry twelve years earlier, Fiona confessed to feeling a little restless in her role at Canada Life before moving to QFS. Be it marketing, communications, leadership, or international experience; Fiona had done it all with time spent in the worlds of both Corporate America and small entrepreneurial environments – and it was her degree in languages that enabled her to do it.

"If you consider what's great about a degree in languages, it's that a lot of it is essay writing and proving a point... That basic structure helped me in writing, in influencing outcomes, in organizing my thoughts. That's how I got into the entrepreneurial environment, and then I was able to parlay that experience into a consulting role when I started at London

Life." One instance that Fiona found particularly valuable was preparing her fourth-year thesis under her favourite French professor Minette Gaudet. Aside from the opportunity to work closely with "an amazing and talented woman," writing, preparing, and orally defending her thesis to a panel of professors showed her that preparation is key. Now, Fiona uses her education in the financial workplace every day, stating that, "[My] languages degree taught me how to organize and present my thoughts in a way that made it easy for decision makers to buy-in and support me. And then [I] back it up with [my] passion and facts."

Regardless of her enjoyable undergraduate career, Fiona left Western without any real desire to complete a master's degree, but rather, to begin shaping her profession. After working part-time for London Hydro throughout her undergrad, she was able to promote as a call center representative before moving into a handful of special projects. "I was constantly being engaged in different ways... so I never thought 'I've hit a ceiling; this MBA will push me up over the next level.' I just kept working hard and being great at my role, and people took notice and kept wanting to give me opportunities." In terms of the pressure modern students may feel to get their master's, as a hiring manager, Fiona admitted that, "I think what makes someone successful in business isn't *only* education – that's a huge part of it. But I believe that coupled with 'street smarts' is also what creates success for people... I would rather have someone who's done an undergrad and has worked for a few years as a teenager than someone who has an MBA and hasn't worked at all." Thinking back to her days of working in retail and getting a pair of slippers thrown at her head, Fiona added, "Nothing trains you better than in-person customer service... [That work] is so different than sitting behind a desk and emailing – it builds character."

Aside from the determination that helped bring her to where she is today, Fiona expressed that it was also a combination of knowing your worth and asking for what you want. She recalled a significant turning point in her career in which, living in London and having transitioned to insurance at Canada Life,

Fiona approached her boss one day and said, “I love the job that I’m in and I am grateful, but I don’t want it anymore.” So Fiona went and laid out what she *did* want. And while her boss warned her that there may not be a job available, Fiona persisted. “I was nervous...but if I hadn’t have done that, I wouldn’t be sitting in this seat today.” While grateful for everything that she had been given, she also believed that within a company, there should be a certain amount of give and take. “As women, we don’t always use our voice. We’re very accepting of what’s given to us, we don’t negotiate, and we don’t ask for what we want... Accepting was very good for me because it got me great opportunities, but then I realized that it was never specifically on my terms.”

A life packed with exciting memories and a career filled with unique opportunities, Fiona looked back on her time at Western with pride as she raved about the distinct relevance of a humanities degree. “So much of it,” she explained, “has to do with what you choose to do with your degree.” Fiona was able to turn a love of languages into the skills needed to be the president of a financial company because, “It’s about behaviours first, technical capabilities second... It’s hard to teach people to be passionate, or to have a high sense of urgency, or be committed. All of those things are important in business. So if you can bring those behaviours to the table, you’re already well on your way.” Be persistent, she advises, and learn how to handle rejection, because it’s going to happen. Ultimately, your life and your career are what you make it, so “put your head down, do a really good job, and people will take notice of you.”



Interviewing Fiona was, as expected, an immense pleasure and an extraordinary experience. A boss woman through and through, I felt comforted leaving her office knowing that my future was just that: my own. Over the years I have had my fair share of degree-meltdowns, but it is interactions like this that ground me and make me certain that by simply following my interests, I am doing what’s right for myself. Besides, it’s always nice to be encouraged to “never take no for an answer!”

Francesca DeNoble is a third-year student pursuing a double major in English Language & Literature and SASAH with a minor in Italian. She now has a better grasp on what she would like to do with her life.

Sarah Emms-Pilon

BA (Hons) '14

English & French

DIP '15

Public Relations

BY MARY HAMILTON



“We drove onto campus through the Richmond Gates and up towards the hill, and I was immediately like, ‘Oh yeah, I’m going to Western,’” When we first meet, Sarah tells me, “I just fell in love with the campus.” She’s describing her first visit to Western. It was a trip she reluctantly took at the urging of her parents, who had wanted her to keep an open mind about her university options. Before this visit, Western hadn’t been Sarah’s first choice. Sitting at the back of Talbot College, watching the sun go down on University College, it is hardly a struggle to understand why Sarah’s change of heart was so sudden.

Like so many soon-to-be university students, Sarah had a clear plan. She wanted to go to Queen’s. She wanted to study French and English and go into “the family business” of teaching. But fast-forward to six years after her 2014 convocation, and like so many other university graduates, Sarah is not where she had first pictured herself. Though she came to Western and ultimately graduated with an Honours Double-Major in English and French Literature, Sarah never found herself at the front of a classroom. Through a series of changes and a period of discernment, Sarah found herself in the world of professional communications, and now works at *sagecomm*, a strategic marketing firm in downtown London where she puts her language skills to work in client relations, project management, and marketing, mainly with non-profits and small, local businesses.

“In between third and fourth year, I did an internship at Sunlife and had an amazing mentor who introduced me to the whole world of communications, particularly the corporate side of things,” Sarah says. “That just made me want to use my degree in a completely different way.” Not unlike others who have experienced an epiphany later into their university careers, Sarah found herself unsure if this was really the right path for her. This decision was by no means as instantaneous as the one to apply to Western. “It was a huge process, all through fourth year,” she says of changing her mind. “In fact, I still applied and got into teacher’s college but also applied to PR programs because I was so undecided about what I wanted to do.” By taking a few more



writing courses in her fourth year, Sarah was able to discover her love for the communications aspect of her degree. Having experienced what it was to work in a corporate environment through Sunlife, she already knew that she liked the change in the day-to-day and getting to interact with people at all different levels of a company. “So, that was the path I chose to take,” she says, and in 2015, Sarah obtained a Public Relations certificate through Western’s Continuing Studies program. It is a program which lead her to a position at London Life, where she stayed for four years before ultimately turning up in her current position at *sagecomm*.

Apart from the campus itself, part of the reason Sarah chose Western is because she was intrigued by the idea of having that big-campus experience while loving the small and connected feeling of the Arts and Humanities faculty. However, she also admits that the first few months of university were a huge adjustment regardless of the faculty’s size – getting used to the unfamiliar feeling of anonymity was a task in itself. “I went to a high school where my mom was a teacher, so it felt like everyone there knew who I was,” she explains. “So, coming to university, where no one knew me was at first scary, but also freeing; a chance to make my own way, but even that wasn’t without it’s challenges.” She found solace alongside the thirty people on her floor of Saugeen, surely equally as intimidated and new to the city as herself, some of whom she is still friends with today. She was surprised by the number of close friends she made given the size of the residence—a testament to just how quickly friendships are forged under the pressure of university. By the end of her four years at Western, Sarah was by no means anonymous as a result of the many roles she occupied within the Arts and Humanities Student Council (AHSC). In second year, she joined as the French Department representative, then

in third year filled the role of VP of Communications. By fourth year, Sarah was the President of the Arts and Humanities Students’ Council and fondly remembers the many “hilarious” and conversely “thought-provoking” conversations she had in the Students’ Council office, as well as her time representing the faculty. “I got to be on-stage during O-Week and also speak to the incoming class when they did faculty day,” she recalls. “Even though I was really only on the O-Week stage for about two minutes, it was really cool to be able to represent Arts students in that way.” Even five years since she last attended Western as a student, Sarah is by no means absent from the Arts department as her accomplishments as president—including bringing the different clubs and organizations under the umbrella of the AHSC, to name one of many—succeed her.

Sarah’s university career is a study in seizing opportunities. Right from the beginning, Sarah saw the opportunity to forge a new path for herself at Western, again in her career, as well in the chance to make an impact in the life of Arts and Humanities students as president. When asked if she had any advice for current students, Sarah didn’t have to think long, selecting something that could not have been more fitting for the university career she had: “Try not to close any doors.”



So many of us know what it is to feel like we cannot change our minds; like we are in some way tied to the picture of our futures that we drew as high schoolers, knowing nothing about university, the world, or ourselves. Sarah Emms-Pilon is living proof that you can change your mind and live to tell the tale. As a first-year student, so uncertain of what is coming my way these next few years, talking to Sarah about the process of changing a long-held plan and forging a new path was extremely comforting. Working with someone who has had such a rich university career has been equal parts inspiring and motivating. Sarah’s story is one worth telling—I’m grateful to the Spotlight team for allowing me to be the one to share it.

Mary is a first-year student pursuing an Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature. By next year, she hopes to have upped her caffeine tolerance.

Jason Last

BA (Hons) '07

English

MA '08

English & Cultural Studies

BY SIERRA JOSEPH

Explore all of your options. Say yes to opportunity. And finally, ask yourself: what's the worst that could happen? These are the three core values that led Jason Last through his time at Western University and beyond to the world of opportunity outside of London.

His first step, like many others', was of course to choose this university. For Jason, Western offered a new experience, one that would include living away from home and starting fresh with the promised adventure of post-secondary life. It was the connected nature between the city of London and Western, the university's reputation, and its stunning campus that drew him in. With Jason's interests lying in reading and writing, the Arts and Humanities – specifically, a major in English – seemed like the best way to go. However, what began as a tentative appeal quickly turned into a comprehensive understanding of the benefits an English degree would offer as Jason's time at Western progressed. For Jason, English was the perfect core program, teaching the right skills while also leaving enough space for other interests – everything he had been looking for in a university degree. According to Jason, university is “such a short period of time where your main goal is to just better yourself in terms of intelligence, understanding, and knowledge.” And for him, this is exactly what an Art and Humanities degree allowed him to do. Arts, he says, enables us to build specific skills like synthesize information, think critically, and communicate persuasively. Just as important, it also allows us to learn and experience as much as possible. Jason appreciated the ability to explore and hone multiple areas of interests and skills that existed both within and beyond what the English department had to offer. While playing in a band and taking part in an outdoor ball hockey league, Jason still made the time to focus on his academics, and it was this dedication that led him to thinking academia would be his eventual path. However, one opportunity changed it all. A personal connection to a marketing agency in Toronto led to a summer internship between Jason's undergraduate and master's degrees. For the rest of his education, Jason maintained his connection to the company John St., and after his master's,

took on a full-time position with them and got his taste of the world of marketing and advertising.

When we're young is the easiest time to take risks. Yes, Jason admits that these should be calculated risks, but ultimately ask yourself: What's the worst that could happen? This is the question Jason faced when he began the process of starting his own company. After completing his master's in English and Cultural Studies at Western, Jason went on to participate in an education that would help integrate him into the world of marketing. He completed a master's degree in Strategic Foresight and Innovation at OCAD University and then went on to work for multiple advertising agencies as a strategic planner. After several years of this routine, Jason saw a market-need and opportunity to co-found his own company and offer specialized and targeted work for clients. Jason's company, Conflict Advertising, endorses that “the best story wins”. Creating and connecting the best story is something that Jason credits learning to his English degree. He shared that it is all about making connections and finding a new way to tell a special narrative. He related this to a common task in English classes: look at this text that has been read a million times before and say something new about it.

At its core, Jason's role as a brand strategist and strategy director relies on this unique skill. Being able to gain and express a new perspective is why brands and companies go to Jason and his team at Conflict Advertising. Taking the leap to start his own company – with only his business partner and inspiration at his side – was a risk: he was leaving a secure and comfortable job behind to explore a new impalpable venture. But it was worth the risk and the time was right. He took on a lot more roles and work than before, but it all came with the excitement of starting something new and being successful. “There's just the thrill of building something yourself and having successes and learning from failures,” he explained.

His risk paid off and Conflict Advertising has since become a success. They have worked on a variety of levels, from big names like Indigo with specific campaigns to working with smaller companies like Sweet Reason, a sparkling water company, to

help build their brand from the ground up. While some might say that finding and filling this hole in the advertising market was luck, Jason and his team would argue otherwise. You never know where new opportunities or experiences might come from, but this isn't exactly luck. You don't have to be lucky to say yes to taking risks, but you do have to be adventurous and willing to take a chance. Jason has continued on with his practice of never saying no and believes that it has treated him well, arguing that, "being open and interested in things is the key to so much of what drives success."

Jason knew that an English degree from Western would set him up for success, but only if he paired it with enough courage to seize the opportunities as they were passing. Frame these "risks", Jason suggests, not as things to fear, but as opportunities to grow. So, next time you're faced with a new opportunity, say yes, and just ask yourself: what's the worst that could happen?



Just as every other *Spotlight* contributor would tell you, this experience is incredibly enriching. But it was particularly valuable speaking with Jason because it reminded me what university is truly about. It is incredibly easy to get caught up into the whirl wind of lectures, assignments, clubs, relationships, and everything else that now encompasses what a university student should be. Talking to Jason let me return to the core of why I chose to come to university – to explore all kinds of learning and education, to simply do and see as much as possible, and that includes participating in *Spotlight*.

Sierra Joseph is a third-year student in SASAH and Women's Studies. She continues to follow whatever opportunities that presents themselves, now slightly more aware of the financial consequences.

Kelly McKenzie

MA '16

Art History

BY EVA ALIE

There is sometimes a narrative surrounding Arts degrees that those who devote themselves to said field of study are making a “risky” choice, buying into a delusional promise of a creative, free-flowing career path that will ultimately prove to be financially and professionally wrought with struggle. However, anyone who is directly involved with the Arts community at Western knows that they are in for an education both intersectional and dynamic that distinguishes the faculty from those around it.

I had the great honour of speaking with Kelly McKenzie, an Art History Masters graduate and the curator of the Corporate Art Collection at Manulife, who served as a tremendous reminder that the passion for human and cultural understanding is an extraordinary strength rather than a career detriment. Kelly completed her undergraduate degree at OCAD University where she studied Criticism and Curatorial Practice before coming to Western University for her Masters in Art History. She, as most students, did not have a clear idea of what exactly the professional world held in store after graduation until she was encouraged to investigate and pursue fine art appraisal, which she admits she “didn’t know was even a thing”. The first step that a client would take when looking to get their art insured, for example, fine art appraisals deal with determining how much it would cost to replace an artwork with a comparable piece or compensate the owners if it were damaged or destroyed. Another example would be determining what an artwork would be worth if it were offered for sale on the open

market. The appraiser must take into account the piece’s role as a historical artifact or its status as a piece of work from a well-known artist. Determining the value of a work can be rather complex, but it proved to be the perfect career for Kelly to step in and make her mark.

That “thing” that she didn’t even know existed has since developed into a tremendously well-established career wildly dissimilar to her expectations. Kelly single-handedly curates and manages Manulife’s collection of approximately 1800 art pieces across the country and parts of the United States, combining her mutual loves for art and business. The bulk of her time is spent on the administrative aspects of her job, including curating and arranging for installations, conservation, framing, and appraisals of the works within the collection. In her free time, she operates McKenzie Art Projects, a fine art advisory offering private clients collection management services, fine art appraisals, and archives consulting.

Additionally, Kelly also sits on the board of directors for Twentytwenty Arts, a not-for-profit organization that empowers and produces art installations within underrepresented communities in Toronto, which is coincidentally founded by Megan Kee, one of her good friends from OCADU. She spoke about a couple of recent and truly incredible projects brought to fruition by the organization, including a future exhibition, *Weathered*, launching in Nathan Phillips Square on August 31st that uses photography to facilitate a meaningful conversation about the current overdose epidemic that has become a part of



the cultural landscape.

Throughout our conversation, I was struck by the similarities between Kelly's and my time at Western, especially in regard to the number of professors that we have both been in classes with, fangirling over the artistic genius that is Dr. Kirsty Robertson. Kelly spoke with immense pride about the mentorship she gained during her time in the Arts faculty, summarizing her experience by saying that "[you] want to be inspired by the people you are learning from" – something that we can both emphatically attest is the case in our community.

In spite of times of great uncertainty that many arts students will experience, speaking with Kelly reminded me that there are so many unique ways that a person is valued within the Arts, and that as women, we are our own harshest critics; the career and personal path is not a linear one, but I was reassured that the experiences we come into contact with along the way deepen and enrich us as students, artists, and global citizens. Uncertainty is something that should be embraced on a greater level; it allows us to explore and learn without the pressures of a prescribed outcome, leading us to places that we would never have gone otherwise.



A persistent fear is the perceived career limitations that an Arts degree can present, but through the two years I have been a part of *Spotlight*, I have had the privilege of meeting and speaking with individuals who defy every expectation. Kelly spoke at length about the importance of following one's passion as well as fiercely pursuing opportunities that present themselves, regardless of how intimidating it may seem at first; this greatly resonated with me and has further inspired me to consciously follow my ambitions no matter how far they may take me.



Eva Alie is a third-year French and Anthropology student who just discovered the magic of Google Calendar to remember the deadlines for her modules. In her spare time, she enjoys overestimating how much pasta constitutes one serving.

Caitlin McCullough

BA (Hons) '09

Art History & Criticism
BY CELINE TSANG



Graduating from Western with a B.A in Art History and Criticism in 2009, Caitlin McCullough immediately landed a paid internship at a private commercial art gallery in Oakville, Ontario. Over her nine months at Abbozzo Gallery, she transitioned from learning *about* art history in her lectures to working *with* art history, employed at an art gallery, collaborating with contemporary artists, and selling artwork through curated exhibitions. After her internship ended, Caitlin decided to pursue further education at the prestigious Sotheby's Institute of Art in New York, graduating with her Master's of Art Business in 2011. Caitlin described how her time there introduced her to a multitude of "real-world" jobs within the art industry and beyond, like working at an artist's estate, a public institution, or an auction house – the possibilities were endless. It was while completing her MA that Caitlin took her first step into the insurance world with a paid internship at Chubb Insurance. In charge of assisting the head of the fine art department in reviewing art insurance policies, Caitlin also worked to show brokers and clients the benefits of art insurance. She cited her time there as, "One of the coolest experiences in my life!" Case in point: witnessing a Chubb-insured Henry Moore statue being lifted 30 floors up to a client's penthouse. "I wasn't even worried!" she laughed.

Following her internship, she applied for a job at Sotheby's auction house in New York. Working in client services, she was primarily responsible for registering paddles for bidders and helping to organize auctions for high-profile sales of art. "I was there for a world-record sale of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*," she gushed. After two years in New York, Caitlin returned to Toronto and found a job at Odon Wagner Gallery, a private commercial art gallery just outside of Yorkville. She managed the day-to-day gallery operations, advised clients who were purchasing artwork, planned their booth for Art Toronto, and worked on entire exhibitions.

With 10 years of art experience under her belt at this point in her career, her leap to working as an Account Executive and Fine Art Specialist at Aon was a pivot in her career path. While she



knew a lot about the art world, she had to be willing and eager to learn the entirely new industry of personal insurance. However, her art knowledge proved crucial when advising clients who had artwork, giving expert referrals to her colleagues, and hosting art-focused client appreciation events. Very recently, Caitlin has transitioned to TD Insurance to perform a role similar to before. As a Senior Private Client Advisor, Caitlin guides highly successful individuals and families on how to protect their assets and their lifestyles using a bespoke approach. Her arts degree ties strongly into what she does now, as she remarked that, “Because I focused my entire career on art and art history, I can use the background knowledge from the art history survey course I took in first year, for example, every single day. I have the skillset to know what is valuable, why it’s valuable, and when it became valuable... I use this knowledge to assist my clients in properly insuring their art collections.” Every day, Caitlin incorporates her passion and her academic background into her professional career.

Although Caitlin appears to have had a relatively smooth transition from education to the workforce, she admitted that when she came to Western, a career in insurance wasn’t what she had planned. She explained that she chose Western because she wanted to go to a quality, reputable school, and her initial visit left her feeling at-home in the campus environment. She confided that throughout all of her years at university, she was constantly thinking: “What am I going to do?” However, her mind was made up in at least one aspect following first year: since her art history courses were undeniably both her favourite and her highest marks, she would major in it. It was at Western that Caitlin volunteered at the McIntosh Gallery and worked for The Gazette as a photographer. She shared about how much fun it was to be involved and run around campus while also being able

to learn and strengthen her photography skills. She still owns many of the editions which include photos that she took, and when asked about her favourite experiences during undergrad, Caitlin shared that she certainly enjoyed her time in residence (“My sophs were incredible!”), but she also surprisingly enjoyed the typically unremarkable act of “studying in the library.” She observed that back then, the only thing she really had to worry about was school. “Studying isn’t really something I’m doing now, so I can look back on it as a really nice time.”

Some of Caitlin’s greatest challenges at Western included balancing her studies with physical and mental health and deciding what she would pursue after she graduated. Having lived in Medway-Sydenham Residence, she remarked that she would walk across the bridge every single day and look over the Thames river, lost in thought about how exactly she could use her education to translate into a successful career. “In the art world, it’s such an organic industry with so many different avenues you can go down. It’s not as black and white as other fields.” In terms of advice for current arts undergrad students, Caitlin recommended getting out there as much as possible by going to exhibitions or volunteering because “you never know what doors that will open for you!” She also added that “it’s so important to relax! Enjoy the present, because being in university is one of the most fun experiences you will ever have.” While she did struggle with anxiety about her future, she advised that, “You have to enjoy where you are at the moment and acknowledge how far you’ve come - you’ve got to be proud of what you have done and not what you could have done or should have done. What you’ve done is great, so be proud of yourself.”



I had a wonderful time speaking with Caitlin! We had very dissimilar majors, but we bonded over movies, pop culture, and the inevitable existential questions that struck us every time we crossed the bridge to Med-Syd. Though I am still anxious about my career prospects after university, speaking to her about how organic and natural her journey had been definitely reassured me and reminded me about the wide possibility of careers available to arts graduates. While I may not know exactly what I am going to do in the future, the three most important things that she imparted on me are remembering to lighten up, giving myself some credit for what I have accomplished, and treasuring every moment (even the stress-inducing ones), because we are all going to miss this someday.

Celine Tsang is a first-year student double majoring in Linguistics and SASAH. When not interviewing alumni, she can be found speed-running Minesweeper.

Elan Paulson

PhD '10

English

BY BIANCA JAMES

One thing no one can doubt about Dr. Elan Paulson is her perseverance to continuously progress in life. Completing her PhD in English here at Western University, she continued on to teach for a little over a year. At that point, she secured a position involving digital communications in the Faculty of Education as a staff member, but also opted to continue teaching as well. She then decided to work as a Director of Communications and Community Engagement for eCampusOntario, a not-for-profit corporation aimed to promote collaboration and innovation across all publicly funded colleges and universities in Ontario. Moving out of a role related to communications, she is presently working at Conestoga College as a teaching and learning consultant, which is where her heart lies.

Initially intrigued by psychology as a subject of interest in her undergraduate career, Elan quickly realized that she had a greater love for reading and literary analysis. Taking courses involving literary studies consolidated her desire to pursue English. What she learned from this experience is that although an undergraduate degree may seem broad, it gives students permission to be able to try many different things and take multiple different courses to understand what really connects with them and what they truly care about. Once she received her undergraduate degree, Elan was extremely excited as she was filled with all these newly learned theories and worldviews from all the literature she read in classes. However, as she did

not plan to enroll in a Master's program at the time, she started working full-time in a job somewhat unrelated to her studies. She quickly realized that she was not surrounded by people that shared the same interests as her in the concepts and theories that she had recently discovered. This made her miss being in an environment with people who did want to talk about ideas in relation to her studies. Having this experience reassured her that going back to school was in fact a good decision for her, so she enrolled in a Continuing Education program.

Through volunteering on campus while still in school, Elan was able to learn about the university, its community, and its cultural aspects. By gravitating outside of the classroom and diversifying her knowledge, she believes this allowed her to understand that her interests were not in literary scholarship alone, but rather the community of the university as well and everything that goes on in it. She stands by the idea that it is helpful to have a growth mindset and to think about the world in front of you as potential opportunities as opposed to just unknown things that are difficult and scary.

Additionally, Elan credits one of her best student work experiences to working at the services for students with disabilities on campus. Her role was to follow and attend a student's fulltime classes and take notes for them. Through this experience, she was able to see how differently instructors in different disciplines taught. She was also able to learn about the disability services and the importance of making teaching and learning accessible to all students. The exposure to the different teaching and learning strategies contributed to Elan's ultimate love of teaching and learning in higher education. Additionally, by constantly finding jobs working on campus as a student, she realized she was unconsciously hinting to herself that she liked the idea of a college or university as being a workplace. Thus, another piece of advice she opted to give: always pay attention to the clues you give yourself about what matters to you, what you are good at, and about what opportunities there are that mesh well with the person who you are.

Further advice she gives for current students who might not



know exactly what the future holds for them is that it is not unhelpful to seek out people that will be optimistic on your behalf. These are the people who will tell you success stories and who will give you some ideas for how you will be able to make your way through life in the best possible way. Even if your career path is not a straight line, sometimes the crooks in the lines are the things that help you to get to where you need to be. In her experience, very few people regret the decisions that they have made in their life because everything is a learning process that aids in improvement. She also stresses that it is important to couple the optimistic stories students are told with really practical activities that will help them get along. It is one thing to want to have a job and it is another to actually have a practical strategy to go out and get it. She believes that you have to put time, energy and hard work into yourself because you are always worth it. You are the one that has to work the hardest to be able to find the path that is calling you.



Getting to interview Dr. Elan Paulson was a remarkable experience I personally gained much insight from. Her career path has proven to me that we never stop learning and that it is important to take the time to understand what really matters to us. Both inspiring and comforting, her advice has resonated deeply within my thoughts. I have learned to listen to the hints derived from everything I do and the decisions I make, as it will ultimately help me understand more about myself. It was such a pleasure meeting someone as compassionate and optimistic as Elan and this is an experience I will never forget.

Bianca James is a fourth-year student currently pursuing an Honors Specialization in Philosophy and a Major in Biology.

Daniel Perry

BA (Hons) '06

English & French

BY KAITLYN LONNEE



Photo by Marcin Moka



It's a question with which many Arts and Humanities majors are familiar: *What are you going to do with your degree?* Daniel Perry—Western alumnus, and author of *Hamburger* (2016) and *Nobody Looks That Young Here* (2018)—shows exactly what a devoted arts student can do and how far they can go with their degree. For Perry, who grew up in Southwest Middlesex, Ontario, Western University was the local choice for his post-secondary studies, but that wasn't its sole appeal. "Western is a top-notch university in this country," he says. "It didn't seem like I needed to look farther afield." Starting at Huron University College as an economics major, Perry experimented with courses in several disciplines before eventually switching his degree to a combined honors in English and French. In his third year, he transferred to main campus, where he became deeply involved in university life: spending a year at Western's official student newspaper, the *Gazette*, as a news editor, joining the University Students' Council as communications officer, and acting as a soph in the orientation program. In his final year, Perry was also president of the Arts and Humanities Students' Council, finishing out his time at university having contributed greatly to the student community.

It is these memories and experiences at Western that have stuck with him over the years, and he says that many of the skills he cultivated in his time on councils and committees have assisted him in his current position as a director in the clearance services department at Ad Standards. But this is only part of Perry's story, and it was after earning his master's in comparative literature at the University of Toronto and having some time off that a side of him he hadn't indulged for a long time began to resurface. "Somewhere around 2009... it sort of came back, this whole thing like, 'Okay, when you were 17, you were writing all the time. You've come through your first educational experiences, and you've got two degrees now... What happened to that kid who was always writing and was always going to write? Where'd he go?'"

Perry had never taken creative writing courses in high school or university, but he had always enjoyed writing and seen it

in his future. So, knowing he was serious about once again putting pen to page, he enrolled in some courses at George Brown College, including an expressive writing course taught by award-winning Canadian author and Western alumnus Richard Scarsbrook, whose first book was similar to what Perry was working on at the time. “I don’t think [the course] was intended to generate fiction, but as I learned to work with my own life, [it’s] where I began to see what I wanted to do in terms of turning experience into something that could be presented as fiction,” he says. “I think that’s where I kind of turned the corner.” It was around this time that he was first published as part of an online elimination writing tournament run by *Broken Pencil Magazine* with “The Expiry Dates,” a story which appears in his newest book. Perry considers his first foray into the publishing world to have been “a bit of a baptism by fire,” citing brutal message boards and attempts to game the contest’s voting system, but ultimately, both the positive and negative responses gave him a taste of “how good and how bad it was ever going to get in such a so-called career.”

“The Expiry Dates” eventually made it into Perry’s linked short story collection, *Nobody Looks That Young Here*, published in 2018 by Guernica Editions, but it was *Hamburger* that hit the shelves first. Published by Thistledown Press in 2016, *Hamburger* is a short story collection in three parts, beginning with a series of flash fictions, following up with a section for short stories of a more conventional length, and ending with one longer story. “I like the idea of flash at the beginning, just for the reader to be able to build momentum,” says Perry. “You can read flash so fast, and if you don’t like this one, well, there’s another one in two pages—maybe that one works for you.”

Comparatively, the stories in his newest novel, *Nobody Looks That Young Here*, form more of a linked narrative, concerning life in a few fictional Southwestern Ontario towns over a 30-year period. “It was one of those things where, as I was writing individual stories, I thought I had a themed collection, but I didn’t really know that I had an arc to them until I’d written quite a few,” he explains. “Then I realized that given characters were connected in given ways, and I had something like *Lives of Girls and Women* or *Olive Kitteridge* or *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* in my hands.”

For those interested in breaking into the writing and publishing industries, Perry emphasizes the value of networking through events like author readings, book launches, and writer socials. As an example, he cites his participation in the online tournament with *Broken Pencil Magazine*, revealing that even today he is still in touch with some of his fellow former competitors. “These are the conversations that have really driven my so-called career, much more than any credentials I might have,” says Perry. “Credentials might help you get in the door, but relationships I think are what keep you going to the place you’re trying to get to.”

As a final piece of advice, he also urges anyone thinking of entering the writing field to go easy on themselves and to remember that career paths aren’t always linear. “I feel very fortunate to have gone to get one of those ‘What are you going to do with that?’ degrees and to have still wound up somewhere I wanted to be,” Perry says. “I think that’s a strength of the humanities field.... We need people who understand a broad range of experience, who understand nuance and complexity.... That’s why I’m really glad to have been a humanities major.”



Speaking to someone who has published their writing always gives me a certain kind of thrill, and Daniel’s stories about his creative journey and publishing process did not disappoint. As someone who longs to be published someday, it can be overwhelming at times, but my interview with Daniel has done a lot to reassure me that I don’t have to go from Point A to Point B—if my path meanders, so be it. Either way, I’ll be along for the ride, writing about my experiences and dreaming of what possibilities the future might hold. A huge thank you to Daniel for his time and for allowing me to pick his brain about post-graduate degrees, and another thank you to the *Spotlight* team for this incredible experience. Now I know that next time someone asks me what on Earth I’m going to do with an arts degree, I’ll just sit back, smile, and say, “Watch.”

Kaitlyn is a third-year student currently completing an Honors Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature and a major in SASAH. She is notorious for exceeding word counts (really, ask anyone) and hopes to pet many dogs in the future.

Juan Carlos Rocha Osornio

PhD '13
Hispanic Studies
BY FRANCESCA
DENOBLE

For Juan Carlos, what began as an early fascination with languages was something that would develop into a desire for innovation and a passion for teaching. Growing up in Mexico as a native speaker of Spanish, Juan Carlos was dedicated to perfecting his English so that he may one day study outside of his home country. His passion brought him to Texas A&M University-Commerce, where he entertained the idea of becoming a diplomat before his professors pushed him to look outside of the world of politics. It was there that, while completing his bachelor's in Latin American Literature and English Linguistics, Juan Carlos fell in love with academia. Watching his professors teach, publish articles, and travel to conferences opened up a world of possibilities as to what he could achieve with a languages degree.

Much of Juan Carlos's devotion to pursuing languages came from an upending move from his hometown in the state of Querétaro, Mexico, to the United States. Although his family travelled with him to ease the burden, poor attitudes toward Latinos were something that did not go unnoticed. "I wanted to make a difference," Juan Carlos said, explaining that it wasn't just the language that he wanted to share with people, but the culture. "I felt that there was a big misunderstanding. People didn't understand the diverse culture that we have behind the Spanish-speaking world." After completing his BA and his master's three years later, Juan Carlos sought to further his knowledge with a PhD before moving deeper into the professional world. His mind was set on attending the University of Alberta when a last-minute decision left him accepting an offer from Western's Hispanic Studies program. "It changed my life completely," he offered, explaining how Canadian attitudes differed greatly from American ones. "Here, students learning Spanish were more interested. They want to learn about the language and the culture and use it as much as possible in their everyday lives." Juan Carlos was initially under the supervision of Dr. Hugo Moreno before he found Professor Rafael Montano, Western's current chair of the department. Dr. Montano was a "wonderful supervisor" who kept Juan

Carlos on track during the thesis years as he pursued his project focused on Mexican literature that deals with the topic of male homosexuality.

Several years after completing his PhD, Juan Carlos began working for the University of Toronto. Now an Assistant Professor in the department of Spanish & Portuguese, he is in charge of coordinating language courses and designing the curriculum of Spanish for Beginners, Intermediate, and Advanced levels, in addition to supervising graduate students. Aside from his administrative responsibilities, Juan Carlos also teaches courses of his own. For example, "Accelerated Spanish through Community-Engaged Learning" is designed to help students learn the language while engaging them in Toronto's Spanish-speaking community. In his last year of his PhD, Juan Carlos experienced the value of interdisciplinary learning through community involvement. He brought his experience to UofT to help others learn the same. "I do my best to meet new community partners," he added. "Two years ago, I started to develop a community engaged-learning component [CEL] project as a part of Advanced Spanish... This year, we accepted about 30 students to the program with the University's generous support." Students partaking in this project are required to complete up to 20 hours at their placements where they, for example, can learn about making chocolate with authentic Latin American ingredients, or help senior citizens from Latin America learn how to use technology. With dedicated volunteers and a final presentation given in Spanish, both the student and community partner can benefit from this experience.

In addition to developing a successful CEL program, Juan Carlos has done much in the way of technological advancement for his department. "At Western," he recalled, "we were very lucky to have resources available to us. That inspired me to pursue this at UofT, as I could see students were learning better with the help of technology." While currently working to develop Online Open Educational Resources that focus on listening comprehension, Juan Carlos has also collaborated with *Latin@sen Toronto* to develop course materials. He hopes

to replace the course textbook with online resources to make it suitable for submitting tests and quizzes, crediting his language coordinator, Ana García-Allén, as having spurred this interest. He expressed his appreciation for García-Allén and the work she did to turn the language program into a close community, emphasizing that, “Everyday was always an exciting day with lots to learn! I am particularly grateful to Professors Joyce Brunh de Garavito and Rafael Montano as well.” Joyce, who has recently retired, has been an absolute pillar in the department, positively impacting Juan Carlos as well as many other graduates.

While teaching Spanish encompasses much of what Juan Carlos always wished to do, a highlight in his budding career has been the opportunity to connect with students from all over the world. As a professor of introductory Spanish, Juan Carlos sees a high percentage of his class filled with international students whose methods of participation can vary from our own. “Learning about their culture enables me to better understand these students,” he explained. “I want to make their learning experience more pleasant... So, every morning, I greet my class in Spanish, but then I may also greet them in Mandarin, for example, and they immediately feel a connection.” It’s not about language fluency or ethnicity, he pressed. It’s about the experience of learning a culture, a way of connecting to the world around you in a manner you may have never considered before. “This is what I have wanted to do for a very long time, so I am happy... But later, when I retire, I would like to fund a small language school in Mexico and work with other universities in foreign countries to create study abroad programs. But for now,” he concluded, “I am happy here.”



Pursuing a degree in languages has often been portrayed as a risky move, but Juan Carlos is proof that your love for languages can take you anywhere you want it to. From bringing new courses to a world-renowned university to developing technology that will help shape the future of academia, Juan Carlos’ willingness to let his love for cultures guide his way is inspirational. Like he said, it’s not about language fluency or ethnicity: it’s about the experience of learning a culture and how this can shape you into an intelligent, innovative, and empathetic human being. So despite my continuous struggle to pick up a second language, I know that it’s a privileged experience that I will move on from richer than I was before.

Francesca DeNoble is a third-year student pursuing a double major in English Language & Literature and SASAH with a minor in Italian.



Kristyn Rolanty

BA '11
Sociocultural
Anthropology
Post Degree '12
Art History & Visual
Studies
BY ROSE GHAEDI

Like many students, Kristyn Rolanty came to Western University without a clear idea of what career she wanted to pursue. Starting out as an English major, Kristyn switched into Sociocultural Anthropology after taking some courses in first year. It was only in her last semester of her fourth year that she began to imagine the course of her future career, after taking a Pop Art course as an elective. Realising her interest in Art History and her desire to work at an art gallery or a museum, Kristyn returned to Western for a post-degree module in Art History and Visual Studies to study in her chosen field. Today, Kristyn works as an Exhibitions Project Manager for the Art Gallery of Ontario, working with multiple teams to coordinate and organize the various exhibitions at the gallery.

Looking back on her undergraduate degree, Kristyn reflects on the difficulty of balancing school, friendships, and extracurriculars at such a young age. Her interest in history drew her to Anthropology, but she eventually realized that she was more drawn to Art History as a visual way of learning about different time periods and cultures. Still, she feels that her leap year at Western was one of the best years of her life, saying: “I fully credit that one year to the rest of the trajectory of my life.” Kristyn threw herself into extracurriculars during her fifth year, working with ArtLab and the McIntosh Gallery and putting the academic skills she’d learnt to practical use. She remembers volunteering to help with the installation of Professor Kirsty Robertson’s 2013 exhibition *Secret Stash: Accumulation, Hoarding, and the Love of Stuff* as “one of the most rewarding

experiences, because I was working directly with artists. I got to see behind-the-scenes: how installation works and what goes into it.” She recommends that students in their undergraduate degree take all the opportunities that come their way: “Even if you take on something and you hate it, at least you know!”

After her leap year, Kristyn went on to complete her Master’s Degree in Art History at Carleton University. She went on to take an internship at the National Gallery of Canada, one of her first jobs in the industry. Although it was an entry-level internship, Kristyn took the opportunity to “meet with everyone possible” and network within the gallery by e-mailing and introducing herself to managers and executives. Later, when opportunities within the gallery came up, they knew that Kristyn was interested. She was hired for two more full-time contracts, an achievement that she attributes to networking.

The transition from school to working full-time was, except for having to adjust her night-owl tendencies, relatively seamless for Kristyn. She credits the hands-on skills learned through Western’s Gallery Practices and Museum Studies courses, as well as her work placements at Carleton University for her comfortable transition into full-time work.

At the AGO, Kristyn is one of four Project Managers of Exhibitions and is responsible for managing a portfolio of 3-5 projects at a time. She works with teams of curators, interpretive planners, designers, and collaborators for each exhibition. Kristyn’s role is to connect the team, setting deadlines and managing budgets for each project. She helps to facilitate



discussions and run meetings to make sure that ideas are being shared and work is progressing smoothly. One of her favourite parts of her job is the opportunity to work with teams from across the gallery, as she collaborates regularly with departments like Marketing, Logistics, and Development.

As a detail-oriented person who likes to be connected to everyone in the gallery, Kristyn loves how her role allows her to think about the exhibitions more holistically, rather than through a strictly academic lens. Her favorite part of her role is the installation process, where she is immersed in the fast-paced and exciting time just before the opening. As crates come in and art is installed, Kristyn can supervise as long-term projects come together in a satisfying way.

Right now, Kristyn is busy working on an exciting exhibit that will be opening this summer, a collaboration between the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C. This project is the *Picasso: The Blue Period* exhibition, which will open on June 27th, 2020. As she looks forward to new and exciting opportunities in her career, she thinks back fondly on her tenure at Western as the building block for her future successes.



Photos by Shannon Rolanty



The chance to work on this year's *Spotlight* publication was an exciting one, and I greatly enjoyed my chance to talk to Kristyn. Her journey towards finding her passion and working her way up in a difficult industry was inspiring, as was her honesty and kindness in telling her story. In a faculty that rarely offers clear-cut paths to employment, it is valuable to hear stories like Kristyn's, where focus, determination, and networking can lead to you finding the career and role that you are best suited for.

Rose is a fourth-year student finishing up an Honours Specialization in English Language and Literature alongside a Major in SASAH. She looks forwards to finding ways to bring the creative attitude fostered in her arts education to a future career.

Mackenzie

Sinclair

BFA (Hons) '15

Fine Arts

MA '17

Art History & Criticism

BY PETER DICKSON

Mackenzie Sinclair graduated from Western University in 2017 with a Master's degree in Art History and Criticism following her Bachelor of Fine Arts and minor in Art History and Criticism two years earlier. An active member in the Western community, Mackenzie acted as a soph during her undergraduate career and a teaching assistant while studying for her masters. In addition, Mackenzie also volunteered at various art galleries in London including both the Michael Gibson Gallery and the Forest City Gallery.

Currently, Mackenzie finds herself at the forefront of the art scene in Toronto. While managing the Tagliatella Gallery, she has also taken on the role of Operations Manager of the Yorkville Murals project. "The gallery itself started in New York, and they represented old masters [of Modern art] such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, but over the course of the last decade, they have been bringing in more street artists like Banksy and Mr. Brainwash." This is especially true at the Toronto location that opened in July 2018. With the help of her director who "cultivated a great network [throughout his artistic career], we are able to feature not only famous artists like Basquiat, Banksy, and Mr. Brainwash, but also emerging Canadian artists who in time will also be important to contemporary art."

When she first came to Western in 2011, Mackenzie started out as an aspiring artist. Her art consisted of drawings and photography, but throughout her academic career at Western, her art evolved into sculpture and installations. As she took different studio courses that exposed her to different methods of creating art, she was able to expand her thinking of what constituted as art. It was in her fourth year that she realized her strong passion in curating while learning how to make art in collaboration with other students. "My overall creative process throughout my four years at Western was fluid. I didn't stick to one medium. I know a lot of people tend to do that. [For example], they love and are comfortable doing photography and then they stick with it, but I explored a lot. Western was a great learning space for my undergraduate and Masters degrees. Professors such as Kelly Wood, David Merit, Christine

Sprengler, Patrick Mahon, and Kirsty Robertson all shaped the way I went about creating and investigating art."

Mackenzie found Western to be the perfect environment for emerging artists. The city of London is small with an active art community where students can have access to get their artworks into galleries and display spaces all around London. She also found that the art community is a small enough circle that young artists can easily get to know everyone and become active members of the London art scene.

After she earned her Masters degree, where she focused her research on public art, she headed to Toronto, where the arts community is larger than London's and, in turn, was able to offer her more opportunities. While Mackenzie didn't have great luck for the first year, she eventually started working at Tagliatella Gallery of Toronto as an unpaid assistant. It was working as an assistant that Mackenzie was able to learn valuable sales techniques and organizational methods – enough to be offered a full-time job, and then, recently, be promoted to Manager. Through working in the gallery, she is able to talk to artists, curators, and learn new knowledge such as an artist's creative process, a gallery's curatorial decisions, and the latest topics of discussion in the art world. She also emphasized that a gallery like Tagliatella is a means of starting an art collection. They aim to make art a not-so-distant world for people who are not artists while providing access to purchase valuable art at all price ranges.

Working in a gallery in the heart of Toronto has been exciting for Mackenzie. Since last July, within the Yorkville Murals project, she has not only gotten to collaborate with talented street artists, but also with retailers and brand-name stores in Yorkville that the painted murals neighbour. Inspired by other well-known mural festivals, Yorkville Murals came to be after Mackenzie's director Alan Ganey saw the untouched potential in Toronto. "Although, the project is run by my director and myself, it is very much its own entity with its own website, Instagram, and own agenda outside of the gallery. [It has been a] nice synergy among not only [the artists who painted the] Yorkville Murals

but with the gallery, the brands around us, and other retailers.” Last year, the project had 9 murals go up painted by various international and Canadian artists.

Being a fine art student at Western can be a unique experience compared to students in other fields. Surely, while the future is unknown for everyone, the possibilities for a fine arts student may seem vaster. When I asked Mackenzie if she had any advice for the fine arts students such as myself, she was happy to share. “Western’s contemporary teaching methods pushes young artists to be more introspective and be critical of their work conceptually. For practicum students, keep your portfolio, build it up. Try to draw themes from all the courses you have taken... try to draw on those differences and think about how you can apply them in a cohesive thought... All arts students should utilize the media room available in the art building. It’s very important to stay educated in the field and keep up with the most recent news and discourses of the art world.” As for the students who are about to or have already entered the world outside of the university bubble, her advice is to just take your shot and put yourself out there in the weirdest and most noticeable way possible. “I landed an interview for Tagliatella through an Instagram message, asking if I was able to help the director open the gallery... Go to openings, ask questions, be willing to learn, and get turned down – a lot.

And finally: “Stick to your practice and your love for the arts. There will be a moment after you graduate where you’ll go ‘I have no clue why I created this, or studied art, and I’m a little bit lost’. Do not let that hold you back to make the leap into the job market, whether it be in auction houses, public galleries, publications, a practicing artist, or anything that fuels your love of art.”



It was an honour getting to interview Mackenzie, not only an amazing Western University alumna, but also an established artist and curator actively involved in the world I aspire to work in. Conducting this interview has shown me much of what our lives after university can hold, and while I haven’t spoken with many graduates who work in the field of fine arts, meeting with Mackenzie has inspired me to so I can gain even more valuable insight. Her advice about the persistence and determination necessary to thrive in an Arts-based career was encouraging, and the opportunity to hear about her road to success was beyond rewarding.

Peter Dickson is a third year honour specialization in fine arts. He is currently refining his artistic style and method of expression. His sketchbook gets thicker by the day.



Meagan Timney

BA (Hons) '04

**English Literature &
Performing Arts**

BY BAILEE MIELKE

For students in the faculty of Arts and Humanities, the future can often feel uncertain. One of the most common questions A&H students get is, “what are you going to do with that degree?” These questions can only add to a student’s anxiety as it is overwhelming enough trying to figure out the next step after graduation. Talking with Meagan Timney, the User Experience (UX) Manager at Google, proved to me that Arts and Humanities students have more doors open for them than may initially be apparent. “All things being equal, if I saw two resumes, and one was a science background and one was a humanities background, I would pick the humanities background. Because I know that the humanities people have the skills to succeed in the business world,” Meagan told me.

Meagan enrolled at Western for her undergraduate degree in the Scholar’s Electives program with a focus on English language and literature and performing arts. Her father was the Dean of Social Science at the time, and Meagan had grown up in and around Western. “It was part of my life, so going there made a lot of sense,” Meagan explained during our interview. She described English literature as “her first love” and therefore the program she focused the majority of her time on at Western. However, she also took courses in French, history of music, and dance. Meagan describes herself as being “really lucky” when she entered into her undergraduate degree, as she had the opportunity “to work with some of the best and brightest in

the department.” Professors such as Peter Auksi, who taught her first year Renaissance literature course, made Meagan think about literature in a different way. She credits Professor Auksi for helping her learn how to “craft ideas of rhetoric and use language to make arguments,” skills that Meagan still employs in her work today. She says that learning those abilities in her time at Western “helped set the groundwork” for her to be able to do what she currently does as a User Experience manager.

Meagan initially entered into her undergraduate degree with the goal of becoming an English professor, thinking that she would stay and teach in London. Moving from her hometown, Meagan pursued her Masters and PhD at Dalhousie University, where her passion for technology was rejuvenated. Meagan has always held a love for technology, from learning how to program by the time she was nine years old to creating text-based adventure games. When she was 14, Meagan was already designing University websites, including Western University’s department websites. While her undergraduate degree focused on Meagan’s artistic side, it was her Canadian edition class, taught by Dean Irvine at Dalhousie University, that began the process of combining her artistic and tech-savvy sides. Instead of doing a physical scholarly edition for the class like the rest of her classmates, Meagan decided to do a digital scholarly edition because of her technical background. Without knowing it at the time, Meagan was entering into an emerging field known as the “digital humanities”. During her PhD the following year, Meagan taught the second half of Canadian Editions and taught undergraduate students HTML and CSS so that they could build their own digital editions. This was the “aha” moment for Meagan, as she finally saw how she could marry her technical side with her studies in the humanities.

Choosing to leave academia was not an easy choice for Meagan. She admits, however, that it was made easier for her because she had learned about digital humanities, understood computer-human interactions, and had started to read about user experience. Her first web agency job made her feel certain that she was in the right place. However, after 10 weeks, Meagan



was laid off because of the recession, telling me that “my first introduction to the real world was getting laid off at a job that I adored.” Regardless, Meagan did not give up. She persevered and was hired by numerous other companies in the following years. When Meagan realized she was ready to take on her next challenge, she reached out to a designer that had worked with her at Inkling before moving to Google. She interviewed and got the job at Google in September of 2016.

While working at Google, an opportunity came up to manage Stadia, a cloud-gaming service within the company. She is now doing qualitative research with a team based in Waterloo, Ontario, while still working from her home in California. Her role as a UX Manager “closely aligns everything [Meagan] has done throughout [her] whole life,” and “so much of it” she says, she learned at Western. Meagan says that the most important thing she does in her job everyday is craft narratives to tell stories, which is a skill that she first learned during her undergraduate degree.

Meagan has managed to merge two seemingly discordant aspects of her life into a perfect career for her and now successfully manages a large team of people at Google. What made her into the success she is today is her perseverance through bumpy roads, creating a large network of contacts, and not being afraid to reach out to people. She cites that having a degree in literature allows her to “ensure that research is getting done, but also ensuring that the work [her researchers] are doing is being heard.” Meagan told me that she is “definitely in [her] dream job, and loving every minute of it,” which makes me more hopeful than ever for the future of all my fellow Arts and Humanities students that we can achieve the same.



I feel absolutely honoured to have had the opportunity to interview Meagan. Her story proves that there are many paths to success with an Arts and Humanities undergraduate degree. I will carry Meagan’s advice on crafting arguments and narrative throughout my own journey of finding the perfect career that, like Meagan’s, merges the things I am passionate about into one. Meagan’s story taught me that perseverance is key, and to keep fighting for what I want in my career. Additionally, it is okay to change my mind if I believe that there is something out there that would suit me better. At the end of each day, it is about making the most of our time in academia, and learning as much as we possibly can that will help us in the future.

Bailee Mielke is a fourth-year Arts and Humanities student pursuing an honours specialization in English Language and Literature and a Psychology minor.

Kim Whaley

BA '88

**English & Political
Science**

**BY ERIN
ANDERSON**



For Western alumna Kimberly Whaley, life has come full circle. Whaley, who completed a double major in English literature and political science before going on to complete a Master of Laws (LLM) degree abroad, has maintained her ties to Western. Not only has Whaley recently been invited back as a guest lecturer in the Faculty of Law, but is the proud parent of a Mustang, her daughter Sam, who began her own studies in the Art and Humanities in 2017. When asked about her experience coming back to campus years later, Whaley said, “It was nice to return to teach, the campus had a different feeling, one of perspective and maturity, of looking back at what was and the path I followed before my return...I never envisioned I would be back there in that role and it was just plain fun; [they were] second and third-year students [who were] very keen. I’ve taught at Queen’s, U of T, York at Osgoode, but it was special being [at Western].” Whaley knew from a young age that she wanted to be a lawyer, citing a desire to advocate for others. Whaley always wanted to work in human rights and dreamed of working in the Hague, Netherlands, the “International City of Peace and Justice.” Whaley acknowledged that she gained many of the necessary skills which she uses in her career through her undergraduate education, including the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and write concisely and persuasively. Whaley said that, while she recalls applying to other universities, she “only ever wanted to go to Western.” Whaley and her best friend from high school applied to Western as their first choice and were both accepted and began studies the following autumn, renting an apartment together off-campus.

“My first English Professor was Dr. Good. I remember him well. I was drawn by the intrigue of sociology, philosophy, journalism, and political science. My days at Western were filled with exploration of people, place, time, and academia.”

Whaley not only experienced growth in the classroom, but also through her extra-curricular activities with the *Gazette*, as a Campaign Manager for a USC President candidate, and playing field hockey. Whaley said, “Western is a wonderful institution for learning, the halls full of our future leaders and innovators,

creators and thinkers. I am proud to have been a part of the Western community and to call myself Western alumni. As a student at Western I did not know what the future held for me, the future something most of us worry about at some point, in some way, yet, looking back, the unknown was maybe the best part of the adventure.”

While Whaley was accepted to all five UK law schools she applied to, she ultimately decided to go to work for a year at her family’s retail business after graduating from Western, which she said, “taught [her] the value of hard work...[and] set [her] up well for becoming a business owner.” Less than one year later, Whaley left for the UK where she attended law school and went on to complete a master’s degree in international law, a diploma in legal practice (with distinction), and a diploma in professional skills. Whaley spent ten years living in England before returning to Toronto, where she completed the necessary requirements to practice law in Ontario. After working for a few years, eventually becoming a partner before opening her own boutique law firm in Toronto 2006, which specializes in estate and trust litigation.

Whaley said that the most rewarding part of her career is being able to help people and work with a diverse client-base, despite practicing in a niche area. Whaley particularly values the opportunity to work with issues pertaining to elder law, working to achieve restitution for elderly people who have been defrauded or taken advantage of. Whaley is also the co-civilian chair of the Toronto Police Services Community Consultative Committee on issues of elder law. In addition to her practice

and other community involvement, Whaley is an award-winning writer, teacher, and mentor to emerging lawyers. Still, despite all her success, Whaley considers raising her daughter to be her most significant achievement.

When asked if she had any advice for students and recent graduates, Whaley said: “Be patient, things don’t happen right away, [but] not to get down on yourself. Students today put so much pressure on themselves to do well...take a step back and allow yourself the chance to grow. Life takes twists and turns and the path you follow is not always the one that you would perfectly pave for yourself [even] if you could.



The opportunity to interview Kim was an incredibly rewarding experience for me. It opened my eyes to the possibilities that await graduates of the Art and Humanities, despite what we typically hear about the difficulty of finding meaningful paid work once we leave university. I believe this is a common misconception that needs to be debunked—something that is demonstrated in Kim’s journey. With an arts education, we are equipped to pursue endless possibilities! Kim’s advice to be patient and allow room for personal growth and development, as well as being open to paths we never imagined ourselves on, was particularly meaningful for me as I grapple with the prospect of graduating from Western in a few months. I no longer feel a sense of trepidation, but rather am feeling inspired and excited for what the future holds.

Erin is a fourth-year English and Writing student who hopes to support the mental well-being of students in the higher education sector after graduation, while working at Western and completing a master’s degree in Education at Laurier. Erin came to Western in the fall of 2016 as a mature student and to be graduating soon is a huge source of pride for her—second only to her children.

An afternoon with

Alexandra Kimball

journalist, essayist, feminist.

PhD '07

**English Language &
Literature**

**BY FRANCESCA
DENOBLE**

Nearly a year after its launch, Western alumna Alexandra Kimball returned to campus for a live reading and discussion of *The Seed: Infertility is a Feminist Issue*. Now a writer and editor in Toronto, Alexandra completed her PhD in English Literature at Western in 2007 after a BA from York University and an MA from the University of Toronto. Her journalism and essays frequently appear in major publications across the country. *The Seed* is her first book, an emotional and candid journey across the difficult-to-navigate landscape of miscarriage and Alexandra's own experience of infertility as a lifelong feminist. Blending together feminist history, science, mythology, and her own story, *The Seed* opens up a space where feminism and infertility can coexist for an intersectional audience. The English Department hosted a discussion panel after the reading to ask Alexandra about her experience as a journalist and the process of writing her first book. An all-around boss-woman, Alexandra had lots of stories to share and advice to give about making it in the world of writing.

What brought you to Western University?

Well I did my undergraduate degree in Creative Writing at York University and then my master's at the University of Toronto. Honestly, I got waitlisted at UFT for my PhD, and that was my first choice. Western was my second, but at the time, it had very strong people working in my field which was already so narrow to begin with. It was actually better that I wound up at Western as there were two professors that had studied Oscar Wilde and that's what I was after. I've always loved Wilde as my mom used to read his fairy tales to me when I was little, and I had an uncle who was a big fan as well and left me all of his [Wilde] books. It was always something I had an emotional attachment to.

How was your transition from academic to employee? You finished your PhD and then...?

It was terrifying! You get attached to the people and the place, and then you graduate and just leave. That's a big life change, and there's no real acknowledgment as to how huge that is. Going from a place like Western's English graduate department where there's a lot of individual attention and it feels like a family to looking for a job in Toronto... It feels a bit like being abandoned. I stayed in touch with some people from Western and keeping those connections even as we were all scattering was important.

Is there anything you wish you had been told as an undergraduate taking on a Creative Writing degree?

Honestly, I think that it's really important to have an alternative way of making money. It's not doing anyone any favours to pretend that the job market is really awesome right now, and the industry is constantly changing. It's okay to have a back-up plan, a side hustle you can work on. You'll only be helping yourself!

How do you establish your identity as a writer and journalist? How do you find your voice without compromising your morals?

Sometimes we just have to write things for money or to keep a job. I think most writers will have those pieces that they absolutely cringe over when they have to write them, and that's common. I don't beat myself up when it happens, but I do always try to go for integrity whenever I can. It's the reason why we do what we do, isn't it? To tell the truth.

Journalists are often taught to be objective in their writing. How did you branch away from this? Are there different expectations for women?

This can be a bit nerve wracking because there's such a bias against combining reporting with a strong sort of subjective eye. Generally, what I try to do is write something that I can really stand behind and what really feels true to me. The very negative response to women writing personal essays is just standard misogyny and I unfortunately don't think that's going to go anywhere any time soon. I work with younger female journalists as a mentor and what I encourage them to do is build a strong community of other female writers. It helps a lot!

Do you have any advice for any aspiring journalists out there?

Get to know an editor in person! Send them your pitch, work out some good energy, and then ask for a face-to-face meeting. They're overworked and they want their freelancers to make their job easier. So if you put it in their mind that they can call you when they need something, they'll reach out. Find out what it is they need and what you can do to help.

When did you know you were ready to write your book?

I was ready to write my book when I had something really important that I wanted to say. And that will always be the best motivator for anything you want to write. If you feel like this is true and that you need to say it, then it's probably a good story! And even if they're not perfectly written, they can always be polished into good stories.

The Seed is available for purchase on Amazon, select independent bookstores across Canada, and from its publisher, Coach House Books.





Join Spotlight!

Looking back on your time at Western, what do you remember most? If you could go back and share one thing with your undergraduate self, what would it be?

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