



AN ARTS & HUMANITIES STUDENTS' COUNCIL PUBLICATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PROJECT ADVISORS

MELISSA PARKER
JESSICA SCHAGERL

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

MARY HAMILTON

INTERVIEWERS

MICHELLE SADORSKY
ELLA EUM
SPENCER BUBIS
GRAY BROGDEN
MARY HAMILTON
ALYSSA DUARTE
LAUREN BELL
RAGHAD EL NIWAIRI
RYAN GOODISON
ABBIE FASERUK
CARLY PEWS

PHOTOGRAPHER

OLIVIA VAUGHAN

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LETTER FROM THE DEAN

For many of the alumni profiled in this publication, the decision to come to Western was easy – deciding on the degree path and the courses that would feed their passions was far more difficult! The same is true of many of our current, incoming and prospective students (who are also struggling with the effects of a global pandemic). This shared experience makes Spotlight such an incredibly valuable and illuminating document. You will be introduced to creative, engaged and passionate people who are willing to help support, guide and nurture the next generation of Western Arts and Humanities students. In their stories you will find them sharing everything from the advice offered by inspiring faculty mentors who suggested new paths, to suggestions on how to develop skills that can shape a career over time. All of it is underlined by the value of the wide range of formative experiences that an Arts and Humanities education makes possible across a lifetime.

This year, once again, we had to get creative to support students and build the community that we so deeply value in the Faculty. Spotlight shows the power of our alumni connections and the resilience of our students. A warm thank you to all of the student interviewers and alumni participants. We remain grateful for your combined talent, creativity, kindness, and excellence.

With deep appreciation,

Dean Michael Milde

Dean of Arts and Humanities

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I am so pleased to present you with Spotlight Volume 5! When I began as a Spotlight interviewer in my first year, we conducted interviews over coffee, unmasked and not yet aware of just what was coming our way. Two years later, I am so grateful to the alumni who continue to carve out time in their busy schedules for a phone, Zoom, or email interview — and even more grateful for the warmth and enthusiasm that makes these remote interviews feel so personal. More than ever, this year's alumni prove the versatility of an Arts degree, with interests, abilities and careers that span the worlds of art, business, policy, and law. And of course, Spotlight wouldn't exist without our interviewers, who tirelessly write, edit, and restructure their pieces to paint the most accurate portrait of their alumnus. This year, I hope Spotlight gives you the same pride in your Arts degree that it gives me in mine.

Warmly,

Mary Hamilton
Editor-in-Chief

WHO ARE WE?

Spotlight is an Arts and Humanities Student Council Publication that aims to highlight the careers of some of A&H's most impressive alumni.

The question we've all been asked, "What can you do with an Arts and Humanities degree?" is not an easy one to answer—not because it has no answer, but because there are countless to choose from. Lawyer. Artist. CEO. Writer. Multidisciplinary, and so on. True to our name, we spotlight the impressive career trajectories of our graduates, with the aim of providing answers to this age-old inquiry.

SAM MAGGS

SHE/HER
BA '10 HONS. ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERATURE
WRITER OF BOOKS, COMICS & VIDEO GAMES

BY MICHELLE SADORSKY

Sam Maggs has achieved much in her career: writing novels like *The Unstoppable Wasp* and *Built on Hope* for Marvel Press, graphic novels like *Critical Role*, *Nott the Brave*, *Tell no Tales*, and *Fangirl*, comics like *Transformers*, *Rick & Morty*, *Star Wars* and—one of her greatest accomplishments to-date – 11 issues of *Captain Marvel*. She's even written for video games like *Borderlands*, *Spider Man*, and *Call of Duty*'s latest installment *Vanguard*. Currently, she is the Head of Narrative at the Wizards of the Coast Digital Publishing and Licensing Division, where she works on *D&D* and *Magic of the Gathering* content. And she's not done exploring her horizons.

To get to this point, Maggs spent a great deal of time reading, writing, and consuming media. She always knew she wanted to study English but believed that she wasn't a fit to be an author, based on the manner in which professional authors talk about writing. "It's quite mystic; they have a muse, and their characters talk to them, or they have to write every day and the ideas just come out of them. That has never been true for me." To her, writing felt like pulling teeth. Yet she came to understand that writing is a job. "It is something that, with practice, you can get better at, and it's not mystical."

When she visited Western in 2006 and learned about the value placed upon the English Department as its own entity, she knew the University would support her writing pursuits. At Western, Maggs gained an incredible amount of experience, developing a sense of community within the English Department, where she was the English Representative on the Arts & Humanities Student Council and heavily involved with the Theatre Department. She was also fortunate to

photographer: Kim Newmoney



find two incredible mentors in Professor Christopher Keep and Professor Joanna Devereux. "I don't think I would have been as successful with school or in my career without Professor Christopher Keep," she remembers. "When I was going through a hard time in my personal life, and my schoolwork was failing, Professor Keep personally stepped in to tell me: 'I see a lot of potential in you and I know you're suffering, and I know you're struggling right now. I want to extend a hand to help you.' And I wouldn't have been able to go to grad school without him. So, I feel very fortunate." She found another mentor in Professor Joanna Devereux. "She made us all feel like we were equals, and valued and smart, and never talked down to us, and be our weird authentic selves."

Growing up, Maggs was big on geek culture, reading comic books, playing video games, and watching lots of TV. "My parents have always been huge nerds. They went to see the original *Star Wars* in theaters in the 70s like 22 times. They said they were big dorks and

raised me as a big dork. Instead of rebelling and getting into football or something, it just kind of stuck.” Unfortunately, her interests were not widely accepted at the time, especially for girls. “I was sort of a closet nerd and didn’t feel that I had anybody I could talk to you about the stuff I loved, or I thought I would be ostracized. So, for a long time, I felt that I wasn’t welcome.” Maggs also noted the problems of certain tropes that kept perpetuating fiction at the time, particularly the “Smurfette Principle.” This trope had the tendency to include only one female character amongst a group of male characters. “And that girl had to stand in for all girls.” These shortcomings in fiction would later become motivation for Maggs’ future writing projects, intent on producing fiction that better reflects the world as she knows it. “A lot of my inspiration comes from wanting to make art that is welcoming to 8–17-year-

old girls who are into sci-fi and fantasy and video games. I want them to feel seen and included.” This has also prompted Maggs to incorporate more female ensembles into her works. “In a world where we’re socialized to believe that there’s only room for one girl or woman at the table at a time, it makes us feel like we have to compete instead of cooperate with each other... But there’s room for all of us at the table.” Now, Maggs feels that it’s part of her responsibility to be that helping hand for other writers. “I love sending a lot of scripts out to people, because nobody’s born knowing how to make a video game. Nobody’s born knowing how to read a comic. Everybody had help, and some people will tell you that and some people will not tell you that.”

To up-and-coming writers and students pursuing an English degree, Maggs has some sage advice to share: “Now is the time.

Don’t listen to anyone who tells you you’re silly for going into English. It has the most potential. You can use it to do anything.” Maggs also emphasizes the importance in putting the initiative in your hands. “A huge thing that will put you a step ahead in terms of professional writing is writing something and finishing it. Because people like me can’t hire people like you unless we see a finished piece of your writing.” She states that large industries—especially the video game industry—are always looking for new hires and fresh voices. “So put your portfolio together so we can hear your voice. Because we need unique takes, especially from marginalized folks, women, people of colour, and queer people. We need more of them represented in all of these industries behind the page or behind the screen.”



AUTHOR REFLECTION

I am so thankful for having the opportunity to interview Sam for Spotlight. She taught me that an Arts Degree does not have a very direct path into the workforce, and that’s because it opens up so many possibilities for the future. Talking to her made me excited about the opportunities and paths I can take, and she also taught me that taking the initiative and putting my work out there is key to success in a writing field. It’s made me realize that building that writing portfolio early on is extremely useful in this field.

Michelle Sadorsky is a third-year student, completing an Honours Specialization in English and Creative Writing. She hopes to pursue a career in film and screenwriting after graduating.

NAOMI SAYERS

SHE/HER
BA '14 HONS. CRIMINOLOGY & MINOR IN WOMEN'S STUDIES
INDIGENOUS FEMINIST LAWYER

BY **ELLA EUM**

Naomi Sayers provides a voice for those unheard and advocates for the needs of those vulnerable and marginalized. Her time at Western University set a strong foundation for her advocacy and legal work. Sayers applied to the Sociology program in the Faculty of Social Science and shared her first-year university experience with many others figuring out which classes she did and did not enjoy taking. She eventually found Criminology courses enjoyable and decided to major in Criminology. She took an introductory Gender Studies course and fell in love with the vivid discussions, engaging readings, and her work in the class, leading to her minor in Women's Studies. While she never planned to study Criminology and Women's Studies, these programs "provided [her] with a positive experience" and lifelong skills.

As a Western undergraduate, Sayers engaged in advocacy on campus and in the London community. In her second year of university, she often participated in programs at the Indigenous Services Centre at Western. Most notably, she developed, hosted, and facilitated her own workshop, "Lifting Our Voices: Addressing Stigma in Post-Secondary Institutions," about combating racism in the classroom. She drew from her experience as a racialized, Indigenous student and taught how to identify stereotypes about Indigenous people and "[provided] participants with different tools of how to challenge [racist] statements." In her third year, Sayers was a panelist at the "Idle No More" teach-in on campus, where she provided "education to [her] non-indigenous peers ... and information sharing". In the same year, she volunteered in the London community to facilitate and develop the Prisoners' Justice Film Festival and participated as a panelist. In Sayers' last year at Western University, she presented at "Flaunting It!"—the Women's Studies and Feminist Research's Annual Undergraduate Conference on Gender and Sexuality. "My sister wanted to be a lawyer, and when I was younger, I wanted to be like my sister. So, I would say

photographer: Anna Toth



I wanted to be a lawyer because I wanted to be like my sister," Sayers joked. Yet Sayers set her own path to achieving her childhood dream. After graduating from Western with an Honours Bachelor's Degree in Criminology and Minor in Women's Studies and receiving acceptances from both law schools and master's programs, she remembers her internal conflict with choosing her next path. Sayers sought out advice from her Gender Studies professor, recalling, "[my professor] told me I should go to law school because [my acceptance to law school] won't happen again, and the MA program will always be here." Following this advice, Sayers accepted her admission into the University of Ottawa Faculty of Law.

Sayers graduated from law school with a Juris Doctor, and two specializations—one in public law and dispute resolution and another in professionalism. As a summer student, articling student, and then subsequently as legal counsel, she worked at Hydro One, Ontario's largest electricity transmission and distribution utility service provider. Sayers loved working at Hydro One, but after some time, she found herself craving different

experiences. “I wanted to do more litigation,” says Sayers. “I wanted to do different types of files.” This desire led her to start her own practice as a full-time sole-practitioner, fulfilling her desire for a broader practice and experience in various legal paths, such as indigenous law, corporate law, litigation, and criminal law. Sayers is licensed to practice in Ontario and Alberta and currently practices in her hometown of Sault Ste. Marie. While she offers a wide range of legal services, her practice targets human rights issues and challenging systemic injustices. “It provides me with a way to think creatively about bigger issues and how to solve the issues for the individual client,” she explains. Whether in her professional career, advocacy work or proposing legal reform, she continuously advocates for individuals who “often feel unheard, dismissed or silenced by the legal system.” As a resource for those with less power, Sayers aims to help in any way she can. Sayers has had many successes; her most recent accomplishment was arguing a motion of anonymization

for strippers providing affidavits in Court at the Ontario Superior Court of Justice Court in February 2021. Sayers represented “Work Safe, Twerk Safe,” an advocacy group promoting the rights of strippers in Ontario. “When an individual files an affidavit, which is a written testimony, [its] sworn in, to tell the truth of that document. But to do that, you have to put your full legal name on it. So, when you have strippers who are trying to access the justice system, in order to participate, they’re giving up their identity, their privacy, their safety, their security,” she clarifies. Sayers was successful in having the anonymization motion affirmed. Her success in the motion was recognized at the Supreme Court of Canada when the Court cited her proceeding in a separate high-profile case, affirming that stigmatized groups have a right to privacy in the litigation process. Reflecting on her time at Western University, Sayers shares that “[she] always tells others if they’re going to go to law school, to try to take a Feminist Studies or Gender Studies course, because taking those courses

have helped me to be a better writer and to think critically about [what] I read and interact with in everyday life.” She continues, “If it weren’t for my Women’s Studies course, I wouldn’t have become the type of lawyer that I am today because I’m challenging systems and working within the system and have to carefully work within the bounds of the law as a lawyer. The Gender Studies courses [at Western] have definitely given me the tools to do so.” Sayers is the perfect example that success in Law school can come from a diverse background that takes into account divergent interests. Sayers’ education at Western didn’t revolve around getting into law school but about what she enjoyed learning and practicing – and these are the foundations she uses while making essential changes in the legal world today.



AUTHOR REFLECTION

I loved being an interviewer for Spotlight and getting the opportunity to speak with Naomi! My entire experience has been incredible and very rewarding. Naomi’s ability to use her education and career to help those unheard or marginalized by the legal system was inspiring. Her journey to becoming a successful lawyer has definitely provided a lot of insight. I took away a lot of helpful advice from our conversation and hope to use it in my own path of going to law school and onwards. Talking to Naomi also strengthened my belief that an education in Arts is only one of great potential and possibilities. I’ve gained a deeper appreciation for my Arts degree from this experience, and I’m proud to be in the Arts and Humanities. Learning about Naomi’s life and career after university has made me confident in my work at Western and provided me with certainty that my experience in Arts will get me far.

Ella Eum is a third year Political Science and Philosophy student. She aims to go law school after undergrad and wants to continue developing her writing skills.

PHIL GURSKI

HE/HIM
MA '83 SPANISH
PRESIDENT & CEO BOREALIS THREAT AND RISK CONSULTING

BY **SPENCER BUBIS**

One of Phil Gurski's fondest memories of his time at Western University was the incredible breadth of knowledge to which he constantly had access through excellent libraries and professors. The shelf of new releases at the front of D.B. Weldon Library was of particular importance to him as it remained one of the most mind-broadening places on campus during the two degrees he completed from 1978 to 1983. When I spoke to Gurski in December of 2021, he was proud to share his many memories from Western as an alum of the Faculty of Arts & Humanities, before his remarkable thirty-year career in Canadian intelligence and his renaissance as a prolific author, podcaster, and consultant in the field of his expertise.

After graduating with an Honours Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and French—the first in his family with a post-secondary education—Gurski also completed his Master of Arts in Spanish Language and Literature at Western. On a fall day in 1982, as his master's neared its end during the midst of a financial recession, Gurski noticed an eight-by-ten poster in the Alumni Placement Office (now called Careers & Experience) from the Department of National Defence with a hiring call for linguists. He applied, but didn't hear back—a relatable issue for students today. This was the second time Gurski had applied for this opportunity with no response even as some of his peers received theirs. He had first come across the same poster a year earlier as he was wrapping up his bachelor's degree. Nonetheless, a month later, when Gurski discovered National Defence was conducting interviews on campus, he walked into the office where they were taking place to check if, just by chance, his name was on the list of interviewees.

photographer: Philip Lizotte



His name did not appear on the list of candidates that day at first, but as Gurski was stepping out of the office, they called him back in. Once the page flipped over, his name indeed sat by itself at the top of the second page. Recounted vividly by Gurski, these tenuous steps to his interview with the Department of National Defence—which went brilliantly—led the way to his thirty-year career in safeguarding Canada and Canadians through his work in multilingual foreign signals intelligence at the Communications Security Establishment (CSE), from 1983 to 2000, and then as Senior Strategic Analyst at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) from 2001 to 2013. He transitioned to the Canadian counterpart to the CIA in the United States and the UK's MI6 several months before the terrorist attacks of September 11th.

As it turned out, Gurski's resourcefulness led him to a profession that he was to excel at in the coming years, contributing to the security of Canada in crucial ways. Gurski's natural talent for learning languages, including

an interest in understanding their mechanics—which he pursued through further graduate and doctoral-level studies in linguistics—served him well in CSE and CSIS, where he quickly learned the languages within his regional specialty of the Middle East. In his mandate at CSIS, Al Qaeda-inspired violent radicalization and extremism in Canada and abroad was the primary focus of his research and analysis.

“Retirement” would not be an appropriate descriptor for Gurski in the years since his career in the civil service ended in 2015. Gurski has used his vast knowledge, expansive network and breadth of experience to help all kinds of people, from businesses to early-career intelligence professionals and students, to the general public of curious individuals looking to hear what an ex-spy has to say about various important and fascinating topics. As President & CEO of Borealis Risk Consulting,

a firm specializing in terrorism, extremism, and radicalization, he not only helps clients through his expertise, but produces engaging, highly relevant and informative content through his regular podcast show, and even his YouTube channel “Canadian Intelligence Eh!,” where you can feed your curiosity with the questions he answers in his video series “Intelligence Veteran Reacts” in his kind and friendly demeanor. With thousands of media interviews, six books—that’s one a year for the last six years—and many more exciting roles and projects to come, each new day brings meaningful challenges for Gurski.



AUTHOR REFLECTION

It was such a pleasure having the chance to speak with Phil about his career, motivations, and interests. Chatting about current issues in Canada and the world at-large throughout our conversation with such a knowledgeable expert was a great privilege. The boundless energy and consistent sense of bettering the community that Phil injects in every contribution he makes to society through his work is inspiring to me. His curiosity and passion for helping people and his greater home of Canada led him to a fulfilling career, not without surprises and challenges that he surmounted repeatedly, taught me valuable lessons as a second-year undergraduate student that I hope to apply and emulate in my own life. Thank you, Phil, for the time you shared so generously, along with the copy of your latest book that I have really enjoyed reading since its arrival in my mailbox during the holidays. I look forward to following along with what is to come in the next chapter.

Spencer Bubis is a second year Philosophy student. He hopes you enjoy learning about Mr. Gurski—an absolutely fascinating Arts and Humanities alum.

SARAH RICHARDSON

SHE/HER
BA '93 VISUAL ARTS
DESIGNER, TV HOST & PRODUCER, AUTHOR

BY GRAY BROGDEN

When Sarah Richardson began her undergraduate career at Western, she did not know what she wanted to be – a not uncommon occurrence for undergrad students! Originally studying in the Faculty of Science, Richardson switched to a major in Visual Arts in her second year, leading to a career in interior design, television, writing, and a constant stream of new opportunities.

At 17, Richardson started her journey at Western with “no master plan.” Despite being a declared Political Science major in her second year, Richardson switched to studying Visual Arts at the beginning of her third year when she realized that Social Sciences were not her calling. In Visual Arts, she spent the rest of her time immersed in creative projects. However, the importance of a balanced degree remained imperative to Richardson, who believes that one of the most important courses she ever took at Western was Business 20. “It taught me very quickly that being an artist is hard and you have to think about making it a business,” she says, adding that a Business course should be mandatory for all Arts students. It helps them think about how they can turn their art and their passion into a viable business.

After her time at Western, Richardson began building her design empire. Starting behind the scenes as a prop stylist and set decorator, Richardson soon became an on-air personality with her first TV series, “Room Service,” on HGTV. Since then, Richardson has hosted, co-created and co-produced eight different shows over the span of two decades. In addition to her many television projects, she founded Sarah Richardson Design Inc., which has been operating since 1998 and services clients across Canada,

photographer: Jeremy Kohm



the U.S. and Europe. Despite the magnitude of her success, Richardson still gives credit to where it all began. “I feel that I have the career I have because of my experience at Western,” says Richardson. “It’s not just about the school experience—it was about the people experience. Western was a place where I learned to branch out and meet people and network.” She even credits her first television job to a social connection she made through one of her Western roommates.

When it comes to her creative progress, Richardson has never lacked inspiration. She told me that, while every room in a house is important and holds a meaningful purpose, her favourite rooms to design are gathering spaces. An extrovert by nature, Richardson revealed that “entertaining, and being with people is what feeds [her] soul and [her] happiness.” It comes to no surprise that some of her favourite spaces to design are living rooms, dining rooms and kitchens. One thing Richardson learned early on was how to

trust her instincts and intuition. “I don’t ever feel that I have a creative block,” Richardson says. “There is always so much going on, that you don’t get stuck.” Because there is always so much to do in her world, the big blocks for Richardson are the challenges she has to overcome during a project, such as budget confinements, structural issues, and product delays. When working in the field of design, there can be so many options that it is easy to second guess yourself, which is a quick way to find yourself exhausted. Richardson advises: “Decide to do it, commit to it, follow-through, and see how it turns out.” If it doesn’t work out, you still have time to try something new, because you didn’t waste time agonizing over your decision. Juggling so many different jobs, Richardson recognizes the importance of her team, stating “I can’t do it all myself.” For her, working effectively with others is all about collaboration,

communication and recognizing what everybody does best. Trust also plays an important role in an effective team, with Richardson noting that she “[has] to be able to delegate” and it can be hard to relinquish control when you do not trust the people around you. Still, Richardson notes that her team has become a lot smaller over the past couple of years, as they adapt to the changing work conditions presented by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. A smaller team has not been the only result of the pandemic. Like many other industries, the design world has been met with its own set of pandemic restrictions and challenges. Supply chain delays and Covid-related safety precautions have meant shifting timelines and extended deadlines. Yet, despite these challenges, Richardson remains optimistic, stating: “I’m working with what I’ve got.” Rather than letting the pandemic take her down, she has simply found

new creative approaches, such as shopping locally at antique shops instead of waiting on custom pieces that may never come. Even with her past successes, Richardson is not slowing down. Sarah Richardson Design Inc. continues to be a thriving design firm, while her newest HGTV project, “Sarah’s Mountain Escape,” is set to premiere later this year on HGTV Canada. This new show sees Sarah in the Rocky Mountains as she transforms a quirky mountain bed-and-breakfast into a luxury rental property, which Richardson aptly describes as “quite an adventure.”



AUTHOR REFLECTION

Being a Spotlight interviewer was one of the best experiences I have had since becoming a Western student. It was incredibly exciting being able to talk to and learn from one of my Faculty’s most distinguished graduates. Being an artist has always seemed daunting, even though I’ve always known that’s what I wanted, but talking with Sarah made it seem a little bit easier and even more fun than I had previously imagined. I know that this experience and the things I learned during my interview with Sarah will help shape the next two and a half years I spend at university, as well as my future career.

Gray Brogden is a second-year student pursuing an Honors Specialization in English and Creative Writing, and a Major in the Arts and Humanities. After graduation, she hopes to follow wherever her writing takes her.

CAMILLE INTSON

SHE/HER
BA '19 HONS. SPECIALIZATION ENGLISH LANGUAGE
& LITERATURE & THEATRE STUDIES
MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST & PHD CANDIDATE

BY MARY HAMILTON

"I like to say I have my fingers in a lot of pies," Camille Intson, BA'19, says with a laugh. The multidisciplinary artist, academic, and Western Arts graduate does, indeed, have her fingers in a lot of pies, so to speak, with flavours including playwriting, conceptual artistry, directing, digital artistry, and writing—both poetry and short fiction, not to mention her litany of academic works.

Now, Intson trades playwriting for song writing with a six-track EP titled "Troubadour." Released under the name "Camie," it sees Intson return to her storyteller roots for an alternative folk album, rife with vivid imagery and emotion, woven into the very texture of the sound. More than most albums, Intson infuses her work with a sense of character and adventure. "I love creating these cinematic and heavily ambient worlds for people to swim around in," Intson says. "I love listening to music where you really do feel like its really its own little world."

This stunning turn as a creative is a far cry from how the Hamilton-native envisioned her future when she started at Western. Originally enrolled as a Political Science student, Intson planned to go to law school—a corporate track worlds away from her creative passions. "It never made sense to anyone," she says of her brief future in the courtroom. "As a kid and as a teenager, I acted and I was performing my music everywhere. I mean, I was an artist."

Like many students, Intson's self-described "come-to-Jesus moment" came at the hands of a particularly formidable professor and in a class she took merely to satisfy a credit requirement. She credits Professor David Bentley's first-year English class with her sudden switch, noting that no other class "fed [her]

photographer: Keith Tanner



and challenged [her]" as much as his class. "It just became this thing of who am I trying to kid? So, I went back to the Arts." She traded Political Science and law school for an Honours Specialization in English Language and Literature and Theatre Studies. Yet, Intson stresses that these epiphanies are not exclusively attainable in a classroom or through simple book-learning. She stresses the value of finding your place outside of the classroom and integrating yourself within a community. "Some of my most formative experiences involved going to a lecture at Museum London or taking workshops with some of the Fanshawe acting students," Intson recalls. "Being involved with the greater creative community, not just at Western, but beyond, challenges you to be thinking: where do I exist in an ecology of people on the planet who are artists?"

Intson has gone to great lengths to find her place in the greater creative ecology, travelling far outside the boundaries of London or even Canada. After

graduating from Western in 2019, Intson embarked on a year-long move to the U.K. to receive her Master's from the Royal School of Speech and Drama, a renowned institution that has trained some of the most recognizable names in film history (Sir Laurence Olivier, Dame Judi Dench, and Carrie Fisher, to name a few). One wonders the chance that Intson might someday count herself among the slew of notable alumni. Since landing back in Canada, Intson shows no signs of slowing down. She penned "Troubadour" while living alone in Toronto, spurred by the feeling of isolation and loneliness felt by many over the last eighteen months and her own specific melancholia—born from the mental and emotional crash that came with returning to a locked-down Ontario after her "freeing and liberating" year abroad. "It's really a concept album," she explains. "It's about running away and getting lost in the world and coming home to a world that is

stagnant. I just felt haunted by all of these stories of places that I'd been and people that I'd met and I started writing these songs with these vast emotional and physical landscapes that really captured the spirit of that year for me. That's 'Troubadour'."

But beyond pushing her own creative boundaries, Intson's true purpose in Toronto is as a PhD student at the University of Toronto, where she is studying Design Justice with the Faculty of Information, working on her academics alongside her many creative endeavors. Inevitably, the question Intson must face is what she plans to do next. With her extensive CV and insatiable curiosity, she could find herself successful in any number of fields. Is her future in academia? Does she see herself as a professor? ("The pay is good," she jokes.) Perhaps she'll expand on one of her artistic pursuits to become a full-time playwright—or singer-songwriter. Artist?

Intson herself is in no rush to answer this question. "Your whole life, you are sold this idea that you have to figure out what you want to do with your life and then you have to go to university to achieve that goal," she says. "Then once you're out of university, you're either at that goal or still reaching towards it. The fact is, that's just not how life works. That's not how the world works."

Looking at her own resume—both creative and academic—Intson is aware of what she refers to as the "cacophony" of sprawling and seemingly disjointed ideas and projects ("Did the same person do all these things?"), but she believes at her core that we are more than one thing; more than one project, more than any one degree, and even more than one school.

"When we open our minds up to the world and allow ourselves to be more than one thing," says Intson, "that's where the good stuff happens."



AUTHOR REFLECTION

My conversation with Camille back in August could not have come at a better time. Just days away from returning to campus for the first time in over a year, Camille's enthusiasm for collaborative in-class learning was exactly what I needed to ease my nerves over returning to the classroom. Her passion for the arts is palpable, even on the page. I hope readers finish this article with a sense of optimism and openness—up for trying, learning, or experiencing something new.

Mary Hamilton is a third-year English and Creative Writing student. Thanks to Spotlight, she has a passion for literary journalism and wants to find her name in print in the years to come.

SYDNEY HEGELE

THEY/THEM
BA '18 HONS. ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERATURE & CREATIVE WRITING
WRITER

BY ALYSSA DUARTE

There is a common misconception that it is virtually impossible to succeed with a degree in the Arts. Oftentimes, those who devote themselves to the said field of study are told they're making a "risky" choice and questioned for the validity and reliability of their future career paths. However, every field of work has their naysayers and it takes a certain level of courage and determination in order to take the plunge into what may be an uncertain future. Western alum Sydney Hegele proves that defeating the odds is feasible if you are up for the challenge.

When Hegele began their studies at Western, they weren't entirely sure what they were going to do after graduation. Like many students, they didn't have a clear idea as to what the professional world had in store for them.

Initially, Western hadn't even been Hegele first choice. In fact, it happened to be the last university to which they had received admission. After exploring the campus grounds, what did seem almost certain was that the university would offer a new journey in which they could partake in all sorts of different opportunities.

Though Hegele always had a passion for creative writing, they found themselves worried that their life would be wrought with financial and professional struggles if they sought a career as a writer. "During my adolescent years, I was never really exposed to people who wrote," says Hegele. "They essentially didn't exist around me and because of this, it was difficult for me to discern whether I even, competition wise, would ever be ready for a professional career in the field or whether it was just a hobby."

In order to keep their doors open, Hegele decided to take a general approach to their first year, enrolling in a variety of courses. But once second year rolled around, they found themselves overwhelmed in trying to satisfy the module requirements for both a B.A in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature as well as a major

photographer: Sarah Bodri



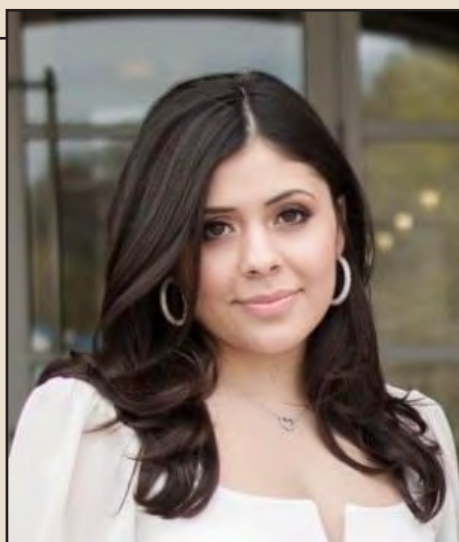
in Criminology. "I was overloading a ton of courses. I was mostly doing English courses, but there was also a lot of base sociology and criminology courses as well," they recall. "I remember telling myself, 'Well, if this writing thing doesn't work out, at least I can be a criminologist.'" When Hegele realized they didn't do well at multiple choice testing but excelled at essay-writing, they made the decision to focus on English and Creative Writing. It was a decision that paid off. In the final year of their undergraduate degree, Hegele was selected as Western's student writer-in-residence. It was during this time that they would also enroll in a full year self-led thesis writing course that would eventually change their life. Working side-by-side their supervisor and mentor, Tom Cull, Hegele drafted the first iteration of their debut work of short fiction, *The Pump*.

Nicknamed after the small town of Grimsby, Ontario, in which Hegele was raised, *The Pump* touches on the notion of making sense of one's upbringing. "A lot of my book is based on the experiences I had as a child," they said. "Growing up, there was a weird contrast between how great it was that everybody knew each other, and

how terrible it was that everyone knew each other. And from that, there was a real sense of isolation that you experienced from the ‘outside world.’” When asked how this correlated with their university experience, Hegele notes, “When you come to a university from a small town, there definitely is a big culture shock. You get to learn so many things and at the same time, your mind is open to so many things.” As Hegele tried to make sense of their childhood, the book essentially served as an outlet from them to exhale and process what they went through. Immediately after graduation, Hegele applied for a Master of Fine Arts. However, they did not receive admission. “At that point, I was terrified. I thought my life as a writer was over” they explained. Though during this time, they questioned the possibility of publishing their book, but found themselves stuck on the notion that it simply was not “good enough” to be released. It sat untouched for two years. Some time after graduation, Hegele learned through Twitter that an independent publishing company was

accepting submissions of unpublished manuscripts. After submitting what was once just a school assignment, they landed themselves a deal and within six months, their book had grown a few chapters, been edited, and received its cover. Soon after, however, their first publisher, Insomniac Press, faced copyright issues. With just months before the book’s scheduled release date, Hegele received a daunting phone call: they had until midnight to either dissolve their contract, or forfeit their rights and risk it never being published. Even though *The Pump* was already on its way to the printers, Hegele dissolved their contract. They couldn’t lose their work forever. Hegele went back to where it all began, taking to Twitter to describe their finished book and offer it to anyone who might be interested in publishing it. The next morning, they received a contract from Invisible Publishing. “My publishing journey was unconventional,” says Hegele. “It’s important to keep in mind that every single person’s publishing journey is really curating to them. And to know

that just because you’re not doing it like somebody else, that doesn’t mean you’re doing something wrong.” It was definitely fate. When asked to recall one of their favourite moments at Western, Hegele reminisces on being a part of campus literary journals such as *Symposium* and *Semicolon* and attending their respective launch parties. “Those launch parties were the first place I ever actually read my work out loud and had my work published.” It was there Hegele recalls their growing confidence, and being able to connect not only with themselves, but those around them as well. Their advice for undergraduate students is simple: “Focus on the connections you can make – not just the one’s you can put on your resume, but instead your genuine friendships.” It’s important to remember, Hegele says, that “in life, there are lots of things to learn and lots of people to meet and experiences to have.” You just have to take the leap.



AUTHOR REFLECTION

From the moment I met Sydney, I felt an instant connection. Our undergraduate experiences were similar yet different and after our conversation ended, it was quite clear to me as to why we had even been paired together in the first place. For a long time, I too have struggled with the uncertainty of where my Arts and Humanities degree may take me. However, Sydney’s story taught me that with perseverance, curiosity, and patience you can truly achieve anything you set your mind to. Our conversation provided me with an opportunity to explore why I had even chose to go to university in the first place—to develop new interest, learn new skills and meet new people. I truly am grateful to have taken part in the Spotlight publication!

Alyssa Duarte is a second-year student pursuing an Honours Spec. in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature with a minor in MIT. She hopes to pursue a career in journalism.

DAVID MCGOWN

HE/HIM
BA '74 ENGLISH & HISTORY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CANADIAN BUSINESS COALITION
FOR CLIMATE POLICY

BY LAUREN BELL

"If you are uncertain of what the future holds or what your next employment opportunity could or should be: think broad not narrow," was David McGown's advice to impart to current Western students. "Think about how to learn, rather than what should be learned."

David McGown graduated from Western in 1974 with a BA in History and English. After successful career in both the public service and private sector, McGown is now the Executive Director for the Canadian Business Coalition for Climate Policy, where he is at the forefront of climate advocacy. He describes his work as being "among the most important work my generation can do for the next" and is appreciative of all the ways his career has enabled him to evolve and support greater causes – whether it be climate change, developing youth scholarship programs, or promotion of the arts. Like a true Mustang, he credits his Western experience as his initial investment into a rewarding career.

McGown's decision to attend Western "seemed like the right choice at the moment." During course registration, requirements dictated that he had to take at least one course from outside of his home Faculty, and the class that fit most neatly was a first-year English course, a subject he always enjoyed but not one that he intended to take in university. McGown credits the professor of that first-year English course, Allan Gedalof, as being the one to open his eyes. "Allan would stand in front of the room with a text and say, 'your job is to connect the dots.'"

McGown would also experiment with other subjects at Western, such as economics, leading him to work on a senior thesis under the supervision of Bruce Bowden, who also happened to be the professor that handed McGown the brochure to Johns Hopkins University as he looked for graduate programs offering a mix of academic and practical course work. He found this at Paul H Nitze School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns

photographer: Mondo Lulu



Hopkins, specifically within the Centre for Canadian Studies, where he could study Canadian political economy through the lens of a foreign educational institution. As McGown states, "It seemed to be the right next step after having laid that liberal arts foundation at Western. I could build on that and not lose anything from my undergraduate experience." When writing essays in his Master's program he would often start with a quote from some of the literature he previously studied. Because of this, McGown urges students to "acknowledge [that] in a world [of] 'I will never use this, whatever it is I'm studying,' to recognize you might be very surprised." McGown graduated from his Master's program in 1980, and as a student graduating amid a recession, he learned the value of networking. One role he took on at SAIS was to run a program where he would identify interesting Canadian public figures and invite them to speak to the faculty. This is how he made the connection to Tom Wells, the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs for Ontario (1978), who later helped McGown acquire his first job in the public service. After an election cycle, he then transitioned into working within the International Branch

of Department of Finance as an economist. In the six years he spent in the department he worked his way across a variety of positions, including a junior advisor to the Minister of Finance and then the Executive Assistant to the Deputy Minister. Despite being offered a more senior role in the Department, he began exploring opportunities outside of the public service and was offered a position by CIBC to set up its first government affairs office in Ottawa. McGown went on to spend the next twenty-eight years of his career at CIBC, where his work with the former Canadian politician Jim Prentice at CIBC led him most directly to his work today. Prentice, as vice chair of CIBC expected to give 4-5 speeches a year and McGown was part of a team supporting this effort. In actuality, Prentice delivered around 30 speeches every year on natural resource development, environmental leadership in Canada and the vital participation of Indigenous voices within that that conversation. McGown's role was to "feed the machine" so that Prentice could speak thoughtfully to his audiences.

Prentice left CIBC to return to the world of politics as Premier of Alberta. After his 2015 election loss he authored Triple Crown that set out the challenges of resource development and environmental and Indigenous leadership. Shortly after Jim Prentice died in a plane crash, which McGown believes was a real loss for Canada. Nonetheless, this prompted McGown to start considering the balance between economic development and environmental leadership, a topic he further pursued when working within the Insurance Bureau of Canada. Discussions with the Ivey Family Foundation identified a gap in market for a business voice to bring focus to the importance of greater consistency in climate policy, creating an initiative McGown "couldn't walk away from." Thus, in early 2020, amidst a global pandemic, he launched the Canadian Business Coalition for Climate Policy. Since its founding, McGown and his corporate colleagues have worked "to continue shining light on how we move the climate agenda forward, how we encourage that consistency the business community needs, while

driving towards our 2030 Glasgow commitments and our 2050 net zero commitments."

"Sometimes in these conversations, one question I'm asked is 'can you tell me how your undergraduate degree got you a job?' and I think the honest answer is it didn't, because I knew I had to go on and do something else," he says, "But I can say in all honesty and certainty, my undergraduate degree helped me keep the jobs I had far longer than I might have otherwise been able to." "It wasn't what did you learn at Western, but it was being taught "how" to learn, how to adapt, and again, going back to Allan, [learning] how to connect dots," McGown concludes. "That skill is probably the most important one can bring to the world of work, coming out of the educational experience."



AUTHOR REFLECTION

Being a part of Spotlight has been enlightening experience for me despite not being an Arts and Humanities student myself. David's story had so many serendipitous themes to me, it reminded me that I can get creative with my career and should have equal confidence in chance and ambition – perhaps my future job doesn't even exist yet. I see many similarities between myself and David, he worked hard, sought new experiences, and advocated for himself, which is an example I hope to follow in the future. Moreover, I hope that when I can reflect on my years at Western, I can find it as valuable as he did.

Lauren Bell is a second-year nursing student, often found studying, and wishing she was in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

LISA SIMONE RICHARDS

SHE/HER
BA '06 SOCIOLOGY, POLITICS & MINOR IN CREATIVE WRITING
PUBLIC RELATIONS & COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT

BY RAGHAD EL NIWAIRI

The word “success” these days can feel loaded, filled with unease and often burdened with restrictive expectations of what a person is expected to achieve and at what age or what path they should follow and even who they should become. Once one has lived enough to see beyond this unrealistic understanding of success, authenticity to oneself gains importance—an idea which Lisa Simone Richards embodies. Both her authenticity and willingness to seek what her heart leads her to has been fundamental to her accomplishments thus far and is a lesson that many Western students and recent graduates will benefit knowing.

Richards, who graduated from Western with a BA in Sociology and Politics with a Minor in Creative Writing, currently runs her own business as a Public Relations and Visibility Strategist, coaching entrepreneurs on how to market themselves and “break through the noise” to improve their business. Having worked at PR firms and agencies, she knows exactly how expensive hiring a firm is. Any given firm may charge clients \$10 000 a month on a yearlong contract—perhaps a reasonable price for larger corporations, but for small business owners and start-up entrepreneurs, it is nowhere near a feasible expense. To remedy this, Richards created a program that spends six months coaching and educating clients on the need-to-knows of “becoming your own publicist.” By the end of the program, clients are able to either take control and succeed as their own PR strategist or teach a member of their team to do so. Richards shows them exactly what they need to “find the right people,” understand where their business will be seen, how to develop ideas to pitch and more. By equipping independent business owners with knowledge and skillsets, Richards provides long-term solutions for individuals and in turn, supports their businesses growth. On her site, Richards also offers free PR workshops every two-months for those who are interested but cannot

photographer: Ema Suvajec



commit to a six-month program.

There is no question that she is good at it, too. Between 2007 and 2009, Richards was employed by large PR firms and agencies and working with well-established companies like Staples, Virgin Mobile, Crayola and more. In this time, Richards supported her clients by landing their messages everywhere from television screens, magazine covers, to newspaper front-pages. She moved on to become the PR head of a fitness start-up and helped them expand their business from thirty locations inside Ontario to over 100 nation-wide. With her expertise, their revenue grew from 400 thousand a year to 4 million a year, increasing by 10 times over the course of 4 years.

Luckily for many independent businesses, Lisa Simone Richards noticed the shift in 2015 of people leaving their stable 9-5 jobs in order to pursue entrepreneurship, and the dire need for good marketing born from it—especially within the fitness industry. Seeing as so many people were interested in bringing good quality fitness programming (from barre studios to Pilates to independent gyms), it was clear to Richards that the

services themselves were not the issue but rather, the lack of exposure. Google LisaSimoneRichards.com, and you'll find Richards smiling at you with the words "You can finally stop being the best-kept secret." This is reflection of both what is necessary for businesses to do well in their markets, and some of the values that have led Richards to where she is today.

When asked why fitness has been such a notable presence in her career as a PR specialist, Richards discusses her experience doing horribly in math at a school that championed academic success. Despite having parents who excel at maths and sciences, Richards was not gifted with the same inclinations. It was a math teacher, ironically, who recommended Richards enroll in a gym class available during the same period. This choice led to Richards having a blast in Phys-ed classes and sports teams throughout high school. Years later, her fondness of physical activity landed Richards two new credits for her resume. After participating in a fitness bootcamp with a friend, Richards was hired

at that same establishment both as their lead publicist and as an instructor. She also added to her own repertoire, certifying as a personal trainer and kickbox instructor. In following her passions and drive, Richards has landed many opportunities by simply asking for them. While her love of fitness led her towards a career of supporting others with similar interests, her willingness to follow her own interest opened the PR world to Richards. In her first year at Western University, Richards had a life-changing conversation with a fourth-year sorority sister. It was over lunch that Richards learned about her friend's plan to specialize in PR at Humber in the future and she became intrigued by the plan. During Richards's fourth year, she came across Heather Reier, founder of Cake Beauty, on the front page of a magazine and contacted her asking to work in PR for her as an intern. After being told there were no positions available then, Richards said "That's great, I'd like to be your next intern. So when can I come in for an interview?" Her commitment to her own passion landed her that

position where she was then hired on after her internship ended. She did this with another fashion and beauty position and succeeded, again. "Have the ambition and reverse-engineer how to get it," Richards advises current undergraduates. It can be difficult to gather the courage to follow your own desires, especially when they are unconventional and especially when you may not have the means to do so. In Richard's case, following her ambition led her to creating a career that allows her to comfortably live, while supporting other people by helping their businesses thrive. Richards also emphasizes the importance of "walking right through" the difficult things and facing them head on. Whatever that difficult thing is, Richards knows that you can just trust in yourself and take the first step forward.



AUTHOR REFLECTION

Getting to know and speak with Lisa reminded me how much we have to gain when we truly listen in our conversations. She knows how crucial it is to acknowledge the experiences and expertise you lack to truly open yourself to learning and personal growth. She has inspired me to step out of my fear and work towards what I want, to try new things, and to open myself to learning and gaining new skills. Speaking to Lisa was both a humbling and exciting experience.

Raghad El Niwairi is a second year Media and Public Interest student in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies. She is looking forward to continuing her personal growth and expanding her worldview through more genuine conversations with the others.

AJANI CHARLES

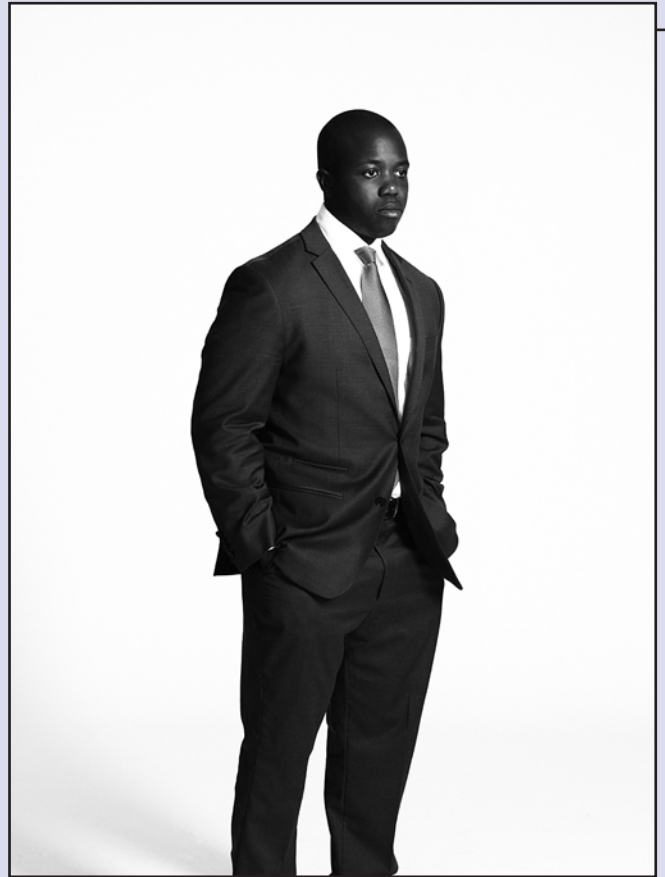
HE/HIM
BA '08 PHILOSOPHY
PHOTOGRAPHER, DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATE
& CANON CANADA AMBASSADOR

BY RYAN GOODISON

Toronto-based photographer Ajani Charles's path to success was an unconventional one. After being unsure of which University he would attend, he embarked on a journey to Western to study philosophy, turning down acceptances from photography-based art programs to expand his thought process further. "Philosophy has had a profound impact on my career," Charles says. "Part of the reason why is that it shows the path of entrepreneurship, the path of being an artist. I learned a lot from studying existentialism during my last year at Western, studying individuals like Nietzsche." For Charles, the study of individual philosophers like Nietzsche and Socrates still resonates in his work today. Philosophy taught him to question his own beliefs and allowed him to become a better artist. As crucial as philosophy was for Charles, it was not the only skill he gained at Western that proved to be beneficial for his path as both an artist and entrepreneur. "I'd say most of my education at Western came through socializing with my classmates and meeting so many different people from so many walks of life. Understanding how to navigate different social situations, and learning from my classmates on campus, in the classrooms, and nightclubs," he says. In fact, Charles notes how reading a room and understanding your own emotional state is a critical skill for any artist. Understanding yourself will allow you to connect with others, which is essential in the business world, noting that "your photography skills can only get you so far."

After graduating in 2008, Charles launched straight into establishing his career. "In my last semester," he says, "I had an existential crisis. The proximity with

photographer: Neva Wireko



the real world led me to make a decision, and that decision was to choose a path of an artist and to choose a path of an entrepreneur." With his wide range of photography knowledge and the skills he gained at Western, Charles believed he could make his way as an artist in Toronto. He began as a photojournalist intern for the Torstar corporation (a parent company of the Toronto Star) and worked as a production assistant for the production company 235 Films. And in his spare time? "I was investing anywhere from 40 to 100 hours a week into educating myself and reaching out to established photographers in Canada and in the US so they could review my portfolio," Charles says. His entrepreneurial spirit was alive from the very beginning.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Charles notes that his days would mainly include meetings, phone calls, being on a film set, working on a photography project, and travelling around Toronto. He sets aside time for yoga and workouts, as well as reading.

But at the start of the pandemic, Charles found himself engaged in an entirely new project, titled “The Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic,” a photo series which captures how Toronto has been affected by the ongoing pandemic. “When the pandemic hit,” he says, “having the fourth largest city in North America as a ghost town was very intriguing to me, and observing people’s reactions to the pandemic in real-time with my camera was fascinating to me. And so, I became far more engaged in shooting Toronto and Torontonians than I had ever been.”

Charles considers himself a Toronto-based artist and still understands the importance of the city to his art. “Toronto has had a profound impact on my life, consciousness, and who I am,” he says. “Toronto’s the most multicultural city in the world. I’ve been to New York, I’ve been to LA, I’ve been to London, and Toronto is more multicultural than any

other city that I’ve been to. And that cultural diversity has impacted me in ways that I’ll probably be unpacking for the rest of my life.” Also a foundational aspect of his artistic process is storytelling. “Storytelling has been an important part of my life and career,” Charles explains. “I consume a lot of stories daily, and I tell stories through my profession, whether it be through writing articles; I’m writing my first book now, producing films, producing photography projects. It’s all storytelling.”

Charles considers himself both an artist and an entrepreneur. He uses his skills in art and business to craft his vision and build his art. Charles doesn’t believe the two aspects are mutually exclusive, and he engages with both in his daily life. He continues to work in Toronto, taking risks and finding new ways to explore his creativity. For Western students, he offers, “If you’re an undergrad right now, you can try different things and explore

numerous career paths, especially at this point in history. You can take several risks, as long as you’re able to recover from those risks, even financial risks you can recover from. And I say it’s worth it if you have even a small semblance of a dream, any semblance of creativity that you want to manifest or put out in the world. I say go for it.”



AUTHOR REFLECTION

Interviewing Ajani was an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience. Ajani is a deeply thoughtful artist and entrepreneur who gave insightful responses to all my questions. I related with him deeply when he spoke about the internal struggles he faced in his last year at Western. After speaking with him I felt more confident about taking risks and trusting my own skills to take me to a career later in life. I came out with a newfound appreciation not only for the skills I have gained at Western, but the skills that I’ve been able to accumulate on my own.

Ryan Goodison is a third-year student pursuing an Honours Specialization in English and Creative Writing. He hopes to pursue a career in screenwriting or journalism.

COLLEEN KIM DANIHER

SHE/HER
BA BMUSA '06 ENGLISH & MUSIC
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES,
WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY

BY **ABBIE FASUREK**

“Not at all,” was Colleen Daniher’s response when asked if her goal as an undergraduate was to someday become a professor. Like many student’s experiences in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, the destination after graduation was fuzzy, and she was just excited to get going with her education, or as Daniher puts it, “spread my wings.” Amidst this uncertainty, there was one thing that Daniher knew for sure: what she was passionate about. Daniher calls herself “the creative type,” as growing up she sang, created music, enjoyed reading, and was interested in performing arts. It was these passions that eventually led her to choose the Music program at Western, where she was excited to receive vocal training and gain credentials as a musician. “I was a passionate amateur community theatre aficionado,” Daniher recalls fondly. Part of Daniher’s academic experience at Western was discovering what she loved, and just as importantly, what she didn’t. In the Music program, Daniher loved studying the pop music stream, wherein she learned about culture, protest music, and social movements. Although she loved this part of her studies, the program also emphasized opera, which she found did not completely fit her interests. When discussing her experiences in the Music program Daniher admits, “I didn’t love it all the time,” and this is what drove her to pursue concurrent degrees in English and Music. It was through the English program that Daniher was exposed to cultural studies, which she excitedly discovered she could use for music studies as well. It was then that Daniher made a connection between her two chosen subjects and began developing her own unique academic and potential research interests. “The humanities are a place to ask

photographer: Geoff Martin



questions,” Daniher reminds us, and this is exactly what she did in her undergraduate classes. While these interests were developing, it was Professor Kim Solga, who Daniher credits as a huge inspiration, who introduced her to ideas of power dynamics, gender, and sexuality, and inspired her to think of theatre as a practice of critical inquiry. Through her consideration of those ideas, Daniher discovered a new passion, and it was one that would later prove to be a huge influence in her graduate studies and in her research. Daniher’s decision to continue her education after her undergraduate was one based on uncertainty. Similar to when she first began university, Daniher was unsure of what to seek in terms of a career and she felt that “things were looking bleak in terms of my employment prospects as a humanities student.” She decided that a yearlong Master’s program would give her more time to figure out her future, and was curious to “see where it would take me.” It took her far, to say the least. After completing her MA in Theatre

Studies at the University of Guelph, Daniher went on to complete her PhD in Performance studies at Northwestern University, and began her career as a professor, teaching at San Francisco State, and held postdoctoral fellowships at Brown University and Amherst College. Currently, she is a professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in the Department of Communication Studies.

Drawing on the skills she learned in both the Music and English programs, Daniher's research focuses on the intersection between performance studies and critical race theory. She is currently working on her book titled *Bodies of History: Mixed-Raced Femmes and the Colonial Archives of American Entertainment*—a project that stems from her dissertation research. It is safe to say that Daniher figured out what she wanted to do in terms of employment, and she owes it to her passions that she discovered in

her undergraduate studies.

When asked what advice she has for current undergraduate students in the Arts and Humanities, Daniher states, “do things [outside of the classroom] that are based on your learning” and “ask questions.”

She explains that learning how to ask questions is an important part of the Arts and Humanities curriculum, as it allows students to explore and understand their current lives, people's lives in the past, and how people will be living their lives in the future. Arts and Humanities degrees teach us that we are all connected together.

Daniher goes on to sympathize and recognize how nerve racking it can be to leave university, as many of us think of it as finally entering the adult world, but she assures us that “life doesn't end after university.” It should be considered exciting that there are new opportunities waiting for us in the future, even if sometimes we are unsure of what they may be.

Along the way, it is okay to change our minds and explore different interests and change career paths. On a final note, Daniher has a message for all students: “I would like to impress upon students who are listening that your life is not determined after your undergraduate career, not by a long shot. So just be open to different opportunities and circuitous paths life can offer you. It is its own kind of education.”



AUTHOR REFLECTION

Interviewing Colleen was an eye-opening experience! Through our conversation she made me feel more confident in my own future as an Arts and Humanities student, and led me to realize that it's not a bad thing to be unsure of the future path ahead. Life has a tendency to throw curve balls and lead you down paths you never thought you would take, and so it is important to jump on new opportunities and pay attention to new emerging interests and passions. Like Colleen stated in our interview, life doesn't just end after university, and I truly believe that learning is a lifelong process. I hope Colleen's story is as inspiring to other Arts and Humanities students as it was for me, and makes them feel more confident and excited about their own stories. After interviewing Colleen, I am certainly more excited about my own story and any plot twists that await me!

Abbie Fasurek is a third-year student pursuing an Honours Specialization in English Language and Literature, and a minor in History. She has a slight book collecting addiction, and currently has over 300 books in her personal collection.

SHANI MOOTOO

BFA '80 FINE ARTS
D. LITT. '21
WRITER AND VISUAL ARTIST

BY **CARLY PEWS**

For Shani Mootoo, living as a working artist was the only option, “I was capable of nothing else and refused to equip myself to do anything else.” This mentality paid off: Mootoo is now an accomplished writer, having been long- and shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize numerous times. Her visual artwork and photography have been exhibited internationally, including at the New York Museum of Modern Art, and she has also written and directed multiple short films.

Mootoo’s dream of becoming an artist started when she was about ten years old. After graduating high school, Mootoo believed that she would attend Sir George Williams University (now Concordia), following the footsteps of a much-admired art teacher in Trinidad. However, this plan never came to fruition for one very specific reason. Nine years earlier, in 1969, Black Caribbean students at Sir George conducted a sit-in in response to discriminatory pedagogical practices. On the last day of the protest, computers were set afire, leading to the affair being dubbed a riot. Having heard of the riot, Mootoo’s conservative Indo-Trinidadian parents worried that she, a Caribbean woman of colour, would face stigma at Sir George and would not allow her to go. Instead, they insisted that if she were to pursue a fine arts degree rather than the law degree which they preferred, that she would attend another highly regarded school in Canada: Western University.

Mootoo attended Western to pursue a Bachelor in Fine Arts. Her move to London was the first time she had left Trinidad without her family. While Western was not her first choice, Mootoo is adamant that Western and the city of London were the right place for her in the end. She played table tennis for the university team during her time as a student, and cites the Visual Arts department in particular as one which she was fortunate to experience, saying, “There was in the art department a climate — among professors and the student body — of

photographer: Ramesh Pooran



encouragement of experimentation and a willingness to allow us students to discover our medium and methods.” For Mootoo, who was always interested in different media and different tools of expression, this was an ideal fit. She notes that she is personally indebted to two of her instructors, Duncan DeKergommeaux and Paterson Ewen, for their guidance throughout her time at Western. After graduating from Western, Mootoo focused on becoming an artist. She describes this transition as moving beyond the degree, in that being qualified to call herself “an artist” did not come from the degree itself but how she worked after school, “if and how and where” she exhibited, and how her artwork was received by her artist peers. While Mootoo had always had an interest in writing, particularly in writing poetry, she was focused on her visual artistry until she was invited to publish written work in the 90s. She describes the transition as if “a dream I had not dared to dream had been realized.” Her first literary publication, a short story collection, was published in 1993.

“In truth, after my first two books, I had not intended to carry on writing, because by this time I had come

to think of my main practice to be visual art,” Mootoo says. However, after the success of her debut novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* — which was shortlisted for the Giller Prize and longlisted for the Booker Prize, among other nominations and wins — Mootoo began to focus on literary work. She says that it took some time before she began to miss visual art, and that the transition back to exhibiting was more difficult than the transition to publishing.

Whether she is working with visual mediums, short stories, or novels, a common thread throughout Mootoo’s work is her ability to capture intense character and emotion in her subjects. She says that her life as a visual artist has influenced her writing, and she sees her written work as a translation of the intense senses she feels in her mind. In the visual, Mootoo sees the opportunity for the viewer to bring their own interpretation to her work, an open-ended conversation to which she is drawn. While Mootoo is drawn to the complex ambiguity which is inherent in visual art, her writing is influenced by the precision of

language. “One of the things that fascinates me about verbal language is how very close one can get, using the correct words and arrangements of words, to what one means to say. Although a reader of prose or poetry will also bring their own experience to their understanding, as a writer, I have locked in my intentions by the words I have employed and their construction within a sentence, a paragraph, and the entire context of the story I’m telling.”

Despite her focus on visual art in her time at Western, Mootoo still finds connection between her projects as a student and her current literary career. After describing a project she completed as a student, a visual art piece completed in both Trinidad and Canada which “spoke of longing, of home, of the sense of displacement, of migration,” Mootoo says that she is still exploring that same thread of identity and home. “It is noteworthy that after decades of living in Canada since then, I continue to explore, particularly in my writing, this still uncut navel string of connection between ‘back home’ and my present home here in Canada.”

‘To young creatives, Mootoo says that focus is key. “I think you have to have first, that very strong, unshakeable determination, that this is what you are, this is what you want to do,” she says. “You have to have a plan of work, and go with that for a while. You give yourself a certain amount of time. And then you decide. Is this something you can pursue full time? Is it better that you have a well-paying job and yet carry on work as an artist part-time even as you still pursue your plan? Or would you be saner if you were—horror of horrors, but realistic—to abandon this dream of professional art life?”

For Mootoo, the answer was clear. Canada’s art and literary scene is all the better for it.



AUTHOR REFLECTION

My interview with Shani came only a few weeks after I’d officially decided to pursue a career in journalism, and I could not have asked for a better interview to start me on this new path. It is always exciting to speak with artists who have “made it” in the industry, and I feel absolutely honoured to have had the opportunity to speak with such a multifaceted creative, especially one who is as kind and humble as Shani. The way that Shani speaks about language, writing, and creativity is very reflective of my own feelings, and it is wonderful to see that someone with such a decorated career has the same foundations regarding creativity that I do. Our conversation truly resonated with me and inspired me in my own work. A huge thank you to Shani for speaking with me and for inspiring me to push my own boundaries of creativity, and another thank you to the Spotlight team for allowing me the opportunity to share her story.

Carly Pews is a fourth-year student pursuing and Honours Specialization in Creative Writing, and a major in Political Science. After graduating, she hopes to pursue a career in journalism.

Want to tell us your Western Arts & Humanities story?

Contact Jessica Schagerl
in the Dean's office:

jschage@uwo.ca

