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Interviewed by Haleigh Desjardins

Can you tell me more about your life before post-secondary? Where did you grow up?

I was born in the Ottawa Valley, and we moved to Port Elgin when I was three years old. So, I could say that I grew up in the Ottawa Valley but most of my accessible memory is in the Saugeen Shores area.

What high school did you attend?

Saugeen District secondary school.

Did you enjoy it?

I loved it. I was a little bit of a social butterfly and I have very diversified interests and skills and that lent itself very well for bouncing between different groups of friends.

What made you start thinking about University of Guelph?

I had already been to four other post-secondary institutions, so I was very, very program specific. By the time I went to Guelph for my master's, I had already done online courses with University of Guelph: that was for environmental conservation. I was well aware of the school, and it just came down to where the wind blew me as far as my career was at the time. The program was well-suited to what I wanted.

What is the program you studied?

Agriculture capacity development and extension. Not many folks know what that is. Agriculture is often studied in very technical ways with lots of charts, lots of graphs, lots of very specific nutrients and chemical components. Research can get quite complicated and very specific. How do you explain that to the farmer then, right? The capacity development and extension program is really a program for innovation. It's a

program for knowledge transfer and translation from studies into real life. It's a great start for launching a business – I run a business and it was really well-suited to the work that I was doing.

The nice thing about that program is that you can specialize in any discipline, any field of study. And they will work with you to bring your expertise into real life, into an applicable way of it being relevant. It's a unique program. I'd already been through school for a couple of other programs, and it suited me well.

You said you studied at different schools before Guelph, when did you get into Guelph?

I started Guelph in 2018. It was a two-year program for the Masters. I'd love to go back to complete a PhD, but family life makes it challenging. If I went back, Guelph would probably be the number one school.

You mentioned you have your own company, after graduating from University of Guelph, is that when you started your own business?

So, the company is called Green Feet Ecosystem Services Incorporated. We incorporated the company while I was doing my studies through the Gryphon Lair Competition. We took some of the research I was doing, and we participated in the Gryphon Lair Competition, mostly to expose the research in the business world, because what we were doing was very new. That was a fabulous launching point. We have a variety of wonderful projects. Many linkages came from the University of Guelph and some other schools. As a business, it's fabulous and it gave me a lot more transparency and trust and honesty by being linked up to a university.

I like to stay as cutting edge as I can and so to have that university affiliation is important. One of the core pieces of our business is that we braid different types of knowledge systems together and different fields of knowledge together and we try to have those complement each other to build stronger outcomes in the environmental field. So, having that university linkage was helpful for my work.

Let's talk about on campus life, do you remember any of your classes?

I did it on campus. I would drive back and forth two hours every Tuesday and Wednesday and two hours back. It was worth it. I could chit chat with classmates and go for lunch.

Did you have a favourite class here? Or a favourite professor?

Let's see. Helen Hambley. She was an exceptional woman, a leader in her field, but humble. Her communications classes were great because she was an honest and understanding teacher. I'm a single mom. So, some days it was "Oh, my kid is sick, I can't come" and she was very understanding of things like that. She's become something of a friend.

I really appreciated her input in the work that I was doing. I appreciated the approach she took to her own work; she was very inclusive, and she dealt oftentimes with tech and social sciences. That's a really challenging discipline that she was working in. And she made it look easy. She knew her stuff well, and she was always saying, 'I didn't know about this before, and I'd like to learn more about this' and she's very honest that way.

Did you have a chance to experience the social life outside of classes and lectures?

Of course. That was my day without my kid, right? We would go for lunch. We would go to events and activities. There were always shows that were playing or activities and get-togethers. Some of the sponsors and funding sources would get everyone together for big social events and celebration events. I really like stuff like that, I didn't get to attend all of them, but oftentimes I would.

I would stay late to go for a drink with friends or go and see this lecture that was coming to the school. It was a supportive environment. I like Guelph in general, every single town has different little gems of places to go, and Guelph has no shortage of those. I would go mountain biking with friends and go on little hikes with other friends.

With your program, did you feel a part of the OAC?

Yes, I definitely felt a part of the OAC. I was a part of the team that was helping to develop the Bachelors of Indigenous Environmental Science and Practice program while I was going to school and after I finished the program was finalized. I got to know some of the folks in the OAC quite well, some who have since retired. The OAC has such a diverse range and such an interesting history too in Canada. I felt part of it. I have yet to deliver dog sledding rides to all the executives and staff of the OAC and the Deans and everyone at the Arboretum. I kept joking with everybody that I would bring my dog sled teams down and give them a dog sled ride. So, I feel I'm not delivering on that, whereas the OAC delivered on providing a quality education alongside a great experience at the school.

You offer dog sledding?

Yes, it's one of the odder services that my business does because we focus on ecosystem services. As you may or may not know, ecosystem services are the benefits that you get from nature, like fresh air and water, recreation and nature is a big one. So, we run dog sled teams to help folks recreate in nature and pretty much all the places that we go travel through areas which have been conserved or protected. The Arboretum has always been one that I've wanted to take the dogs running through just for fun.

I'm not familiar with all of the OAC traditions, but I do hear about them and they do sound exciting. Did you take part in any of the traditions, or do you remember any?

I didn't really hear about many of them either. They may have been more youth oriented, and maybe I just didn't hear about them. Unless they did do some and I just didn't know it.

Do you have any favourite memories from your time at the University of Guelph that you can recall of?

I'll have to think on this one. My most favourite memory is that my daughter came to school with me one day and she was so excited to go "where Mommy goes to school" because she goes to school too, right? So, she got dressed up and was bundled up; it was a fall day or early spring, but she walked around the campus trying to spot all the Gryphons. It was like a hide and seek game. All of a sudden that Gryphon emblem became something much more special to me, and a real creature because it was real to her, it was something, that embodied this legacy of truth and the mystical, you know, anything's possible kind of a thing. My daughter, I remember she was standing by one of these Gryphons and it was one of the statues at the front of the school and she says, "I can't wait to go to school here too," and it was a really neat thing. She also chased after the geese and was looking at all the poop on the ground and stuff like that. So that was a little bit odd too, but I mean definitely the gryphon piece was a little bit better.

Would you recommend the University of Guelph to her?

I would, but ultimately, it's her choice. I know that the University of Guelph will probably have something that she'd like to do just given all the things that she said that she wants to do already.

Are you still friends with people that you met or went to university with?

Yes, those friendships continue. I'll see them at conferences sometimes, and we'll chit chat and update each other on our respective lives, jobs, work and things like that. We became very close because the capacity development and extension program is very small. It's a unique master's program, and we got very close because as you travel further and further into your educational career from bachelor's to master's, master's to PhD, it's a smaller and smaller group of people that you know understand your experience. So, you really bond with people the longer you stay in school. Through both good and bad. What is it they say? At NASA, there's a saying - it was on the Apollo movie - "failure is not an option," but there's actually more to that sentence. You go through bad stuff, you make mistakes, but you have to make mistakes if you're going to have successes, right?

When you say both good and bad, you have to go through the bad too. It's such a supportive and positive way to get through challenging stuff. I was a single mother running a business, completing my masters. That's not an easy feat, and looking back on it now, people will go 'oh wow', that was really hard. It was really, really hard. But not for a second did I ever doubt being able to do it because of the people at the school and the friends that I had at the school.

Don't answer if this question is too uncomfortable, did you go through any tough times during your university years?

On a daily basis. But you've got to go through them. Just like how I run things on the dog sled teams. You're not going to build a great team or a great person or a great character if you don't have those challenges to go through. I remember my piano teacher when I was quite young, she would always say if you're not thinking about playing the piano, then you're not learning. I always kind of kept that in the back of my mind. Her name is Caroline Renault. She was an incredible piano teacher and consequently I stuck to it right up to grade nine. I got credits for school that way. I was a horrible piano player, but I stuck with it. I grew up enjoying those challenges because it just builds a different kind of skill set, right?

Last question, you're not obligated, but are you willing to share any of your photos from your experience in the OAC or at the University of Guelph, or maybe a favourite memory photo?

I have a bunch. You can even choose some of them. I'm not very big on social media, but when I was going to school, I put pictures up. There are some cute photos of my daughter coming to school.