

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History

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Interviewed by Cameron West



What year did you start at OAC, and what made you decide Guelph?

I first started at the OAC in 2011. I grew up in Guelph, and I was always interested in working in some kind of animal field. As a young child, I thought marine biology and then it turned towards animal biology. I had two uncles who attended the University of Guelph for vet school. I also had a cousin who was going through and another cousin in the same family of one of the uncles who wanted to be a vet. So, I thought that's what I wanted to do. It turns out that's not what I ended up doing, but that is what brought me to Guelph. I'm not sure how familiar you are with the rules around vet school applications, but you must live in the specific area to apply to that school. So, I couldn't apply to all the vet schools in Canada. I could only apply to the ones in Ontario because that's the region I live in. If you live on the East Coast, you can only apply to the ones in that region. If you live out West, you can only apply to Saskatoon or Calgary, so for me it made sense to go to Guelph for my undergrad because that's where I wanted to go for vet school.

Where did you live while attending the OAC?

I moved into residence for my first year. I lived away from home in second and third year, then lived back at home and then later on in grad school moved out again. I am a home body type of person, also because I'm from Guelph. During my time at OAC, I worked a part time job, which was the job I worked in high school. I worked as a lifeguard for the City of Guelph and deck supervisor. So, you know, I was back and forth to home a lot just cause sometimes it was easier to stay over there. When I worked a Friday night shift, got off at 9 or 10, and then had to be back at the pool at 8 the next morning. I like the quieter settings. I was in East residence in the apartments, so I wouldn't say I was necessarily one of the partiers, but I still feel like I got that first-year experience. But with my parents being around, we'd meet up and go for coffee or they'd take me to get groceries. So, I got the benefits of both living away from home and being at home. I wouldn't say I had hands off parents in the sense that they're not involved in my life, but hands off, as in they both moved away from home for their undergrads and a significant distance from home. My mom went from Ontario to Alberta in her mid 20s and my dad from Winnipeg to Alberta, so they also knew kind of how to let their kids

experience University life on their own while still being really supportive. So, I think it was the best of both worlds for me.

Were you involved in campus life?

I wouldn't say I was all that involved. I went to a couple of events, mostly because for example, I had friends on sports teams. I did end up joining the concert band in second semester first year, and then I was in that second year and then fourth year. I had previous work and stuff outside of school as well. I was so focused on vet school and volunteering and then I had my part time job. I wouldn't say I got super involved in campus.

Lots of my classmates interviewed people who felt really involved and their class was very tight knit. Is this something that you also experienced?

I think I witnessed it. More as someone who was standing back. I didn't involve myself a ton with the intro to Aggie events. Compared to the Aggies who live together in residence or who were in clusters, or who just naturally gravitated to those campus events where you built those friendships, I didn't really have friends in my program until third year and that was only because I started fostering service dogs and then made a few friends that way. And by doing that then I branched out to a couple other people in the program. But for me, I wouldn't necessarily say there was that tight community. But I'm also a more reserved person. I'm quite friendly but I also had a lot of differences going on. I knew I was outside of the community, but I never felt left out because I knew partially it was because of my own actions. But I would say there is a very tight group of Aggies because you have the animal bio students and then you have the agricultural science students – some of them are in animal bio but some are just straight agriculture and they're definitely very tight knit.

What would you say was one of your, like, favorite memories?

I was very fortunate to be able to take Jim Atkinson's pet nutrition class. He also taught poultry nutrition when I was in undergrad and Jim was a very big part of Animal Biosciences, which was formerly animal and poultry science. He really helped develop the department. He brought a lot not only the department, but also sports on campus. I was very fortunate to get to know Jim in grad school as well. That had a big lasting impression, especially because I was really sad to find out that he had handed off the faculty advisor role for animal biology to Ira Mandell, who was also wonderful. But I had heard so much about Jim, so to be able to take his classes and still get to know him was pretty chill.

When did you graduate from the OAC, and what did you major in? As well, describe the research you conducted to complete your masters.

I finished my undergrad in 2015 with a major in animal biology and technically convocated in 2016. I started my masters in 2016 and did everything backwards because I was originally going to start in the fall and then my advisor emailed me and asked if I could start in the spring. There was a project she had, so I did all of my master's thesis work within the first four months of my MSc and then did the reading and writing after. But also, in the second year of my master's while I was finishing my thesis, I ended up covering a maternity leave with Trouw Nutrition. So, I worked as a monogastric research assistant for them at their former Burford location before they went global, and certain locations were closed. I ran the on-farm research trials. The research scientists created the trials, I implemented them on farms and then we had our research techs who were doing the daily animal care. And then I came back and did my PhD.

Describe the difference of your research you conducted during your masters compared to your PhD?

I would say out of most of the people I know, I have my fingers in the most pies. Very few of the students that I went through with made drastic changes in their research trajectory. For example, Doctor James Templeman, his masters were in ruminants, he did some research on dairy cattle for his master's, but then he switched to sled dog research for his PhD. But generally, if you're coming into companion animal or if you are going into a swine lab and if you're continuing from a master's into a PhD, you're probably within a similar range, even if you're doing different projects. I am very different, I started with dogs, and I was studying mineral nutrition, then I switched to protein and protein quality work. So, we were investigating pulses, we had a grant through swine innovation, pork as well as Saskatchewan pulse growers. Then I got MITACS funding, so we were able to do this big processing study in which we looked at the processing effects, so more food science on the different pulse ingredients. Then we incorporated them into swine diets and fed them to pigs. This led to a couple different studies. One was an ileal study; another one was looking at true digestibility in the animal and another one was an indicator study. So rather than looking at digestibility, we're looking at bioavailability, we were curious what was happening after it had been absorbed and how available it is to the animal. And then I also did an in vitro study and so that's trying to replicate what's happening in the animal in a lab setting we're trying to replicate digestion but in beakers, tubes, et cetera.

What research have you conducted in your post doc?

For my post doc I'm doing in vitro work, but we're doing both digestion and fermentation. But for the horse, so I've kind of gone all over the place, I've worked with multiple species.

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

I'd say most of the friends I have from University of Guelph would be from my master's onwards. I kept in contact with a lot of them simply by virtue being in the same industry, but I am still really good friends with some from undergrad. I don't have a lot of people I keep in contact with, but I do have one good friend from undergrad. We both raised service dog puppies and we were both an animal bio and we became really good friends after third year, and we still keep in ready contact.

Did you go through any tough times during your university years? What caused the difficulties and how did you deal with them?

Yes, I would say for me it's mostly health related. So, both mental health as well as some physical health issues. I've had challenges on and off. For me, having family support was a big help one. I regret not using more campus supports offered at the school. In first year when I was doubting myself or having struggles with that transition from high school to university. Even though I was a relatively high achieving student, I definitely saw a drop in my grades in first year and I wish I wasn't as resistant for support. I wish I had been more open, like a lot of students, who I saw using those resource rooms, but at the time I thought no, I have to be independent. So, my takeaway to students' is don't think you have to do it on your own. Don't be stubborn, go get the help, because that's what they're there for. I started using a lot of resources in grad school and I thought: Why didn't I use this before? There's a reason they're there and it's because we're still learning. I still consider myself a child and I've turned 30 this year. Back then when I was 20, I thought I had to do everything on my own, I have to be independent etc. So, I think my big takeaway was through all those struggles is that it's OK to ask for help and ask for help sooner than later. I think a lot of my struggles could have been lessened by just asking for help sooner.