

Ontario Agricultural College,  
University of Guelph  
**Alumni Oral History**



## **Carleigh Johnston**

B.Sc. 2015, M.Sc. 2018, MBA 2022

**Interviewed by Anthony Radford**

### **When did you graduate?**

It depends on what degree. I have three University of Guelph degrees. My last class for my BSc degree was December 2014, but I convoked in 2015 in the spring. My Master of Science was in 2017. Then my MBA was in 2022.

### **What year did you start your Bachelor of Science?**

I started in the fall of 2010. During my time as a student, I was also a varsity athlete. I played on the varsity women's rugby team. It's common to take the extra semester or a full extra year because you have five years of eligibility.

I took a small gap at the beginning of 2015. I was working full-time for the OAC Dean's Office, for the liaison program and then over that summer, while I was working for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, I applied to grad school and then started my master of science focused on animal nutrition for the Department of Animal Biosciences in the fall of 2015.

### **Do you remember any of your professors?**

Of course.

### **Do you have a favorite one?**

Two notable professors from my undergrad were both from my independent research courses. One of them was Trevor Devries, who I did my undergrad research project with and Vernon Osborne, who I also did my master's project with.

Vern taught the animal housing course, which was a fourth-year class, and he was really the reason why I pursued grad school at all.

I think a lot of people in their undergrad have a similar experience where they think that

they must be the smartest student on the planet and know exactly what they want to do in grad school to go to grad school.

He had a project that he had been working on with some of the other professors in the department that he had an opening for a master's student.

So, I jumped on the opportunity when he had reached out and said, hey, do you want to do this?

### **So, was that your favorite class?**

Animal housing was definitely my favorite class.

I know I ended up going the animal nutrition route, but I was working mainly on forage management, which was a lot of working with producers and their management practices. In short, dairy farmers and how they feed their animals.

What I really liked about the animal housing course, which was similar to my master's research, was that it was very applied science. It was a real-life scenario; it was all very practical. How do we adopt an existing practice and make it better? I liked the problem-solving aspect of that and learning about how things are being done.

### **You were involved in rugby, were you involved in anything else during your time? I'm assuming you can only do sports when you're an undergrad, right?**

No. You can play in grad school. I chose not to. In my last year of grad school, I got involved with the team again, but on the coaching staff. I'm still involved with the team now. Last year I switched into a managerial role because the time on the field was a lot. Now, I'm taking more of an administrative role, better suited to my skill set and time availability.

During my undergrad and grad school I worked for the OAC Dean's Office for the student liaison program. So, recruiting for undergrad programs, so that was the other thing that I was doing in addition to sports.

### **OK, so I'm assuming you felt part of the OAC because you worked for the Dean's Office?**

Yes.

## Was the social life on campus any different from what it is now?

That's hard to tell, because I'm still on campus, but not, of course, on the student side. My bachelor of science was in biological science. But I started in animal biology. I virtually did the entire animal biology degree, but then in my last semester I transferred to biological sciences to avoid one class so that I didn't have to take another semester. So, it was really my grad degree that was in the OAC. My MSc is in animal nutrition from Animal Biosciences, but I think being in an animal program, especially animal biology feels less a part of the OAC than the agriculture-centric programs. Socially, you feel less like a part of OAC. But working in the Dean's Office allowed me to bring that experience to the student recruitment position. There has been quite a transformation in terms of how inclusive the OAC student community is in terms of trying to include all programs, not just the core agriculture programs.

I know that the leather-jacket aggies are still present on campus and that's still like a very identifiable group. But in a much broader sense, both with the student government and then other social events, I think that it has reached a bit further into the other programs that are a little bit less, agriculturally focused.

So things like landscape architecture, food science, environmental science: those are all OAC programs too. It's probably become a bit more inclusive of a multitude of programs even though there's a lot more of a culture around aggies.

## Why did you choose Guelph?

Like a lot of people to take animal programs I thought that I wanted to be a vet. But I had an interesting opportunity that changed my mind.

The head coach of the women's rugby team, her husband's a large animal vet, so in my second year, it was convenient for me to have the opportunity to do some work and do some ride alongs. I was interested in large animal medicine at the time when I came into school. After having some experience working with him, going out with him for a couple days, I just decided this was not for me. For me, it was Guelph or nothing because of the vet school and animal programs. Most universities don't offer undergraduate programs that focus on animals specifically at the undergraduate level, and so I think that that's a big draw of the University of Guelph.

Rugby also ended up being an unexpected, gigantic part of my life that's really shaped who I am. The women's rugby program at the University of Guelph is historically very strong.

So, I unknowingly joined this program that has an incredible record and that developed me both as an athlete and as a person. I would say if I were to do it over and know what I know now, rugby would be a big draw. But at the time, I didn't really know that.

I had visited campus once and it was just a beautiful campus.

I'm originally from Peterborough ON which is a relatively small city, and so the transition to a bigger city that still had a smaller town feel to it and lots of green spaces was a really easy transition for me. It is one of the reasons why I've never left.

I've been living in Guelph now for 13 years, and I consider myself to be from Guelph now when people ask.

So the City of Guelph and campus were a big draw too.

### **Where'd you grow up?**

I grew up in Peterborough, ON which a lot of people associate with the lakes regions which are beautiful. The actual city portion of Peterborough is a little bit less flattering. For anyone who lives on the other side of Toronto, it feels like it's a million miles away. Driving back and forth there to go home, is it real pain. Once I left, I didn't go back because I loved Guelph so much.

### **Last question because I know we're short on time. What was your favorite memory of being at university?**

Being a part of the rugby program really changed my life. Managing the team but also recruiting athletes to the program and so being able to share that experience with them. All my best friends now are people I've played with, so I think that's unique.

Working in the Dean's Office also was a huge part of shaping both my career path, and my skill set. The opportunity to work with the liaison program early in my undergraduate degree, and then carrying that through into grad school. It was really rewarding because I became such a good team worker, both from rugby and my work at OAC combined.

Working in recruiting, it is such a thrill to plan an event, host it, execute it and then be able to, like celebrate that with your team after. A lot of the connections that I made there were really strong, and it was really hard to leave when I left my full-time role there. What's important is the community on both the athletic and academic side, even the faculty members that are in the Department of Animal Biosciences. During grad school, they really treat you as a colleague as a grad student. That's a huge confidence builder that really pushes you out of your comfort zone. You can live in that space of impostor syndrome the whole time but then be continuously encouraged by everybody around you. There's never been a time where I felt more unsure but sure of myself at the same time. It is an environment that made me grow really fast and learn a lot about myself and the transferable skills that I gained from being part of that environment with the community and Animal Biosciences was really transformative for me.

**I really appreciate the insight because I was considering being an Aggie at one point because I worked on a farm for years. But I'm just a nerd, so I chose history anyway.**

Yeah, my husband was a history major at Guelph, so you can have multiple interests. If you ever have the flexibility in your courses to just like take a couple of agriculture classes, then it's worth doing honestly.

Even though I'm not working in agriculture actively right now, there was so much that I learned in those classes that make me more aware of things that I interact with daily. That's what is so great about agriculture and food science and like food system is that we all interact with all those things every single day. I feel so much more informed, even just as a consumer, as a result of being a part of it.

**So good life experience, not just for farming, but for life.**

Yes.

**Well, thank you so much.**