

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



## **Lauren Benoit**

B.Sc. (Agr.) 2016, M.Sc. 2019

Interviewed by Jori Picard

### **What year did you start at the OAC?**

I started my undergrad in the fall of 2012, I majored in the Bachelor of Science honours in agriculture. Once I was done with my bachelor's I had eight months off, and then I came back for a master's degree. I did my master's degree down at the Ridgetown Campus, so it was a bit of a different location there, I got to see both campuses which was cool.

### **Did you have a preference?**

The Guelph one definitely. I liked the Guelph campus. There are more things to do in Guelph which is fun. When I was in grad school, I think there were five people in my program whereas in undergrad you are on campus with a whole bunch of people, so more friends in undergrad and a lot more free time too. So, I think Guelph was the preference, nothing bad to say about Ridgetown. I had a good time at Ridgetown as far as academics and studying went it was probably a good thing, I was at Ridgetown and not Guelph, there were a lot fewer distractions.

### **Where did you grow up?**

I grew up just outside of Exeter, Ontario. Exeter is about half an hour to forty minutes north of London, and I was about ten minutes east of Exeter on a small grain farm. My parents had a grain farm business and a custom application business, so grew up there, went to high school in Exeter and then came to Guelph for university.

### **Why did you decide to go to Guelph?**

I decided to go to Guelph when I was in grade six. I came to the campus with my dad for the farmer's conference, I think they had a kids' program. That was the first time I went to campus and the rest is history. When I was younger, I was involved in 4H so the agriculture program was a good fit for me too, so that was when I decided. I didn't ever consider any other schools. It's all worked out so far.

## **Did you have family members or friends that have any connection with the university?**

Yeah, my dad is an alumnus, so he would be the most influential. I did have friends that were in programs in Guelph, but I guess they were more acquaintances. I knew people who had gone to Guelph, but I wasn't close to any of them.

## **Did you visit campus before you enrolled?**

I visited the campus when I was in public school, I also visited the campus, I think, the summer before I started. I got to visit campus and got to see the dorms and experience it as an entering student rather than as a thirteen-year-old.

## **Was that an official tour?**

Yes, I think so.

## **What residence did you stay in?**

I stayed in Lambton. The agricultural cluster used to be in Lambton. We were the last year it was in Lambton. This was before Lambton got renovated. After my year, they moved it to Lennox-Addington. I was on the second floor of Lambton; I can't remember what my room number was.

## **Did you like Lambton?**

Lambton was fine. It was a residence, it was fun, like having a whole bunch of friends within thirty feet was much more fun. Lambton itself had two beds so close together we could hold hands if we wanted to. As a residence, it did everything we needed it to do and not a whole lot extra, but it was nice. It was within walking distance of Creelman, and there were great food options around, I did like living on-campus which was fun.

## **You said that you were an agriculture major, did you always know that you wanted to do that or how did you decide?**

Yeah, I was Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, and my major was honours so it was kind of the mix between crop science and animal science. So, I knew I wanted to go to Guelph, and I knew I wanted to be involved in agriculture, but I wasn't entirely sure what side of the industry I wanted to be involved in, and the honours program gave me the flexibility which is why I chose it. You also don't have to take biochemistry which was a bit of a perk. It gave me more flexibility to choose the courses I wanted to choose and

not tie myself in one specific direction, which was good, and not having to do biochem was a big plus.

### **Did you have any favourite courses you took?**

Yes, I enjoyed crop physiology which was taught by Dr. Hugh Earl who I think is still around at Guelph. It was a favourite course. Research methods was a favourite course also taught by Hugh - I might just like Hugh's courses. But yes, anything hands-on, there was a field agricultural program — international agriculture — and you went on a trip to Costa Rica, that was a really cool opportunity. I enjoyed a lot of my courses, anything hands-on and applied, and anything research was right up my alley.

### **Do you find everything you learned helpful now that you're working in the field?**

It's hard to say. Some things certainly, once I learned how to apply myself, I retained a lot more information, and I was surprised by how much you learn when you sit down and study. I do think there are some things I apply. Some things I learned in grad school are much more applicable day to day. In grad school I studied weed resistance and herbicides so now I work as an agronomist, helping with weed control questions. That fits pretty perfectly into what I do for work. Other things like more soft skills, how to work in groups, how to give a presentation and lead a project, those sorts of things have all been skills that you started learning in university and then you develop them more thoroughly in the rest of your career. So maybe the day-to-day content is not quite as much, but certainly some of the experiences influence what I do now.

### **Did any of your professors influence what you do now?**

It's hard to say. I had two summer jobs as well, I worked in the industry in my summers as a research assistant at one of the agricultural chemical companies near London and that was when I started an interest in research. Then when I was in school any opportunity to do a research-based project or program I kind of jumped at. Clarence Swanton - I did a few research projects with him. He was a pretty influential person. To have his guidance on that front was valuable. It is not easy to draw a direct comparison between this person who said this and then I made this decision. But there are certainly some of the profs that I looked up to and asked for just little bits of guidance and advice along the way that were helpful. My masters' advisor Dr. Peter Sikkema has also been hugely influential, both while I was in grad school and since I've graduated, I've been fortunate to stay in touch.

## **Do you remember a lot of your professors?**

I like to think so. I can remember probably more profs from the time I was in my third and fourth year. Some of my profs from first year chemistry I don't remember quite as well. But by the time I was in my third and fourth year, I like to think I can remember most of them at least for now. I graduated in 2016 so I like to think it wasn't that long ago.

## **Did you have any least favourite classes?**

I didn't like first-year chemistry. The first-year courses are a lot more grunt work, a good opportunity to learn how to just put your nose down and get it done. Maybe not the most enjoyable subject matter but you get it done and out of the way. I actually didn't pass chemistry a few times, so I took it multiple times, and you don't like it the third time.

## **Did you have the same professor for all those tries?**

No, I didn't, so that had to have helped too. I liked my last one a little bit more, but I don't know what his name is.

## **What was it like when you first arrived on campus?**

It was busy. I didn't bring a whole lot of stuff, I think we managed to carry everything I had up to my room in one trip between my dad and I, so I didn't have to spend a lot of time unpacking or anything. I packed light. Then it was just meeting a whole bunch of people, it was a new friend every hour it felt like. The orientation week activities were fun, but I don't remember many specifics. I got lost, not horribly but I figured out which was good. It was never overwhelming. It was cool to meet people that you realize are going to become your friends.

## **Did you stay in contact with them?**

Yes, some of my closest friends I met in university. I still talk to them daily to weekly depending on how good of friends we are, but a lot of them. We still stay in touch; we see them at weddings and events in the summer. We try to get together too. I am lucky that I have a good group of friends to rely on.

## **Were they your roommates or your classmates?**

My first roommate ended up dropping out after the first semester, so I had a double to myself, which was a little bit of a perk. But classmates, people that were just down the hall, and even a few people that started the year after me as well and in different years. They became good friends. We're from all over the province as well so it's remarkable as well that we can still get together and see each other as often as we do.

## **Where did you live after your first year?**

After the first year I lived on Cole Road in Guelph. I and two other friends rented a house together. There were four of us originally and our fourth roommate dropped out. As I'm saying this, I realize that I have a track record of my roommates dropping out, which might say something about me, but I like to think that I was not that bad. So, four of us lived together in a house on Cole Road where we commuted to school, and that was great. In fourth year, we moved again to a little bit of a smaller house, but I didn't live too far off campus. The house was similar to the residence, it did what it needed to do. It was a student house; it was nothing fancy. I am certainly more gentle with my current house than I think we were with the student house, but it was fun. We had a lot of fun, good times, and inside jokes, and some things you look back on, and I can't believe we did that. For example, we ate cereal for like a week straight, and I don't know if it was a rule or just an understanding that during exams, anything to do with cleaning was okay to be dropped until exams were done. So, by the time exams were done the house was in need of good cleanup, and now I don't operate that way anymore. But yes, just funny things to look back on and laugh about.

## **Were you involved in any extracurriculars through the school or outside of the school?**

I was fairly involved with the school. I was president of S.F.O.A.C (the Student Federation of the Ontario Agriculture College) in my fourth year, which was a great experience. I met a lot of cool people through that and learned to start fine-tuning a few leadership skills as well. S.F. was something to be involved in and I participated in a lot of things like tractor tug for tots, so that was always fun to be involved in. I was never involved in a formal capacity, but I would go help on the weekends with whatever anyone needed help with. I was also involved in the soil crop club and the dairy science club, pretty much anything that my friends were doing I was game to go with them.

## **Did you have a favourite (club)?**

Probably S.F. It was the club I was the most involved in so it did take up a lot of time, it was funny - I would say it was both my favourite and the most stressful. Attending tractor tug and not having to organize is a lot of fun, but with S.F., watching some of the younger students come in and get set up, and take up leadership roles as they got older and more involved was a cool and rewarding opportunity. It was cool to see them in the same leadership roles a few years after graduation and then your kind of like "I knew you would be good".

## **What is social life like on campus in general for everybody?**

It was busy. I feel like we probably had more social life than we had class life for a lot of us. So, Aggie pubs were always kind of a big thing to go to and hang out at. We had a lot of clubs. We tended to establish additional learning opportunities that always made me chuckle to myself now when I think about it. Maybe we weren't the best at attending class, but we had a soil and crop club, and we would organize guest lectures on topics that we were interested in; totally on our own. So, maybe we weren't the best at attending class, but it was never because of the lack of desire to learn, sometimes it was just because the class was early, and the Ranch was open late. Social life was good, I don't know how to quantify it, but it was a lot of fun. It's not often you get to have that many friends so close that everyone was on the same page, life stage-wise.

## **And what is the Aggie pub?**

The Aggie pub is like a dance event that happens usually in Peter Clark Hall (P.C.H). I think they're still going on. Wednesdays in P.C.H. if you like country music, it would be a good place to go. When I was there it was a five-dollar entry, maybe it was ten. I can't remember how much it was. Anyway, it was dancing, the bar was open, dancing and drinks and just a good time. There was a theme every week too, so one week it would be hockey jerseys, and the next week Halloween would be a theme, and people would go all out on costumes. We had a thrift shop theme, so you had to wear something that you found at the thrift shop. It was fun, it was just dancing and music.

## **Did you have traditions or anything?**

There were a lot of things that we called traditions. The OAC Good Times Banquet was always a lot of fun and I know it has been going on for a long time. Pig roasts in the middle of April were a lot of fun, and other things to participate in, like the leather jackets you're excited to get and cherish after the fact. Good Times would probably be the most significant.

## **Was that your favourite tradition?**

Yeah, I would say that was my favourite. It's an award banquet so you get to dress up which is always fun and when I was in school it was at the Gambrel Barn in Milton, which is just a beautiful facility.

## **Did you overall feel very a part of the OAC?**

Yes, I always felt very much a part of the OAC. I know that not everybody leaves school feeling that way and I recognize that the OAC as close as we can be, it can come off as exclusive or cliquy. I never felt excluded, but I also realize that some people did.

## **Like students outside of the OAC?**

Outside of OAC students, or even OAC students who didn't feel like they fit the farm kid stereotype, maybe didn't always feel welcome. We talked about tractors and corn much more than is normal or necessary, and sometimes we weren't the most welcoming to people who didn't want to talk about those things. We were very much an established presence on campus, and it was fun. You have about a hundred people in your year, and you'd be friends or know sixty-five percent of them, so on any given day, you'd run into ten or so friends just walking to class, which was very fun and cool and made the whole experience very enjoyable.

## **And you lived in an agricultural cluster, right?**

Yes, the first year I lived in a cluster, so the whole floor was students in the same program which was nice. You can start studying together, walking to class together, getting to know each other, helping each other on projects and stuff.

## **Is that where you made a lot of your friends, in the cluster?**

Yeah, the friends I lived with in the second, third and fourth years I met in the cluster. Then after that, through a lot of extracurriculars, you meet a lot of other students as well.

## **What are your favourite memories of your time at Guelph?**

Let me think about that one. It's hard to pick a single favourite moment. I mean, a bunch of things pop into my head, but none of them seem like they're extraordinarily special for any reason. Friends and I would always go to the alumni's yearly Bonspiel and that was always a highlight in the year and that would always happen in March. It's hard to pick a single thing. The pub is a highlight, it was fun to always have. I don't know, I just like

talking to everyone all the time and seeing so many different people all the time was kind of the highlight. There was not a single moment that was better than all the other ones, it was kind of just the whole thing.

### **Did you go through any tough times? What caused these difficulties?**

There's nothing specific that I would consider monumental in the time I was in school, you know there are certainly challenges. Sometimes drama or disagreements among a friend group that you work through, or you don't do well on an assignment or a test, or you're nervous for a presentation. At the time they feel like they're really big struggles or challenges, sometimes I was too busy for my own good, but looking back on it now there's nothing I can pick out that I would say was extraordinarily challenging or negatively impacted my time at school.

### **Just the stress of school in general?**

Yeah, which is funny. You stress about a test or an exam, and then you pass it, or you don't; if you don't you, do it again, and then you do it again and pass the second time. Then ten years later you have a degree, and you don't remember how awful first-year chemistry was.

### **Is there any advice you would give to manage the stress?**

I would just say remember keep it in perspective, nothing is do or die, and if it doesn't go well; you're in school to learn things. Just pick yourself up and try again, it is not the end of the world. If you apply yourself to anything there are a lot of resources and people want you to be successful. And if you don't love your lifestyle — there are a lot of students and new people to meet — you can just change it, find a group that emulates the habits you do want to have and maybe start hanging out with them a bit more.

### **I just have one last question about your current job, how long have you worked there? Did you go out of university and into it?**

Not directly, I finished my master's and then I worked in Australia for just under a year for an agricultural chemical company, not the one I'm currently at. Then I came back, and I've been in this role for three years now. I did get this role through a connection I made at school. The connections and the network tend to be much more valuable than the actual education or information that you gain. I've been in this role for three years and enjoying it, and today I see many people I know. Last year we hired somebody that I met who was a few years younger than me at school. He was a 2020 grad, and I was a 2016 grad, we met through school and then when we had a job opening, I reached out to ask if he was interested.

**That's the last of my questions, but do you have any questions for me?**

Well based on what you just heard about my experience, has your experience been similar or has it been widely different?

**I feel like it has been wildly different, but we also went about it in very different ways for sure. I'm not an agricultural major for one, and I didn't choose to live in a cluster. But based off what I've heard from you and other people I think I do regret that decision a little bit, but it's too late now. No, I'm not a member of any clubs or anything but I think maybe I'll try it out, it could be beneficial.**

One of the things I always like about clubs is that you can just go to a meeting and if you don't like the vibe of the meeting, you don't ever have to go again, they're very low commitment right off the bat. You can always try things out and what sticks, sticks and what doesn't, doesn't. So, what program are you in?

**I am taking a Bachelor of Arts in History.**

That's exciting, like local history, or colonial history or Indigenous history, do you know yet?

**No, I am not too interested in a specialization which may not be a good thing down the line, but I like trivia and I like to know things.**

That's cool, and I find that with university it's a lot of soft skills. Just the experience of having to apply yourself for four years and having to work on something for four years is just as valuable as a specific major.

**Yes, I really relate to what you said about coming here to learn. Not about anything specific, I'm just here to learn.**