

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History



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Interviewed by Jessica Struyk

Where did you grow up? Where did you attend high school?

I grew up in a small town on Georgian Bay called Penetanguishene and I went to a small French high school called La Caron. There's only 150 kids there, and now there's so few that it's actually grades 7 to 12.

What year did you attend the University of Guelph?

I started in 2012 for my undergrad and I finished in 2017, and then I did a master's at Guelph until 2018.

What made you decide to go to the University of Guelph?

Initially I wanted to be a vet, but I realized once I got to school that my education from my small little high school was not great. I used to get 90s in high school and then I was getting 60s in university. I was like, oh my gosh, there's so much I didn't learn that I should have.

Did you attend the university for OAC, or did you go for something else and then transfer?

I was in animal sciences, but it wasn't OAC, it was under the College of Biological Sciences. But then I switched to Environmental Biology, which I think was in second year, so the School of Environmental Science is part of the OAC, so that would be when.

Did you choose the University of Guelph for the program or were there other factors that made you want to attend?

I chose Guelph because everyone says if you want to be a vet go to Guelph. So, it was really the only university on my mind, but I actually ended up really liking it. I had no intention of changing schools, just majors.

How far is Guelph from your hometown?

2 1/2 hours northeast.

Did you visit the campus before you started?

I did with my mom once. But I was pretty set on it. I knew I had the chance to apply for three schools and the two other schools I didn't really care about. It was really just Guelph, so it was the only school I visited also.

The visit wasn't something that helped your decision?

No, no, I was already set on. It was more like check out where you're going to be living next year.

Did you have any family members, friends, or other connections at the University of Guelph?

None whatsoever.

What was it like when you first arrived on campus?

Just Guelph in general. To me, Guelph was a big city, so everything was intimidating. It was a lot to get used to just from that respect. It was a lot of fun. I wasn't nervous or anything. It was just very different than your one stop light town kind of thing.

Did you have a favorite class from your undergrad?

Anything biology related, but in particular the entomology courses, so insects. My focus was insects and plant interactions. Obviously, that leads to agriculture. Any course with insects, but particularly Cynthia Scott Dupree, she has the IPM, the Integrated Pest Management course. That was definitely one of my favorites.

You already mentioned one of your professors, but do you remember any others that you enjoyed?

Oh, yeah, totally. Cynthia was also my grad advisor, but then Rebecca Hallett, she was my undergrad advisor, and she is also an insect plant prof. I really like her. The other insect profs like Steve Marshall and then Ernesto Guzman, he's the honeybee research prof. I loved a lot of my environmental biology profs. I don't remember all their names. Simone Haerri taught me Climate Change Biology. I really like her also, and Kat Jordans. Oh, and Hugh Earl for crop physiology. He is also great.

Did you see a lot of the same professors throughout your years?

I had a pretty good diversity of profs. I don't really think I had any repeats.

Where did you live for your first year?

I was in East Residence, so I was in the apartment style.

Did you enjoy that experience?

I did. I live alone now because I couldn't live with other people. Having my own room was kind of a must. I lived with clean people so we just kind of all took care of the apartment. It was good. The suite next to us was a twelve-person suite of guys and girls and it was chaos, and it was disgusting in there too, but I lived with the RA, so really not the same.

Where did you live after your first year?

I spent three years in the same house with one of my roommates from undergrad, so we lived together for four years during her whole undergrad. It was south, but not too south end. It was kind of off Edinburgh.

Was that a good experience?

Oh yeah, we had a couple of different people come in and out, but it was really nice not having to move for three years.

Were you involved in any extracurricular activities on campus?

I didn't actually do any clubs. I did do volunteering at the Honey Bee Research Center. Then I volunteered in the lab as well, extracting honeybee RNA. I did that, but I didn't join any like particular clubs.

Was that associated with the University of Guelph, or was it an opportunity that you found in Guelph?

It is associated through the university, it's the university's apiary. I just went there and was like, hey, do you guys need a volunteer or whatever to help take care of the hives because I wanted to be involved with the bees. So, I did that and then at one point they didn't need any volunteers, so I asked if any of the doctorate students or master students, needed any help with their projects. I helped there where I could.

Did you like that experience?

Yeah, I did. It was cool, one obviously working with the bees and the apiary was nice. I love it. Working in the lab was cool because obviously we get lab experience during chemistry but helping someone get to an end goal was nice. Learning lab protocols. Lab work is cool, its repetitive but it is very cool.

What was social life like on campus?

So, I wasn't a traditional Aggie because I wasn't in the agriculture program, so we actually got called fake Aggies or "faggies." I only went to Aggie pub once. As a queer person I didn't really want to get involved. I had one friend who was an Aggie, and she only brought her girlfriend over when everyone was gone to Aggie pub. I can't say I really participated in the typical Aggie social circles. I mostly hung out with other environmental science people and integrated biology people. So, a lot more like ecology, nature nerd types, that's kind of where I hung out socially. My building was across Gordon in Bovey so it's across the street from the main campus and it's also pretty removed. It was nice interacting with my peers, but it definitely wasn't as integrated with the rest of the university, I would say.

You started to touch on this, but did you take part in any of the OAC traditions?

I didn't no. Like I said, I only went to Aggie pub once. I walked around College Royal and stuff like that. But no, I wasn't part of any group, so to speak, basically just on the fringe. When you're studying plant interactions you study all the crop species and plant stuff. I didn't grow up on a farm either so it's not like I was able to talk the talk at the time. Now I could talk about farming forever, but back then, I had all the technical knowledge, but I didn't have experience. Now I can talk to you about what kind of equipment to use and stuff like that. But back then, I was mostly just learning theory, but plants and insects specifically.

You mentioned that you want to Aggie pub, a classic OAC experience. Can you talk a little bit about what that experience was like for you?

It's mostly just Aggies doing line dancing and stuff like that. Some dancing, it's a lot of cowboy boots and jeans. It's what you'd kind of expect if you think of the classic, oh, we're just going to go to a hoedown on the Saturday night. Everyone gets drunk and then dances. It's not club music, it's country music and then people doing the two step and stuff like that.

Not really your thing?

It's very cis, it's a very straight environment and it's not exactly the vibes I was looking for. Once I found the queer community in Guelph it was way better too. A lot of my experiences are outside of OAC also because of that. Obviously, I work in agriculture now, but it's still tough as a queer person in agriculture so it definitely kept me away from a lot of those spaces from a self-protection point of view.

Did that kind of environment make you feel disconnected from the OAC?

Totally, yes.

Do you have anything else to share about student life from your time on campus?

I did all the typical oh, we're going to go to homecoming and this and that, but I got really bored of drinking fast. I still went to things but once I found my big group of people, I started doing stuff with them all the time. It was a lot of fun, but that was more in grad school. Fifth year and grad school were good because I also lived with these people. It was a lot better because I actually wanted to go out with these people. So, I did a lot of Brass Taps and karaoke and stuff like that. I'd say in first and second year, mostly first year, I did all the typical events like homecoming, the hockey game and checked off all the big party days and the big social events. Once I lived off campus and kind of lost interest in the big groups of people, I became kind of like an old man who was just like, yeah, these kids need to respect the neighborhood. I went from first year "Woo party" to "Alright, kids, settle down really fast."

What did you do for fun and relaxation?

A lot of hikes and nature walks. We'd go out in groups and look at the plants and the bugs and go out and ID things. One time we went to Guelph Lake and there was a swamp right away and we got 5 minutes into the hike, and we spent 45 minutes in the swamp. We're the nature nerds. We went on field courses where we were just in the bush studying insect behavior. A lot of dogs and board games nights and stuff like that.

You mentioned a field course. Can you talk a little bit more about that, maybe some of the experience you had in the course?

It was with Gard Otis and Steve Marshall and then our TA, he now runs the insect stuff at Guelph, Steve Paiero; he's hilarious. Basically, there was just twenty of us in the bush in Missouri going around playing with insects, watching them, staring at insects,

collecting them for two weeks. Then we did some day trips like there was some falls here, there was this and that. It's literally just a bunch of nerds in the bush staring at bugs. It was great. We had to put together little research projects. A lot of insects, they'll have host specificity, so it means that, OK, we only like to eat this certain thing. So, we were looking at a beetle that only feeds on Willow leaves and trying to see different influences. What influenced their recognition of the Willow species? We did things like crush up willow and then put it on a box elder, a Manitoba maple leaf to see what kind of recognition was there. And then alternately, we crushed up Manitoba maple leaves to see if they would feed on the willow from that one. Just small little behavioral experiments and then we made our collections. It was cool. Other classes have gone to India and Costa Rica. I'm sure that was super sweet, but Missouri was cool, too.

For your specific program were there any events that you remember taking part in?

We didn't have a ton, but I definitely went to any kind of SES events, School of Environmental Science. I went to the Christmas parties and stuff like that. So, I did socialize within the department but there wasn't a ton of events that we had. There was the odd karaoke night and stuff like that.

Did they do any off-campus day trips or experiences?

No. I know OAC has the Costa Rica trip and they do crop tours and stuff like that around Canada. Unfortunately, SES doesn't have a ton of money so I can't think of anything during my time there.

What are some of your favorite memories from your time at the University of Guelph?

I was just there yesterday for a job fair, and I thought, "Oh my God, I miss this place." Being surrounded with other nerds and talking about nerd stuff. Honestly, I love to learn, so just learning about plants and insects. The field course to Missouri was one of my favorites, it was called Field Entomology. Insect Behavior was another course I really liked as well. Biology - it took us out into the woods, we were actually going out there and doing stuff. I did a lot of greenhouse work too. I love being in the greenhouse. Honestly, the program itself I really liked and the people in my department I really liked too. Getting to play with things I like for school.

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

Oh, for sure. My friends and I, we met on the field entomology course, we call ourselves the buggy buds still. We started Guelph Bug Day on campus. That was two of my good friends and then all of us who were on that course together, we started Guelph Bug Day

and they're in their sixth year now. I went back this year, and I thought "Wow, look at this, this is our baby." I'm still friends with a ton of people from school. My friend who I lived with during undergrad for four years, we're still really good friends. I was just at her baby shower; I'm going to be her bridesmaid. Then my other friend, who was also a part of that bug group, I'm the one who's manning the dog at her wedding. A lot of good friends that I made.

Did you go through any tough times during your university years?

Oh, for sure. My first year was terrible from a grade perspective. My mom was like if you fail another class, you have to drop out. My high school education, like I mentioned, was not great and my math and physics teacher in particular, she was smart but couldn't explain things in a way that we could get it. I failed math, and I failed physics. Honestly, getting through those in the first year was probably the toughest just from an academic perspective. Math and physics are my least favorite. I like biology the most so once those were out of the way, school was a lot better.

Your first year you were in a different program as well, right?

Yes, but those are courses like any base science program, I'd have to take those courses anyways and pass them for the degree. So, I did still need them, but later on I could branch out into some more stuff that interested me and then my grades got much better. But math and physics were the toughest part, academically speaking.

Did you find it a big transition going from your high school to university in terms of course load and the learning aspect?

Well, it was hard because I found that I didn't learn a lot of stuff I should have learned. We were supposed to be building off a certain level, but I hadn't achieved the level we were building off yet. There was a lot of catching up to do in that respect. The transition from French to English was not hard at all, which I was kind of concerned about. It was really just realizing how basic my high school education had been.

I read that you've done some beekeeping, is that still something you do?

Eventually I'll have my own couple of hobby hives, but no. I did help my dad's buddy beekeeping for four seasons, and I really do love it. I love the bees and everything like that. I don't have the time or the energy. I have people who've said, you can keep hives here. I just haven't gotten to that point yet, but one day I will have hives, just a couple though.

You talked a lot about being really interested in your courses on insects. Was that an interest of yours when you were thinking you wanted to be a vet?

I didn't realize I loved insects until I started beekeeping. So, then the beekeeping, I became obsessed with bees which graduated into an obsession generally with insects and plants overall. Bees are very connected to plants as well, so it was the beekeeping which I started the summer after first year and then I was like, wow, I love bugs. Then I was like, maybe I want to get into honeybee research. Then I was like, no, and then I headed down towards integrated pest management and agronomy and stuff like that.

Was beekeeping one of the reasons you decided to switch programs or was it mainly because the vet thing was not?

The vet thing was definitely a no. I wasn't upset because I had started beekeeping and insects are animals. I ultimately wanted to work with plants and insects. Animals from the start, but I also had considered environmental stuff as well in the past. It just ended up. I was like, "Wow, I love beekeeping, I love the bees, I want to do research and stuff like that." And then it ended broadening to way more because there's just so many cool insects out there.

What are you doing today to continue your work with insects?

Right now, my job doesn't involve insects, unfortunately. Until recently, I was working as an independent agronomist, so crop consultant, which did involve insects, but it was just field crops, and I was getting kind of bored of that. My new job I can work with all crops so I'm trying to expand my horizon into horticulture and then eventually it'll be my end to get back into consulting for horticulture, which is way more diverse, way more insects, way more plants and way more stuff to work with, which is kind of the end goal is to get back to insects. I just have to pay my dues and get some horticulture experience beforehand.