

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History

Melanie O'Shea

B.Sc.(Agr.) 2008

Interviewed by Isabel Sinden



What year did you start at OAC, or the University of Guelph?

I became a student at the University of Guelph and OAC in 2004.

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

I grew up in Joyceville, which is just east of Kingston. I went to LaSalle Secondary School, which is located just outside or just within the city limits of Kingston.

When did you graduate from the OAC/University of Guelph?

I graduated in 2008, I was an OAC 2008 Maverick.

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

I wanted to pursue my education and career in agriculture, and I had an above 90 average in high school, so I wanted to go to University as opposed to going to the satellite campus in Kemptville which was actually closer to home. Since that was college program, it wasn't the right fit for me. At that time in my life, it was good for me to move away from home. The thing that drew me the most to Guelph and the OAC was my sister. She was a 2005 Aggie and hearing all of her stories, and knowing what the atmosphere was like at Guelph and the OAC specifically was probably the biggest draw for me to go and get out of my homebody shell. I was intrigued by the social aspect and the opportunities that OAC offered.

Did you visit the campus before you started? What was that like?

I did. Even though I had already been there when we dropped my sister off, I went again. There was an agriculture convention that was happening in Guelph right around the time of College Royal. They had arranged for campus tours, and it was one of my sister's classmates that did the tour for my group. I knew the person who was giving us the tour. While we were getting the tour, he was telling us what campus life was like and

while he was giving us the tour, we saw so many OAC Aggie jackets and every single one of them greeted him and called him by name. He would say “see you at hockey tonight.” I just felt that connection even while we were on the tour. I was 3-4 hours from home, and I felt so connected to everybody and it just felt so close knit, like a family. I saw jackets of all colors, so it was that he wasn't just friends with his own respective class, he was friends with the first years, the second years, the third years. To me that's a really unique experience.

Did you have family members or friends with a connection to the school?

I had my sister. Just about everybody that I knew that was in agriculture who came from a farming family was either going to Kemptville close to home, or they were going to Guelph. The house that I lived in after I was done in residence, someone from my county and the Kingston area had lived in that house for 20 years. It had gotten passed down from somebody in the community to the next person. So, I knew all kinds of people that went to Guelph.

What did you major in? Did you decide on your major right away?

I ended up majoring in animal science. I thought about choosing the Agriculture Honors program because you get more electives with that program. While I was really interested in the animal side and biology side, I thought maybe it would be smarter for me to take more crop electives. I took a second-year genetics class that's a requirement for Animal Science, but not for the Agriculture Honors Program. It was such a hard class, and truth be told, I left it up to, “if I pass genetics, I'm going to be an Animal Science major, and an Agriculture Honors major if I fail it.”

Do you remember any of your professors?

I do. I wrote a list. Another thing that's really special about the faculty at the OAC is that just like the students, they get to be part of the OAC family, and I think that's part of what you share with alumni. Part of what you share with current students is talking about the professors that have either come before you or are there now. I narrowed it down to four that were my absolute favorite. I have John Walton. He was our reproduction professor. And then Vern Osborne, he had such a big personality. He forces you to ask yourself the hard questions. He was my class's honorary president. Andy Robinson and Stephen LeBlanc were also my favorite professors. There were also individuals that I consider part of the faculty of OAC, but I didn't have them as teachers. One was Betty Clyde. She used to be the secretary at the Dean's office, and I'm still friends with her on Facebook, we still stay in touch. Then, Mary Buhr, who was the interim Dean while I was in fourth year. She was the interim Dean before Rob Gordon. She was another very iconic individual. Whenever she spoke or participated in a student event, she just left such a great impression on us. So those are my favourites.

Did you have a favorite class?

Most of my 4th year classes were my favorite because for our program, that's really where the rubber meets the road. I remember we joked about it when one of our Animal Nutrition labs was feeding pigs. We were saying, "Wow, we finally got to see a live animal, we've only been here for 3 1/2 years and here we are". My favorite class would be Dairy Challenge. It was spearheaded by John Walton and Mark Carson, who are still involved with the class today. Then, the uniqueness of Crop Tour and having the opportunity to go to Costa Rica in my third year. The Costa Rica trip was my first time on a plane. This was exciting for a kid from a small town who wasn't sure she wanted to move away from home. The OAC encouraged all these new opportunities and gave them to me. That's something really special about the OAC. Just about anything that John Walton or Steven LeBlanc taught. They were such dynamic individuals; they really knew their research and they were just as passionate about the topic that they were teaching us as we were about learning it. Those were always some highlights. I always enjoyed going to those classes.

What was it like when you first arrived on campus?

When I first arrived, I handed the orientation team my ticket that showed which room I was in, and they all laughed. They said: "oh, you're on the 6th floor, you're at the highest we can go". My dad was so annoyed that we had to carry all my stuff. Then, this swarm of people showed up! Everybody grabbed something and I moved up the stairs in one trip. It was amazing. I wasn't in the Aggie cluster in residence. I had a single room in South, so I was very fortunate. I loved my view of the 6th floor, "the penthouse", as they called it. At the time, I really liked the room. I always felt really safe on campus. It was a beautiful campus, part of the reason that I chose Guelph, it was easy. Once I got comfortable on campus and found the Aggie cluster and other girls that were in South who were also in my program. I just loved campus life. The most fun and organic times just occurred naturally.

Where did you live your first year? Did you enjoy the experience?

I lived in Prairie Homestead 2, on the 6th floor. There were the logistics of moving in and out, but I loved walking easily to and from class. It made that first year of transition really easy, and Mountain Cafe is amazing. We'd always go for Sunday dinner type meals at Prairie since they were a bit more traditional. Campus life was a lot of fun. It was really organic. We got warned about it when we were moving off campus, the second-year students said to keep in mind that when you want to hang out next year, it requires more effort.

Where did you live after your first year? Did you like where you lived?

I lived in the Janefield subdivision which is just on the other side of the Stone Rd mall. I always visited Cole Road, which is a traditional hub for the Aggies. I was walking distance to it so I always participated in the shenanigans that went on there, but I could also always leave and retreat back to Janefield when I wanted to. There were a number of Aggies that lived in Janefield as well. There was a group that lived right across the road from us. They always had fun parties that we attended all the time. I enjoyed the Janefield area. It was a way to be close enough to all the action that was going on, but then have that quiet study time as well. And again, it was really safe. I love Guelph so much that even though I don't live there now, it's a great city.

Were you involved in any extra-curriculars on campus?

I tried to narrow this down and to highlight my favorites, because honestly, the list of what I wasn't involved in could possibly be shorter. I was involved in my class executive for my first three years, then I moved on to Student Federation of the OAC after that. I was involved in the dairy science club. I was actively part of the judging club. I pretty much participated in everything. I wasn't on College Royal executive, but I attended every single event. Aggie Pub was an absolute must for me. I think in my 4 years that I was attending the OAC, I only missed four Aggie pubs.

What was the social life like on campus? What did you do for fun and for relaxation?

I joke sometimes that sometimes sitting in class was the relaxing part because I just needed to focus on one thing. The OAC students are so lucky to have the Aggie lounge. They've redone it and it's now in the basement of Johnston Hall, but for us it was upstairs, and it was just such a cozy spot. Surprisingly, for the number of students that are in the OAC, whenever you walked in, there was always space for you. That was mind blowing to me. There were iconic people that we joked about living in the Aggie lounge and who never went to class. They were just there all the time. It was having that space that you could always go to if you needed to. I'm dating myself now, but we didn't have laptops, so we used our computer lab that was up there. We had the Ontario Farmer publications, and we had all the agriculture magazines up there, so if you just wanted to sit and focus on something else other than classes, you could always retreat up there.

Did you feel a part of the OAC? Can you remember taking part in any OAC traditions?

I would say my classmates, still to this day, make fun of me for using the word tradition or spirit points too much. I'm still bringing up all these things that we should be doing and participating in. There weren't too many traditions that I missed out on. We had our leather jackets, College Royal, traditions like Crop Tour and being part of the Costa Rica trip. I represented the Guelph judging team in Quebec. We would go over to McGill

University and drive to the judging competitions and everything there, and I participated on the dairy science trip as well. The dairy science trip went to Quebec and toured farms in Eastern Ontario, and we got to tour my farm in my first year. Then, of course, Aggie pub. There weren't too many things that I didn't participate in. My favorite part about the OAC is that if you want to be a part of the OAC, the OAC is more than happy to have you. I can think of three classmates in my class, and they technically weren't OAC students, but they either lived with OAC students or two of them came from farms. They just didn't pursue the OAC for their post-secondary. One of them was the biggest city guy and landed in the Aggie cluster by accident. We wholeheartedly adopted all three of them. We made them honorary Aggie certificates. I certainly felt a part of the OAC. From my perspective, I would say that part of that was that I made myself part of the OAC. One of the most beautiful things about the OAC is that anybody is welcomed into it, and you can be a part of it if you want to be. The OAC Aggie Good Times Banquet, is by far my most favorite event. It's a night where we celebrate all the achievements and the accomplishments of the individual classes and acknowledge those friendly rivalries. My Aggie Spirit Cup gets a little fuller every time I attend it. I still attend as an alumnus and as part of the Alumni Association. If you ever need a feel-good moment, you just need to go to that event, and it'll pick your spirits up.

What are your favourite memories of your time at the University of Guelph?

I would be amiss to not mention that my 2008 class was the class that came up with the Tractor Tug for Tots. We started that as a class executive. The first year we ran it was back in 2006 and it's still going today. That is something that is very near and dear to me and the legacy of our 2008 class. It showed that the OAC looks beyond ourselves, and that we can make charitable donations that go outside our specific industry. That was something my class was really passionate about. The first children's charity that we had was in honor of our classmate's sister. Other memories I have are Super Thursdays at College Royal, Square Dancing at College Royal. I'd be chatting with friends from high school, and I say, "I've got to go to square dance practice" and they say, "are you actually kidding me right now?" and I'd be like, "no 7:00 AM square dance practice. I've got to go." And truth be told, my favourite memories are just walking between classes; the ones where we're being silly, or we're all walking in a group, and everybody can identify who we are because of our jackets. For me, those are my most cherished memories. There's so many favourites, I can't remember them all. Honestly every memory that I have at OAC is my favourite.

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

Without too much of an exaggeration, I would say that it's almost impossible for me to go a week without talking to a classmate. I'm hard pressed to go a day without talking to someone that went to OAC. My husband went to the OAC, he wasn't there when I was there, but there's that connection. My husband and I got married in 2019, and I'd say the majority of our guests had an OAC connection.

My closest girlfriends, the majority of them are all OAC or honorary OAC members. When I was doing this interview, there was a group of them that I texted and chatted with and I said, "they're asking me if I'm involved in traditions" and they all just laughed. We are very much still a close-knit class.

You don't have to answer this if you don't feel comfortable, but did you go through any tough times during your university years? What caused the difficulties and how did you deal with them?

When I was in my second year, it was Friday, the end of Reading Week 2006, and I was scheduled on Sunday to be picking some of my classmates up and driving them back to Guelph. My dad passed away suddenly at home. That was very traumatic for our family. I didn't go to school the next week. I had family arrangements and I wasn't able to emotionally process what had happened. When we were in the receiving line at one of my dad's wakes, someone asked me if I would be going back to school. I kind of looked over at my mom because the thought had never even crossed my mind to not go back. She said your dad would still want you to continue your education. Part of the reason that I am still so close to this day with my class, is because my class is so tight knit. Somebody once used the tagline "once you were a part of the 08 class no one got left behind". We had a group project that was due after reading week, and I happened to be in a group with three guys in my class and all their girlfriends texted me. They were all in our class as well, and they said, don't worry, we will keep the guys in check. We will get this project finished for you. My classmates were just so supportive of me coming back out. Our OAC program coordinator, she was so supportive. She met with me frequently to make sure that I was still keeping my classes on-track and she worked very closely with me and recommended that I drop a class and pick a couple up in the summer. She said we don't really know what to expect in the next couple months. She said things might get tougher. You might have a tougher time as exams get closer. I had missed a midterm. The professor was so amazing about it, he basically just told me, "don't even worry about making it up. We will just allot the percentage somewhere else on another project - I know you." You expect that from the students and from your fellow friends. I'm sure anybody would have had that experience. When I talked to the guidance counselor, when I talked to the professors about it, they were all very human about it. They completely understood. I still graduated on time with all my classmates and for me that was what it was all about. I didn't want to lose out on keeping those friendships or living those experiences with my classmates. It was not an easy time and I hate to think of where I'd be had I not had them all there with me.