

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History



Rene Van Acker

B.Sc. (Agr.) 1990, M.Sc. 1992

Interviewed by Grace Nelson

Biography

Rene Van Acker is the current Interim Vice President of Research at the University of Guelph, whose formative years in both his undergraduate and master's at the OAC would lead him to become a professor, Associate Dean External, and then Dean of the OAC.

His work in fundraising has facilitated the establishment of over 20 externally funded chairs and professorships, garnered over \$100 million for the OAC, helped establish the now Arrell Food Institute and the Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming, and has aided in the development of the new Guelph Turfgrass Institute, the Bioproducts Discovery and Development Centre, the Guelph Food Innovation Centre, the Animal Biosciences Abattoir and Meat Lab, the new Honey Bee Research Centre, renovations to the Arboretum's Hilton Centre, and the new and expanded Student Federation OAC Suite in Johnston Hall.

On Monday, October 16th, 2023, he was interviewed by Grace Nelson in collaboration with the History Department to share his experiences at the OAC to be recorded and transcribed for the upcoming 150th anniversary of the OAC.

So, to begin, I was hoping we could talk a bit about what led you to the OAC originally, whether that be your familial connections, if there was a specific course that interested you, or anything like that?

My original interest was really in being involved in agriculture somehow; I grew up on a farm, but I didn't want to *farm*. I wanted to be involved in agriculture somehow, and so later in high school when I started investigating this, there was really one place to go, and that was the University of Guelph and OAC. My guidance counsellors in high school were not in favour of my choice, I don't know why but I ignored them, and I'm glad I did.

What did you specifically major in while at the OAC? Did you have any favourite classes or professors?

I was a crop science major. One of my favourite professors was Anne Clark, and she taught a course in Pasture Management, or something like that. She was a tough professor, but she was tough because she wanted the best for you and she really wanted you to squeeze everything you could out of the course, and so I learned a lot from her in and had a lot of respect for her.

There were a couple of others, one was Duane Falk, who was a barley cereal breeder and so he taught, I think, it was a plant breeding course. He was super dedicated to his craft and very enthusiastic about it. Lastly, I would say Clarence Swanton. Clarence was the weed science professor and I thought he was a great teacher, very dedicated. I ended up doing a master's with Clarence in weed science. Another would be Jack Higgins. Jack Higgins was a turfgrass specialist, but he taught one of the first-year courses that we had - I can't remember what one he taught, but he was super enthusiastic and really funny and had great slides. Back then they were slides, like picture slides.

Did those professors have any influence on your choice to then go on and become a professor at the OAC?

Absolutely. I think in particular of Duane Falk and Clarence Swanton. Clarence, because he was my master's supervisor and I saw him and his job more than my other professors, and I saw how enthusiastic he was about teaching, and how enthusiastic he was about supervising graduate students. He did so much to help his graduate students in terms of getting them connected to the industry, making sure that they went to conferences, presented in front of people and built foundational skills. I found that inspiring, and his passion for research in weed science, which ended up being my field as well. Watching Clarence I never imagined I would be able to achieve that, but it did become an aspiration.

Back to your first year, or at least your undergraduate experience at Guelph, were you in residence? How did you find the Guelph community, both on campus and around it when you first started out?

I was Lennox-Addington, specifically in Addington, the fourth floor. I loved residence, it was great, it was fantastic. I mean, it was the first time living away from home, and there was all that excitement around that, like having a fridge in your room. It's the little things that are so exciting because you really felt like you were transitioning to becoming an adult. That independence was so exciting.

The great thing about residence is that was independence light. You didn't actually have to cook for yourself, the bathrooms were cleaned, so it was great and you had a chance

to meet and make friends with a whole bunch of people. I really enjoyed first-year residence, it was so much fun. You'd have movie nights and you'd go down to the LA Pit and get those thick milkshakes that they used to have. Everybody would trundle over to Creelman and get their food and you know, commiserate with each other over upcoming midterms or biophysics assignments that were driving you crazy or complain about first-year chemistry, which everybody still does. All that was so important. To have people commiserate with is very, very important, and to work through some of those problems or study together.

You already touched on this briefly, but were you involved in any extracurriculars on campus or were there any special places on campus you like to frequent?

The Aggies are very social. For sure Aggie Pub - that's not an extracurricular, but it's sort of like an extracurricular, so you get involved in Aggie Pub. I was involved in intramural sports. I wasn't an athlete, but really liked intramural sports. We had a volleyball team, we were terrible, but we really had fun! Later I got involved in College Royal and me and my now my wife, were in the square-dancing team for a couple of years and I've never done that since, but really enjoyed it.

So those are the few things that I remember, and just hanging out with the Addington floor mates, going to what we called the Keg, that is now the Brass Taps, was a common thing. There were a lot of bars on campus back in those days, Der Keller was in the basement of Johnston, there was a Boo bar, like a sports bar in the University Center, along with the Keg, there is the Whipple Tree restaurant that you could go to, so there was quite a few places - I think they even served beer in Mountain Pizza, not that it was about beer necessarily. The Bull Ring was a dance place back in those days. That was a lot of fun.

You talk about your fourth floor Lennox Addington friends; do you still keep in touch?

There are a couple people: Warren Oughtred, who is a fellow Aggie, and then Gary Bouck, who went to vet school. Gary and I were roommates through much of undergrad after we left residence, and he became a specialist vet who now lives in London. Warren Oughtred took over the family farm just south of Brantford. So, we're not in touch that much anymore, but still in touch. I consider myself an '89 Aggie, even though I was Co-op, so I graduated 90, but I'm still in touch with a lot of my '89 Aggie classmates, and in fact, we have our 35th anniversary next year during OAC's 150th and we're looking forward to a bunch of us being together then.

You were a Co-op student. What was that experience like for you?

Co-op was great. It was a chance to earn money while you're in school, it was an opportunity to explore a range of jobs and I always say co-op is a good opportunity to learn about what you like and about what you don't like. I met my now wife when we were both interviewing for the same job in our first co-op term back in 1986.

I did a double work term in my very first co-op, which I don't know if I would recommend that, that was a lot. It was eight months, and I was a sales assistant for BASF, which is a seed and pesticide company, still are a seed and pesticide company today. So, we were mentored by a full salesperson for BASF and then we had to do cold calls on farms. I have so much respect for people who can do that work, I could never do that. After that I was like, "I will never do this work again," because it was so hard. It was so emotionally draining and dogs, you know, showed up on a farmyard. So many dogs, so many not very nice dogs, lots of nice dogs, but it was an interesting job. So, I learned a lot about interacting with people in that regard and that I was never going to do that as a living.

My next two terms I ended up working for the same company, Ciba Geigy, which was also an inputs company on the research side, looking at weed management research and that I really liked. I loved those co-op jobs. We worked hard, we sometimes had 18-hour days, but there's so much camaraderie and I thought the work was really interesting. Part of me was thinking this is the kind of stuff I would like to do for a living, or something in this realm.

What advice do you have for Co-op students?

Do a better job than I did at trying on different kinds of jobs. Your first work term is usually kind of what you can get but be very deliberate in thinking about what kinds of skills you want to build and what you think you want to learn through those co-ops and hopefully your supervisors, your advisors, your employer in those co-op terms are open to that. Think, "I'd like to do this kind of job or that kind of job," to explore different kinds of jobs and situations.

Now beyond student experiences, you can offer a really interesting look at the other side of the OAC because you have gone from an undergraduate then to a master's, then to professor and then to Dean of the OAC and now the current Vice President of Research at the University of Guelph.

So, I was wondering, what were all of those transitions like for you, to go through all those things. What was that journey?

The journey was certainly one that involved a lot of serendipity, but also a journey where, at every stage, you do it like you mean it. At every stage, you're not thinking so much about "Where will this lead, and what will I do next?" but you're very into what you're doing at that time.

I finished my master's and then I did a PhD in the UK. I was totally into that, really worked hard, and then as it was nearing the end, I looked for other opportunities and was very, very fortunate that it just so happened that somebody at the University of Manitoba was retiring early in agronomy weed management.

So, a position opened up there. I was able to get that position and then just poured my life and soul into that position because I really enjoyed it, not thinking about what was next, and then opportunities come up. Sometimes the timing is not quite right, but opportunities come up and so after a decade in Manitoba, a position as Department Chair here in Guelph opened up.

So, I became chair of the Plant Agriculture Department. I was in that position for a number of years and then a new kind of Associate Dean position came up, the Associate Dean External in the OAC, and I thought: "Oh, that looks interesting." I was able to get that, and then that prepped me for seeing the inside of the Dean's Office and doing a lot of fundraising, and that convinced me that I would like to be Dean, but it was only maybe halfway through seven years of being Associate Dean that I thought, "Oh, you know, maybe I could [become Dean]." But until then, at each of those stages, I never thought that I would achieve those stages. I was really into what I was doing and learning as much as I could and enjoying that and preparing, unwittingly, for opportunities to come up and when they did, I was fortunate.

This role is a good example. In the middle of July, I was blissful in my job as OAC Dean, which is a job I love. I can't believe that I get to do that job, but the Vice President of Research stepped down and the President called me and said, "Hey, guess what I need you to do for the next year?" I was like, OK, you know, these things happen. But again, this position is a tremendous learning opportunity. Will I want to do this job for a term, I don't know yet, because the draw back to OAC is extremely strong. I would say you prepare yourself for opportunities to come up but don't dwell too much on what those opportunities might be: you'll know them when you see them and you'll be like, "Oh, yeah."

The other thing I would say, I wish I'd done more of it earlier on, is to think about your professional development. So, there's your disciplinary skills and expertise, but then there's your skills around that, your professional skills, your soft skills, your foundational skills and I wish that earlier on I had pursued more opportunities to build those, maybe in a formal way, short courses, workshops, one day workshops, whatever. I do that now more, but I wish I'd done that earlier because it's that combination of your disciplinary skills plus your foundational skills that really build your capacity much more fully and prepares you for things like management opportunities.

Now, you touched on this a bit, but you have helped raise over \$100 million for OAC as well as helping establish new institutes and research opportunities. So, this is a bit of a loaded question, but what has been the most rewarding aspect of your work here at the OAC?

The fundraising has been great, and we've been very fortunate in being able to build that capacity. In that work, it has also struck us that there are a lot of people beyond our alumni who are interested in the things that the OAC does and can do, because we have such a tremendous moral purpose in this college, literally feeding people, for example. So that's been a great learning experience. Most impactful, I think it always comes back to students, whether it's the graduate students that I've had the fortune of being able to advise through my career as a professor, that's always extremely rewarding and seeing them be successful and go on to do amazing things, and I still have a have contact with so many of them. That's always great.

I love graduation, any graduation. It's just the best time, like you see that accomplishment and you see the pride and the students, and you know they all have wonderful stories about where they're going, what they're doing next. Their families are really happy. Graduations really do it for me. It's the most important thing we do in our education programs and so I really, really enjoy that.

I don't think I can point to one big thing, but I would say graduations, and then that parses down into keeping [the OAC] and me focused on what I need to be doing and where we need to be going, what projects we need to pursue and how all of that relates back to student success. That's maybe a different kind of answer, but that's what's meaningful to me.

Whether it be from your career or during your time as a student, what are your favourite memories of your time at the OAC and the University of Guelph?

There's a number. I mean, one would be meeting my wife, that's a great memory. She's also an OAC grad, so together we have this huge affinity for this place and lots of great memories of meeting each other and being with friends. When I was in undergrad,

doing fun things. In my master's here at Guelph, there were also a lot of fun things, one highlight was a weed competition - weed as in weeds in fields and stuff like that, not weed as in cannabis - but there's still a weed competition and students still go to it to this day from Guelph. I competed in the North Central competition when I was an undergrad and I won that competition as an individual undergraduate student. So that was a highlight for me, I was like, "Wow, this is amazing," and I think that was a bit of an eye-opener that I might have a particular capacity in this area.

In terms of working in OAC, I think starting the Food Institute, which became the Arrell Food Institute, that was a highlight certainly and all of the great things that have happened through that Institute under the leadership of Evan Fraser. That was a lot of fun. Achieving my first sort of big donation for a chair; that was convincing Loblaw to give us \$3 million to establish a chair in sustainable food production, pitching straight to Galen Weston Jr. to do that. That was certainly one of those moments where you're like, "What the hell am I doing?" Like I'm sitting here in front of Galen Weston Jr., pitching him. That was a highlight.

Subsequently, I think we now have something like 25 named chairs and professorships in OAC and every single one of them is a special journey in terms of finding the donor, the supporter for those to help elevate our faculty into another role. I'll be very excited when the Honeybee Research Center gets finished, I think that'll be a good feather in our cap.

You know, this year we opened the new alumni center in Johnston Hall, so for the first time ever, we have a place where our alumni can come back into Johnston Hall and visit and grab a cup of coffee or whatever. So those are some highlights. Becoming Dean of OAC was... I still remember it was a July day when the president, who was Provost at the time, Charlotte Yates, called me and said, "Oh, can we meet?" and so I knew that decisions were being made and I remember meeting with her and her saying, "The committee wants to select you." I just about fell off my chair and then I walked around in a daze for like, half the day. I couldn't believe it. I mean the college means so much and the fact that they were letting me be the Dean of it, it did not seem real. So, I value it hugely and I feel a lot of responsibility.

Now you touched on the Honey Bee Research Institute. Are there any other major projects or anything coming up that you're excited for?

There's always things we're thinking about, certainly we want to finish [the Honeybee Research Institute] but there are a number of other chairs coming up that we have in the works that are really important. I think the last one I would say is we had that agreement between OMAFRA (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs) and the University of Guelph, and it's a very large agreement, it's hugely valuable. *It needs to be bigger.* The agriculture and food industry in Ontario is coalescing in a way I haven't seen before, and they really want to come together and build a vision for growth of the agriculture and food sector in this province and I'm looking forward to being a part of that process, and maybe helping to facilitate that process and then have the OMAFRA

and University of Guelph agreement be the flagship of the actions towards that vision. So that's something that's in the works now, it's complicated getting there, but I think there's an opportunity in front of us that hasn't existed for a long time, so I'm looking forward to that coming to fruition.

As we wrap up this interview, I was wondering if you had any advice for any current or future OAC students?

My first advice is come to the OAC. That might sound a bit strange but I'm sincere in that appeal because we don't have enough students in the OAC specifically. We continue to have a demand for our graduates that far outstrips our supply and it's a chronic issue, so the first thing is my wish for students to see programs in the OAC and to see *themselves* in those programs in the OAC and who they want to be and what they want to do and that's easily said, but really hard to do.

So that becomes my foundational wish. And then, once the students are here, squeeze *everything* you can out of your experience. I mean, there are so many opportunities and there's an industry that is excited, that is growing, that wants graduates, that wants co-op students, that really wants to build you up and have you be successful so that they can be successful, so the opportunities are tremendous and they are local, national, global, whatever you want. Do you want to live in a small town? Great. You want to live in a big city? Great. You want to go to Singapore? Great. Whatever you want to do, you can do it through these programs and working somehow, somewhere in that global agriculture and food sector.

Obviously, I have a lot of enthusiasm, but I see it firsthand. I am constantly interacting with people who represent various elements of that sector and who are always, always, always looking for good people. It's never-ending and the opportunities are bigger than they've ever been.

So first of all, find us and then when you're here, squeeze everything you can out of it. I would recommend being in a co-op program and also socially, students in our programs are very social, they have a good time, they make friends. Do that while you're here. A big part of your university, especially undergrad, is just building yourself in that transition from dependence to independence.