



Sue-Ann Staff

B.Sc. (Agr.) 1994

Interviewed by Toby Crawford

What year did you start at the OAC?

I started in 1990 and finished in 1994.

Where did you grow up?

I live in the Niagara Peninsula, just west of St. Catharines in Jordan. My family has been here for over 200 years growing grapes for over 100 of those years.

This is a family business then, one that gets carried down through the generations?

Yes, I'm the 7th generation of my family to live on the property and the 5th generation to grow grapes there.

Did you attend high school there as well?

Yes, I grew up here, went to high school here and then ended up back here now that I've grown up.

Did you ever visit the campus before you decided to come to Guelph?

No, I didn't visit first - I just knew Guelph had a legendary reputation for agriculture.

What did you take while at Guelph that got you qualified to make wine?

I took horticultural science and biotechnology and got two majors out of that and that way I could further my wine education elsewhere in the world afterwards.

Where did you go afterwards to learn more about winemaking?

At the time there were only five schools in the world that taught winemaking in English, two in California, two in Australia and one in South Africa. South Africa was just coming out of apartheid, so that didn't seem safe. I could have gone to California, but I figured why go to California when I could go to Australia.

Did any of your family come to the OAC before you?

No. I was the first. I know my grandparents thought highly of the OAC though and probably wished they had gone.

Do you remember any of your professors from your time here, were there any that stuck out to you particularly?

Yes definitely. I'm still in contact with one in particular, his name is Dr. Alan Sullivan from horticultural science. He supervised my undergraduate research project. I also kept in touch Dr. Proctor for horticultural science. Dr. Phillip Sweeney who was my microbiology professor. I always used to bring him apples. At first it was to kiss up, because I knew he liked them and then he would make me an apple pie. He's passed on unfortunately.

That sounds really sweet.

Well, we had apples on our farm at the time. They were extraordinary Mutsu apples - now they're called Crispin apples. I felt like I was one of 300 students sitting in a lecture hall and the professor doesn't know me. So, for every single class I took each professor an apple and Dr. Sweeney got the biggest one. You could almost carve a Jack o' Lantern out of it. That's how big it was. The next class, he brought me an apple pie! I didn't discriminate; every teacher got an apple and every teaching assistant.

Did you have a favourite class during your time here?

Yes, that would be Dr. Sullivan's fruit crops class during my 4th year, but I loved almost every single class I took in horticulture. I took a major in horticulture science but a minor in biotechnological agriculture, which was a pretty large minor so that got me over to the College of Biological Sciences. Taking industrial microbiology over at CBS was really interesting as well and some of the plant biotechnology courses were really interesting. It's beyond what I do now, but it helps me to understand the science and I have some intimate knowledge of the technology that we're seeing today that we learned way back in 1994.

What was your experience like when you first arrived on campus?

It was exciting! All the people I met, and checking into Macdonald Hall, which is where my residence was and all the friendships and the fun and frivolity. Being a farm girl, I arrived in a pickup truck with all my stuff in the back including a bean-bag

chair and a 10-speed bike with the turned down handles. The first week was fun but then on Monday classes started and then all sudden I'm like "Yes, I'm here to go to school." Sunday night, people are getting their textbooks out and reading and I was like "What are you doing?" I made the realisation that "Oh wait this isn't a party, this is all about going to school." I don't know why but suddenly I'm putting on skirts, quickly changed my attitude and stuff like that. The change was so remarkable that classmates commented "that's Sue-Ann, and that's who we met last week" I thought "Yes, I'm here to go to school now. I'm going to learn."

The other really exciting part was all the varsity sport because I was a competitive figure skater at the time. So, to learn that there was a varsity figure-skating team was exciting. My father wasn't too happy because it's an expensive sport, but I explained "No, it's free." He may or may not have shed a tear of joy. It was great to make so many friends from general athletics, from the OAC and from varsity sport. My little thing that I tried to do every day was go into the University Centre and to meet someone new. If I saw someone sitting by themselves, I'd sit down and like, hey, is this seat taken? What's your name? What's your program? What are you doing? Just strike up a conversation. So, I think I maximized my time there.

Are you still in contact with any of your university friends?

My OAC Class of 1994 is absolutely incredible. Every single year we have a summer and sometimes a winter reunion that has been uninterrupted for the 30 years since our graduation. Most OAC classes have a summer reunion while they are in school, but for many classes that tradition sometimes peters out. But we're still going strong. I'd like to think I have something to do with that. Every time I go to a class reunion, I take at least a case of wine with me, so I'm sure they're coming for the wine! What's really cool now is to see other classmates' children starting to connect both at the university and in agriculture, such as at 4H leadership camps and stuff like that. The traditions and generations will continue.

Were you involved in any extracurriculars while you were at the OAC?

At the time I was a competitive figure skater so, clearly varsity figure skating where we were Provincial Champions. I was also a part of the College Royal and helped to put together its fashion show. That was fun, I met lots of people in different disciplines and different years. I was also involved in the Horticultural Club which was a fantastic club. We made a lot of money for horticulture students! We had plenty of wonderful plant sales in the fall in the University Centre at the arena after a horticulture show. That club and my undergraduate research project took me to the American Society for Horticultural Science Conferences. So, I was able to go to Nashville and then to Portland, Oregon and meet other students.

Outside of extracurriculars and classes, what did you do for fun or relaxation on your own time?

I don't remember! I remember it being very intense with all the extracurriculars and figure skating and doing a science degree, but I know I did try to take time every day to go to the university centre and meet people. The first couple of years when I was living on campus, I did intramural sports – dodge ball and water polo. There were curling bonspiels. The curling bonspiels were alumni events, but they always made room for students.

Do you remember taking part in any OAC traditions?

Yes, I do. There was the BBQ that was always held at a local farm where we hopped on a bus and went off to have a pig roast. You had no idea where you were going! There were also some Frosh Week activities for the OAC - stuff like backing up a tractor with a trailer attached and leading a cow and stuff like that. We had a lot of fun.

Out of my own curiosity did you or anyone you know ever paint the cannon?

I never did but certainly many of my classmates did. Every time we hosted an Aggie pub, classmates would gather ahead of time and paint the cannon to promote it. There was also this great big plywood fence around the building across from the UC as it was under construction, so that would get spray painted all the time too. I believe people from my class wrote: "Ask not what agriculture can do for you but ask what you can do as an Aggie." And that was there for three months. I was proud of our class for doing that.

Do you have any memories that particularly stick out to you as special from your time here at Guelph?

I guess my most treasured memory would be the very first time I arrived on campus. I came about two weeks early through a program called START where you get to come and see the campus and stay two nights before school starts. You got to see the campus and meet people and there were different activities you could do. It was fun because all the friends I made during the START program ended up living close to me when school started so I was able to start off with a couple of friends and general knowledge of the campus which gave me a bit more confidence going into it.

What residence were you in?

First year, I lived in Macdonald. Second, I lived in East Residence and third and fourth year I lived off campus with other OAC friends.

This is one you don't have to answer if you're uncomfortable, but did you go through any difficult times during your university years and how did you deal with them?

I had a really tough time in 3rd year. I think I just overextended myself between being on varsity sports, having a full course load, working on a research project, working part-time at Gryphs Sports Bar above the arena and being president of the Horticulture Club. It was really challenging to get through it all. There were a lot of mistakes made that year. The professors were empathetic. There was one project where I just completely missed the boat and I went and said, "I'm so sorry, here are all the other things I'm trying to get done as well" and they told me it was ok, but I might need to sort out my priorities a bit and drop a few things. Figure skating and school were the priorities. So, I gave up the job at Gryphs and just budgeted with what money I had saved between food and rent and parking and all those things. The financial stress of it – it's the first time you're writing these cheques and having to budget everything. You're balancing your eating, your drinking and your partying. Knowing what your financial commitments are. It was stressful at the time, but it was one of those life skills you need to learn at the time, and it made me a better person.

Do you have any photos of your time at Guelph that you'd be willing to share?

We made a yearbook for our year, so I can pull some material from that.