

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History



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B.Sc. (Agr.) 1980

Interviewed by Megan Diebel

What year did you start at the OAC? Or was it the University of Guelph?

So, it was OAC at the University of Guelph, I started in the fall of 1976, and I graduated, in 1980. So, the class of OAC 1980.

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

When I was in high school my plan was to become an agricultural lawyer. I thought farmers needed to have some expertise in legal advice and having grown up on a farm, it would make sense to do that. However, when I was seventeen, I became Ontario Dairy Princess. I won the opportunity to work for the Milk Marketing Board for a year, so I took a year off school and moved to Toronto and worked for the Milk Board. I was 17, so I missed grade 12 in high school. When I was Dairy Princess, I met so many wonderful people and that cemented in my mind that I wanted to study agriculture, not law. I didn't want to go to any other school besides Guelph. I didn't know what I wanted to major in, but I knew I wanted to be an Aggie. I'd been in 4-H and in Junior Farmers, and so I'd met lots of people who were graduates of Guelph, but I didn't think Guelph was where I should go to become a lawyer. Soon after I finished being Dairy Princess, I realized, "I don't want to be a lawyer. I want to work in public relations and marketing and communications" because that's what I had been doing all year. So, then, I went back to high school. I had to give up driving my Ford Mustang convertible and get back on the school bus and go to Fergus High School and do my Grade 13. Luckily, I had been doing an accelerated academic program anyway, so I ended up graduating with both my Grade 12 and my Grade 13 diploma after just four years of high school but taking that Grade 12 year off made a big difference. It was difficult to get back on a school bus and to go back to doing calculus and math because for a whole year, I didn't do that.

I was working. I was traveling. I drove 40,000 miles that year around the province of Ontario and traveled internationally. It was an amazing opportunity. That's what set me

on the road to “Oh I’ve got to go to Guelph. I want to be an Aggie. I want to work in agriculture. That’s where my life is.” It was a roundabout way that I got to Guelph. It wasn’t something I was intending to do, but obviously it was the right thing to do because I’ve never looked back.

Well, that's fantastic.

If you want to work in agriculture or be in any way involved in the agrifood industry, Guelph was the university to go to. There was nowhere else that that would even rank up there. I also have family members who went to Guelph. My dad went to Guelph. He was a diploma grad in 1954, so I knew about that. My brother was a diploma grad. My sister was a FACS grad. As kid growing up, my dad's class of OAC '54A had a reunion every summer. I always thought that was really fun. We would see these guys because they were all guys, I don't think there were any women in his class, they would come together, and we'd have a summer picnic, and we'd play ball. As a kid growing up, I thought this camaraderie between his classmates was cool. Looking at my siblings, one of my sisters went to Waterloo...I think OAC is unique in that class spirit, and it often lasts a lifetime. I'm not a graduate of any other university, but I don't see that my sister's classmates from her class have the same affiliation to their university or their college. They don't get together. They don't have reunions. It was my expectation when I went to Guelph that I was going to be part of this great camaraderie between the class of OAC '80, and that kind of dictated everything I did on campus. It was about getting my degree, but it was also about being as active as possible on campus with everything Aggie. I remember when I started in the Fall of '76, my first goal was to meet as many of the graduating class of '77 as possible because I was starting, they were ending, and I wanted to learn as much as I could from them. I started dating a guy who was going to graduate in '77 and so I got to know the '77s, the '78s and the '79s. So where did I grow up? I can go back to that.

You mentioned Fergus High School. Is that where you grew up?

I grew up on a dairy farm at Alma, Ontario, which is close to Fergus and Elora, so only half an hour from Guelph and I went to high school in Fergus. It was called Centre Wellington District Secondary School.

The other advantage of going to Guelph was that I could be away from home but close to home. I could go home Sunday nights for family dinner and get my laundry done and then come back. Even though it was only half an hour away, I didn't want to miss the university experience and my parents didn't want me to miss that either. By the time I was 18 I had already been away for a year, I wasn't ready to live at home any longer. So, that was it. It was a real advantage for me to be so close to home, but not at home.

Did you visit the campus at all before you started?

No, I don't think so. I did attend a 4-H conference there, so I knew a little bit about the university, but I didn't go from my high school and see it and say, "Oh, yeah, this is where I want to go." I didn't have to do that.

I did apply to McMaster and somewhere else as my second and third choice just in case I didn't get into Guelph, but back then, as long as you had pretty good marks you could get accepted, so there was no other choice for me, and I didn't need to visit the university. For the 4-H homemaking conference we stayed in residence and so I knew a little bit about it. But I didn't do a high school tour.

You had said your dad had gone to Guelph?

Yes, he was a '54A. So OAC '54A, which means associate diploma, he did the two-year program.

Any other family members?

My brother is an '87 A and my sister. But she didn't go to OAC. She went to FACS at the University of Guelph and then my other sister went to Waterloo.

What was your major?

Agricultural economics.

Did you decide on it right away or did it take a little bit?

No, in hindsight, I wish I had taken agricultural business. I don't know why I took economics over agricultural business, but I chose that stream because I didn't want to do biophysics and I didn't want to do biochemistry. Our majors were different back then, we had crop science, animal science, agricultural business, agricultural economics, horticultural science. I think there might have been an environmental one, but if you wanted any animals or crops, which is what I would have been interested in, you had to do all those other biology classes and that just wasn't my strength. I didn't want to do that. With agricultural economics, I could take more electives. I could take animal science electives, crop science electives, and I thought with agricultural economics I would graduate with a more rounded degree.

In fact, agricultural business would have given me an even more rounded degree, because to be honest, I've never used anything from agricultural economics. But I chose

that major by second year just because I knew the biophysics and biochemistry were going to be horrendous.

That's why I ended up in agricultural economics. Plus, there also seemed to be a good group of people from my classmates I met that were going into that major and I thought, "I like these people." My best friend all through university was also in agricultural economics. So, we met, we had the same classes. Plus, for me, it was the flexibility to choose courses as electives that I could take. I don't know if it was beef and sheep and swine and poultry or what I took. There was a couple of crop life or crop science courses that I could take. I think that going into agriculture economics gave me a more rounded education. I got exposed to more things.

Did you have a favorite class?

No, but there were some professors who stand out in my mind, absolutely. Sandy Warley, Professor TK Warley would be one of them. In the last few years of his life, we would get together with him every year, a bunch of us from our class and we would have dinner with him. He influenced a lot of us, and Stewart Lane would be another one of the agriculture economics professors. They're both since passed away, of course. There were definitely some professors in the School of Economics who stood out to me. I got to go on the Croppers tour, the Midwest Tour that the croppers do, and Rob McLaughlin, who became Dean of OAC after that, was the professor for that course. One of the highlights of my university was doing that crop tour as an agricultural economist. I wasn't a cropper, but I was an agricultural economist, and able to go. That was really fun.

What was it like when you first arrived on campus?

I remember waiting in line to register to get my student card or whatever we had to do that first week and I was so excited. I was very outgoing and talked to everybody. I was very comfortable because I'd had that experience as Dairy Princess. So, I'd been out in front of the public. So, for me, it was not a big deal. I wasn't shy, I wasn't nervous, I was just ready to go. I was ready to be there and get to know people and get involved and do stuff. I remember a very good friend of mine still to this day, a classmate and colleague in the agricultural advertising business said he remembers me from the very first day standing in the line. He was a 'W', I was a 'T' and he said, "I remember seeing this girl who is chip chip chip" (making talking motions with hands), he said, "I just thought to myself, who is that?" and we joked about it for the rest of our school time together because he was in a agricultural economics with me. Very good friend. We worked together at the same advertising agency in fact. I remember starting and immediately jumping into stuff. I pulled people together and said we've got to go to the Aggie games. We've got to have a team. We've got to have a presence; we need to get a class president going. I had natural leadership tendencies and so it was a perfect spot. I made it my mission to get to know the '77s and the '78s so that I could learn from

them and bring my friends along to some of their things. I joined the agricultural economics society, they had events, and I would go as a freshman to their events and get to know them. For me it was “Let's get going and get involved,” and so right from day one I was super involved in everything.

Did they have a Frosh week or, what was the Frosh week like?

They did have a Frosh week. I remember being on a tug-of-war team. I lived in residence the first two years. I lived in South. The first year was with a roommate from Fergus High School, and the second year I had my own room in South. Then I moved off campus to share a house on Scottsdale, which everybody did, with a bunch of girls. It maybe wasn't the same kind of Frosh week they have now. There were Aggie Games, and there were some events that we were invited to, and of course I went because I knew it was important to get involved right from the get-go. I would say not everybody did that because they just weren't as plugged in as I was, but I guess they did have some Frosh week things. I don't remember.

Other than the tug of war stuff, what I remember most were the Aggie Games, which were a couple weeks later and homecoming and that sort of thing. I remember one of our first classes was with Dean Switzer. So, Clay Switzer was the Dean of our College, and I knew him because I'd met him during my year as Dairy Princess, we were often at the same banquets, so I knew who he was. I respected him immensely and he talked to us in PS105, I remember it was called back then. Physical sciences 105, and he was the one who told us OAC stood for “Out at Christmas”, and he said, “look around” and he said, “the person beside you on either side. One of you won't be here after Christmas because you'll just party too much or you'll find the courses too difficult” or whatever. I remember thinking “Well, it's not going to be me. I want to be here, you know?” Dean Switzer would be one of the biggest influencers on my life as well.

So how did you enjoy the experience of living in residence?

It was great. It was fine. For a lot of people, I think residence is where they get to meet people. But for me, in first year, it wasn't that. I was already connected to people on campus. Life in residence was fine. I didn't take part in any of the antics because I was out with the Aggies. We didn't have residences set up in areas of our courses.

When my daughter went to Guelph, she could choose a residence that had people who like to study or people who liked to party or whatever. She could be placed with like-minded people. That wasn't the case back in 1976. You just landed in a residence, so there would be people from all different colleges. I didn't need to get to know those folks because I had another circle of friends. It was really handy to be on campus because the other thing I got involved with right away were the intramural sports. I loved intramural sports. I played baseball, soccer, broom ball, hockey. I played water polo. I

played as many intramural sports as I possibly could, again, because I'd put a team together from my class. It was more an OAC '80 team rather than a residence team.

Then you mentioned that after your second year, you moved to a house on Scottsdale.

Yes.

Did you like where you lived then?

Yes, it was. It was fine. We could walk to school, but I also purchased a used car with my boyfriend. He and I bought a car together. My parents thought this was a terrible idea; how are you going to share a car? We were able to share a car. He lived in another house on Scottsdale, and so we shared a car. Sometimes I'd walk over dairy bush, I don't know if they call it that anymore, but we'd walk to school. It was time to get out of residence and live in a house. That was good.

You mentioned that you were involved in a bunch of stuff. So, what did you do most for fun and relaxation?

I mostly played intramural sports and then got involved in on-campus activities. So, I was on SFOAC for most of the four years I was at Guelph. I volunteered with College Royal every year I was at the university. I was class president in the second year. I ran for College Royal Celebrant. I went to all the Aggie pubs. I was involved in all the things on campus for fun.

I'm assuming because you did all this and you were getting everyone together, you definitely felt like a part of the OAC?

Oh absolutely. I have a huge affinity for it now, which is why I've stayed super involved, even though I live in Ottawa. It's hard to get back for OAC things, but I did take a stint as a director on the OAC Alumni Association. There are a few of us from our agricultural economics group who have tried to golf, and curl in every bonspiel since we graduated. Now we've missed a few years, but I have always supported alumni events. I try to go to the OAC Alumni Association annual meeting, and the Foundation's annual meeting. I went into the university already knowing I was an Aggie. So being there on campus just made me full-fledged 150% and I've been an Aggie ever since.

So, were there any other OAC traditions that you took part of other than the Aggie pubs?

I would say just the normal things. Aggie Week was a big one. We were always involved. I don't even know if they have that anymore, but there would be activities all week as part of Aggie Week. There would be a leg auction and there were fun things I'm sure you're not allowed to do anymore. We painted the cannon a few times, of course, that's a tradition. We got leather jackets. We chose the class colours, and we chose the mascot. It was the rooster. So, we did all the traditional things. We'd have a banquet and since then, of course, we've had some class reunions. We try to have a reunion every five years and I have been on the planning committee for every single reunion, I think. It's part of it is my natural tendency to plan and lead. I can't think of anything else specific. Aggies were very involved in College Royal at the time. I was on the College Royal Planning Committee. We had a square dancing set every year at College Royal.

So, what are some of your favorite memories of your time at the university?

All the fun activities we did. I mean, I remember Dean Switzer, saying to us as well, "Don't let classes get in the way of your education" and I'm not sure if I'm quoting that quite right...but he meant that it's important to go to class and study and get good marks, but your real education at university, and particularly the OAC, is everything you do outside the classroom. All the experience you gain by leading and participating. I loved the sports we played by 4th year. I played hockey. That's where I learned how to play hockey. That was one of my favorite things because all our boyfriends would come and coach us, right? And we'd borrow their equipment and whatever. By 4th year we won. We won everything. We won the hockey, we won the broom ball, we won the baseball. I mean, we're 4th year big shots right, and had played together. It was just intramurals, but it was really fun. I love sports and being able to play with my classmates was really fun, and I have fond memories of all the leadership things like the College Royal, I learned a lot about being a leader and working with volunteers and organizing. When you're at that university age, you're a funnel and stuff just pours in, right? So, academics pours in. I don't think at the time you can appreciate what you're learning, but you learn how to learn. This is why you go to university, you learn how to learn, how to be curious, how to find answers. It's also a time of your life where you're open to learning things about life, about friendships, about taking on leadership roles, about making tough decisions: do I do this, or do I do that? I was naturally outgoing and found it so easy to be a leader, but sometimes people resented that and again that was part of their growth. When is the right time to lead out front? When is the right time to lead from behind? I think that's an important takeaway for me from all my activities at university, I didn't just graduate with a degree and all the courses with academic knowledge. I graduated with a wealth of experience and knowledge about how to put myself forth in the world, in whatever position I would go to after that, because I'd had all those experiences. I don't know if it's the same now, I suspect it's similar. I think that

OAC and some of the traditional colleges, they must work hard, but the OAC is a bit unique that way, because it does create an opportunity for that camaraderie that maybe other colleges try to emulate but aren't as successful. Part of that is the history and the tradition. Part of that is bringing farm kids together. I think there's sometimes a difference between rural and city. There's a lot more city people there now. When I went, there were a lot of city kids who didn't know agriculture but chose agriculture. I think OAC is really unique that way. I'm sure there are some engineering schools and nursing groups and other professions that would say they have a similar affinity, but not like OAC, not graduates and alumni who come back every year to events and donate every year back to their college and have reunions on an annual basis. I think that's what makes OAC really special.

So, are you still friends with the people that you went to university with?

Absolutely. Some of my best girlfriends are from the OAC. When COVID started, because we couldn't get together, one is in New York, one's in Calgary, one's in Toronto, one's near Port Stanley and I'm in Ottawa. We started a Zoom, and we meet monthly. We call ourselves the FAB 5 and we were all in agricultural economics or agricultural business and are very, very close friends, then, there's this larger group that gets together to curl or golf, and we just had a get together in June to start planning for our next reunion. A bunch of us just met in Guelph at the Shakespeare arms for dinner, so yes, a lot of very close friends, and even if they're not from my class, a lot of my very good friends are from classes before or after. There's such a fraternity that some people have likened it to a frat house. You know where people live in the same house, and they get to know each other and then you have these frat friends forever. But this is a bigger circle when it's a whole class and it's not just your class, it is the people who graduated before and after even 10 years before or you. There's that affinity with the college.

Alright, you don't have to answer this if you don't feel comfortable. Did you go through any tough times during your university years?

No, I would say not really, except I did allude before to couple of times where I learned things. I would say it might have been tough at the time, but I learned about leadership. I learned that sometimes if you're out in front leading, you're going to get attacked. I think that was just part of growing up, trying to figure out what to do when you're a natural leader and outgoing and love to participate, how do you inspire other people to come along without looking like you're trying to be bossy? At that age, it's a good time to sort of soak all that up and learn about yourself as well. In terms of any kind of mental health issues, I was very fortunate. I didn't have any times when I felt like, I can't do this, or I don't have the support. If there was anything that I had to manage, it was being too busy. It was having too much on my plate. Too many commitments and then stressing because I really hadn't spent enough time studying. I was at university. I was supposed

to be passing exams, but for me it was more important to be involved in all these other things. So, sometimes a tough lesson on time management, but nothing from any kind of mental health perspective.

Alright. So, how did you feel when you were awarded the Honorary Life award from the Seed Growers' Association?

So, I've had a few awards. I was given the CAMA Lifetime Achievement award. That's Canadian Agri marketers Alliance. I was given the Honorary Life Membership award from the Canadian Seed Growers Association. I also received the Canadian Seed Trade Association Seed Achievement Award. There are a few other awards I've received, and all of them have been humbling and exciting. It's an honor to be presented with an award, but what's more important to me is the recognition from your peers. When I was in university, I sometimes felt that people didn't appreciate my leadership abilities, but then you get to a stage in your career where you receive awards for things that you've done, and you think, they really do like me. So, I've been very lucky, and I've been very fortunate to be able to work in agriculture my whole career in all kinds of different areas, with different groups within the sector. I started with Farm Credit Canada, then went to work for the Ontario Milk Marketing Board, and then I started working for King Grain, Pride Seeds. Then I started my own communications business and have had many clients. It's been mostly focused on the seed industry, which is why SeCan is one of my biggest clients right now. I also work for the Canadian Agricultural Hall of Fame. I work for CAMA. My list of clients is really long but I feel very fortunate that I've been able to work in agriculture all my life, and I probably could count on one hand the number of interviews I've had to do to get a job. Usually someone taps me on the shoulder, so that's a really nice feeling.

So, what was it like, creating your own business.

I hope this isn't coming across as being bragging about myself. When I got married, I moved down to Ottawa and my plan was to start my own business because I felt had communication skills, event management skills that I could use. I was never intending not get another full-time job, but in the Ottawa area it was difficult to get a full-time job because I wasn't bilingual. I had not taken French, so that was a bit discouraging and forced me to commute back to the Guelph area where I had contacts and I could get work, and it just built from there. I got exposure to different clients, and I took on different roles and then I thought I don't ever want to go work for someone full time. I love the flexibility of my own business, being able to take time off when I want to, working crazy hours at certain times and then not at other times. It was a bit challenging in the beginning, like anything new you start, especially a new business where you're looking for income to pay that mortgage, but somehow, we've always figured it out and managed and I would say money has never been the motivating factor for me. What's most important is that I love what I do every single day and when I no longer love what I

do, then it'll be time to retire and do something different, but I'm 66 and that hasn't happened yet, so I don't know when it will.

Well, it's great that you love what you do.

Yes, it's really important. What is it they say, "if you love what you do. you'll never work a day in your life" or something like that. That's right. That's a good quote.

Do you have any other stories you'd like to share about your time at the OAC?

I think I've told you most everything. I was interviewed for an article in the OAC alumni magazine or newsletter and I'm trying to remember what I said there. For me OAC was not just a university experience, it was a life experience and tied me to agriculture and this amazing industry, for my whole life. The Ontario Dairy Princess jumpstarted me but then as soon as I got to Guelph, everything fired up and I just never looked back. I do credit the college, the Aggie spirit, the professors who mentored me and challenged me, my classmates who became lifelong friends and supporters for helping me get to where I am today. It wasn't just an education. It was the experience that built my life to what it is. Family and all that other stuff that's important. I don't know what OAC is like now because it's almost 45 years since I've been there, but I know there is still spirit and there is still that feeling of belonging to something that's bigger than just you and your roommate or you and your residence group. It's bigger than that, and that's pretty special because you don't always get that when you go to university. So, hopefully that's been helpful, and I've told you a bit about it. Obviously, you know I'm a big fan of OAC and everything it has done for me and for others and I love this industry and I love all the people.

Did you and your classmates did you do anything special for after graduation?

We had a big party. Yeah, I think we convoked on a Friday on Johnson Hall Green and then we had a banquet where our parents were invited because our parents wanted to be there. Then we spent the rest of the weekend partying in other places and doing other things. We were so excited to be finished and heading off to our various careers. We did have a reunion that summer, we started that summer with a get-together, and we did a reunion for every year for the next few years but then people get married, and they move away, and they get busy. We were all building careers, so we moved to every five years after that. We were supposed to have a reunion in 2020 but didn't with COVID. So, our next one will be in 2025. I hope, Megan, I didn't come across as, you know, being too full of myself, because that's not who I am, but at the same time, if I didn't share what I did there, and how much I enjoyed it, I don't think you'd get the true impact that OAC had on my life.

I didn't think you were coming off braggy at all.

Well, that's good. Megan, you made this easy and I just talked a lot. Hopefully you get something out of this that you need. I hope maybe I've talked you into switching and now you're going to OAC or something!

I like my history degree. I'm going to become a teacher hopefully.

Well, good for you. My daughter's a teacher. I have two daughters. Let me just tell you one more story. Right from the day they were born, I had my own business, so I had no maternity leave. I just worked through it all, but I took them everywhere with me and my parents still live back at Alma, so I'd take them with me to Guelph and they would stay at my parents and my mom would babysit. They traveled with me. Then when they started school, Mom still was away. Mommy went here and there and was away and always working I always worked hard. I think they saw that. When my eldest was about 12, somebody asked her, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and she said, "Well, I don't want to be like my mom. I want to make a lot of money and I don't want to work as hard," and I thought, my goodness, that's really telling. Am I setting a good example for my kids? My oldest became a nurse and my youngest became a teacher. Talk about more traditional professions, right?

They're both doing really well. Bronwyn is a neonatal nurse in Hamilton and Jodi went to Nipissing and became a teacher, and she's teaching in the school where she went from JK to grade 8 and is teaching with some of the teachers that taught her. It's really cool. Honestly, we need good teachers. So, I encourage you to think about that and pursue that if you can because it's a really noble profession. Almost as important as producing food! So good luck with that. I mean there are good teachers and there are mediocre teachers, and we need good ones.

Thank you.

OK. Thanks. Nice to meet you, Megan.