

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History

E'layna Baker

B.A. 2021

Interviewed by Henry McKay



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

I started at the University of Guelph in 2017.

And where did you grow up and where did you attend high school?

I grew up in the Bahamas. I grew up in the capital island of the Bahamas called Nassau and I went to a private high school that had a good reputation for having academically strong students and athletically inclined students. On the island, people call it the top high school in the Bahamas. It was an interesting high school experience for sure, especially growing up in the context of a small island like Nassau. Where I grew up set me up to see the world from a different point of view and I feel like coming into an institution like the University of Guelph and attending the OAC was a perfect fit for someone like me as I grew up and on a small island and got to learn about topics that impact food and sustainability, along with issues that are so intrinsic to island life, I feel like the University of Guelph is a perfect place for me as it just matched with my background and what I was exposed to growing up

What year did you graduate from the OAC?

I graduated in June of 2021. I was one of the pandemic graduations, so we had our in-person graduation the following year, in June of 2022.

What made you decide to go to the OAC?

What made me decide to study at the OAC was the fact that Canada and the University of Guelph in general have such a rich history of research and engagement, along with different collaborations and partnerships in the food and agricultural industry. When I was coming down to the end of my high school career, I didn't really know what I was going to do or what I wanted to study or get involved with. I looked around and saw different problems that were happening within my island and where I grew up. I saw the high food prices, a high dependency on food imports, and that we did not have a self-

sustaining system of food and agriculture on the island, and I wanted to be a part of that change. It seemed like something that would be interesting to learn more about and to get involved in. I wanted to get involved in the policy aspect of food and agriculture, and during my research, that led me to the University of Guelph and the OAC, which is where I learned about how great the programs are here for exactly that.

I decided to apply, and once I got confirmation from U of G, I completely ignored all my other acceptances from other universities and just focused on this because I knew it would be the best place to get that knowledge, as well as a good community feel while in post-secondary. I felt like it would be the perfect place for me.

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

Yes, I did get to visit the campus and that was a very interesting experience because I went with my mom. It was my first time in Canada. My mom had been to Canada before, but when she was around my age and she hadn't been back to Canada in a very, very long time. Probably a decade or so. We came on an early March day, and we scheduled a campus tour and we wanted to check out the City of Guelph and get an idea of what I would be getting myself into. Fun fact. That weekend we came turned out to be the coldest weekend of that winter. It was a huge shock for someone like me, growing up in the Bahamas, only knowing heat, and experiencing extreme cold overnight. It was crazy, but it was a great experience just to see the university. At that time, the University of Guelph was very active on Snapchat. I don't know if they still are, but they used to have these campus tours and show different snippets of student life. That was something I was very into at that point, so I knew what I was getting myself into. But seeing it in person made a huge difference to me and it made it all the more vivid and that this place was real and meant to be. That was coming towards the end of my grade 12 year.

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

No, I don't have any family members from the past who have been to Guelph. Most people that were asking me, "What school are you going to? What did you decide?" I would say the University of Guelph, and they couldn't even pronounce Guelph. If I sent it in a message and they had to read it, they would say, "What? What is that, go elp?" Nobody in my life has connections to Guelph. But I have met a lot of, what I would call lifelong friends, which have become family through the University of Guelph. Today, a lot of my connections are through my time here.

What did you major in? And did you decide on it right away?

I started in the food and agricultural business program. Then in my second year, I switched into food, agricultural, and resource economics, because the program was

better suited to my interests. It got more into the policy side of food and agriculture, rather than the business, management, and accounting side that the food and agricultural business program was offering. So that was the reason why I made that switch in my second year.

Do you remember any of your professors?

Yes. There was one for sure. Dr Rakhil Sarker. He was a professor in the Food, Agricultural, and Resource Economics program, and he gave me my second University of Guelph job. In my second year, I worked in the University Center food court. Then the summer of my second year, he offered me an undergraduate research assistant position. I assisted him in some research over the summer and he just was such a breath of fresh air, how he would speak to you and his outlook on his research and the impact it will make. I appreciated that encounter, so I definitely remember him. There's also Andreas Boecker. He's an interesting guy and I remember having him for several classes that had to do with International Development and how that ties into hunger and a lot of themes in the food system. There's also another professor. His name is Philip Loring. He was a teacher in the geography department, so it wasn't an OAC course, its name was something like food systems. I really don't remember the name of the course, but it was such an interesting course, and it invited the course participants to really step outside of themselves and reflect on their relationship to food and how a lot of our actions could directly or indirectly affect the food system. I think the way the program is designed; you're bound to cross paths with some really interesting and memorable professors.

Did you have a favorite class?

Yes, I did have a favorite class. It had to be either the cost-benefit analysis course with Professor Sarkar or, I think it's called Introduction to Food Systems with Phillip Loring.

And where did you live your first year and did you enjoy the experience?

I lived in Maritime Hall during my first year. It was a single room and I didn't love the experience only because my first year was a mixed bag of emotions for me personally - being an international student, being in the cold, and being around a bunch of people I didn't know, in a country by myself with no family. There were a lot of things that were working against me and making me not like the environment I was in. I was able to see my friends a lot because pretty much all of them were in South Residence and we would all grab lunch together or go for breakfast. My friends were accessible, but the circumstances I was dealing with didn't make me love where I was living. But it was good for what it was and the purpose that it served for my first year.

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

After my first year, I lived with a friend that I found within the OAC, and we are still friends to this day. Her name is Caitlin Garrettson and she's a great person and one of my closest friends to this day. She was also in the Food and Agriculture Business program, and I met her one of the first days of class during my first year. She ended up asking me to move in with her and a couple of other people who were in OAC programs, and that's where I lived for my second year.

Were you involved in any extracurriculars on campus?

I was involved in the peer helper program with the multifaith ambassadors for two years, and I also worked on campus in a number of jobs. I worked at Mom's Kitchen at the UC, and at Pita Pit also in the UC. I also worked for the OAC as their communications intern for the Dean's Office during the summer of 2020 and 2021. I was in a club called the Caribbean Culture Club, and I was very surprised that Guelph had such a rich Caribbean community. I was able to find a lot of friends and socialize with that group.

How was the social life on campus? What did you do for fun and relaxation in your first year?

The social aspect of the campus was always very lively and upbeat. I always felt like people were on their way to do something meaningful. That was the vibe that people were giving me every time I would go out. But in terms of socializing, it was always great to do events with the Caribbean Culture Club, and I also connected with friends a lot. We would study together at the library, or just be around each other while we got work done. I used to go to the gym on campus a lot but stopped after my first year. That was always a great spot to be with friends because a lot of the time, you don't want to go to the gym alone, and do activities that would be better with your friends. My friends would also organize little picnics and stuff at Johnston Green, especially when the weather was nice.

Did you feel a part of the OAC, and can you remember taking part in any OAC traditions?

I definitely felt a part of the OAC, but that mostly stems from my work as a content creator and communications intern with the OAC. I was able to push the boundaries of my creativity by learning about current communications and helping to enhance student life through communications. At the OAC I was able to start a blog post that showcased my experiences as an international student, and different tips and things that other students could take away from my experience. I was able to connect more with the student community by creating engaging posts on social media and helping to spread

awareness about the available programs. It was a great experience. I was able to work with the OAC Dean's Office for two years and being able to facilitate a culture of inclusion, but also help to do it in a fun way and in a way that I was able to be my authentic self. So, in short, I did feel like part of the OAC.

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

There isn't one specific memory, but the international students that I was friends with always got together every year for Thanksgiving. Most people go home to their families, but we couldn't, and we just had each other, so we would do potlucks with different meals from where people were from. They would usually happen at someone's house, or one year even my house. Another memory that I appreciated was that my OAC friend Caitlin, invited me to Easter dinner with her and her family and I got to explore their chicken farm and the land that they have. It was great seeing the actual rural side of Canada, not just the OAC and its resources, and learning more about farming and the people that are involved with it. So those are my two favorite memories.

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

Yes, I am friends with a lot of the people I went to university with. From the OAC, specifically Caitlin, I feel like she's my friend for life. Also, the people I met through the Caribbean Culture Club. There's a Bahamian friend that I didn't know before I got accepted to the OAC, but I saw that she posted that she was also going to the University of Guelph, and I talked to her and said that I was also going to the University of Guelph and we were able to connect. So, we got to know each other right before we flew up to Canada together. Her name is Eliana and we're friends to this day. Some other friends that I met through the Caribbean Culture Club are Ariel from Barbados and Nicholas from Jamaica.

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?

Yes, I did go through tough times. It had a lot to do with my transition in the first year, being new to Canada, the cultural shock that came with that, and being separated from the place you grew up with. But I feel like a big part of getting through that was remembering why I would uproot my life and come somewhere that I don't know about. It's to give myself a better opportunity. A lot of students in the Bahamas tend to go abroad because their programs aren't taught at the schools in the Bahamas and there's just more opportunity out there beyond the island. So, holding onto why I was here and knowing that my family was always there to support me, even though they were not physically there. It became easier over time though. I adjusted to the environment and was able to make friends on campus and in Canada and rely on those people more

than my family. I feel like this happens to every international student, especially for the first couple of weeks, it's very uncomfortable. But everyone finds their community in the end.