

# The York University Magazine

Fall 2021

# The People's Doctor



Eileen de Villa: making good  
on the promise of public health



# RIGHT THE FUTURE™

Now more than ever we understand the importance of creating a just world that sustains and provides for us all. People who belong to the most underprivileged groups are disproportionately impacted by environmental crises and intensive urbanization. York is introducing the new Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change to create a greener, healthier, and more equitable tomorrow for everyone.

Join us in creating positive change for a more just and sustainable future at [yorku.ca/EUC](http://yorku.ca/EUC).



## The York University Magazine

# Contents

4 The President 5 Editor's Notes 6 View 28 Giving 32 Alumni 38 Flashback

### 14

#### THE PEOPLE'S DOCTOR

*With scientific lucidity, Eileen de Villa has been steering Toronto through the pandemic. Meet the medical expert behind the mask*

### 20

#### FLORA FEMINISTA

*Plant-minded women have been cultivating the study of botany for years. York scholars get to the root*

### 24

#### VIEW FROM THE WHEELCHAIR

*A health condition has left Nikoletta Erdelyi with limited mobility. But that's the least interesting thing about her*



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

## THE PRESIDENT



**RHONDA L. LENTON**  
PRESIDENT AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

**AS I SIT DOWN TO WRITE THIS MESSAGE**, community members from across York are busily preparing for the beginning of the Fall academic term – students are participating in orientation events, faculty and course directors are preparing lectures and staff are getting ready to welcome students onto our campuses. In some ways, the bustle of familiar activity makes it seem almost like any other year.

But of course, we know that it is not *quite* like other years. After nearly 18 months apart, we are finally starting to reopen our campuses with increased in-person teaching, research and other activities, giving an entirely new meaning to *homecoming*. I want to acknowledge that even during the 2020–2021 academic year, while most of us worked remotely, essential staff continued to meet on-campus needs, some instructors offered in-person instruction when student learning outcomes could not easily be achieved online and many of our researchers maintained urgent work that would otherwise have been at risk.

Throughout the pandemic, and especially in preparation for the introduction of more in-person activities, we have continued to work closely with the Chief Medical Officer of Ontario, Toronto Public Health and the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to ensure the safety and well-being of our community. This is why we made the important decision to require vaccinations for everyone attending our campuses in person – a central component of our multi-layered pandemic defense strategy. We very much hope to welcome many of you this year, and invite you to check out our Better Together website to learn more about our YU Screening Tool and other safety measures.

As much as we are craving a return to normal, we know that higher education, like most other aspects of society, will be different going forward. The transformations triggered by the pandemic – the widespread adoption of remote work; online teaching and learning; the amplified impacts of automation and A.I.; the increased urgency of addressing environmental and sustainability challenges; and the refocused attention on the critical need to address inequality, among others – have permanently reshaped not only York's future but the future of our world more broadly.

History has shown us that times of great disruption can be an inflection point of rare opportunity for positive change. And so, as we begin a new academic year and a new chapter in York's future, we are challenging ourselves to seek out these opportunities for enhancing our impact by leveraging the lessons we have learned over the course of the pandemic and advancing our University Academic Plan 2020–2025 – through enriched 21st-century learning, research intensification, enhanced access and student advising, an international perspective and collaborations that extend around the world.

We have many exciting projects in development, including the new Markham Campus, a proposal for a new School of Medicine, a Service Excellence Program and a new cloud-based Student Information System, to name just a few. Working together, we continue to explore, discover, develop, create and innovate – we are ready to right the future.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

## EDITOR'S NOTES



### Bella Fortuna

**OVER THE PAST 18 MONTHS**, we've grappled with the recognition that life is often unfair, subject to forces beyond our control. But are we always fortune's fools, tethered to the vagaries of the stars – or can we take control of our destinies through the choices we make?

It's a question as old as astrology, and it's colouring our experience of the pandemic, forcing us to consider how much our personal actions figure into our future survival.

Personally, I believe in perseverance, determination, knowledge and the power of the imagination to seek solutions even during seemingly impossible situations – such as the one we're all living through now. These attributes stand out in many of the York alumni you will read about here, in the Fall 2021 edition of *The York University Magazine*. Take, for instance, Eileen de Villa, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, tasked with piloting the city through the current health crisis, and Nikoletta Erdelyi, a burgeoning writer who consistently challenges fate (in the form of a rare congenital disease) by living creatively and sensually while confined to a wheelchair.

But are we actually the authors of our success? How much of what passes as success is governed by external influences? Should we count ourselves lucky when things work in our favour? I can't quite decide.

Boethius, the sixth-century philosopher who, while down on his luck, wrote about life on the Wheel of Fortune – up

one minute, down the next – proposed that being true to ourselves and trusting in reason can save us from falling from hope into ruin. But then there's the equally persuasive thinking of Thomas Hardy and F. Scott Fitzgerald, literary geniuses whose romantic destiny novels show how fate's inconstant hand can completely overwhelm even the best-laid plans, destroying people's lives.

One way to parse the existential dilemma is to see life as a commixture of chance and free will, a card game with rules attached. Our stories on teen psychology in the time of COVID and on Robert Rotenberg, a lawyer who writes legal thrillers on the travails of Toronto's haves and have-nots, exemplify that. In Rotenberg's bestselling books, you play the hand given you and whether you win or lose depends on circumstances often beyond your control. And yet you stay in the game. Why? Because just maybe you'll get lucky. You'll get to live another day. ● — DEIRDRE KELLY

## The York University Magazine



THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE OF YORK UNIVERSITY

Volume 7, Number 1

**PUBLISHER** Jaqueline Janelle  
**EDITOR** Deirdre Kelly  
**DESIGN** Communications & Public Affairs  
**CONTRIBUTORS**  
 David Agnew, Peter Feniak, Mike Ford,  
 Sofie Kirk, Ira Lamcja, Alanna Mitchell,  
 Katie Nanton, Chris Robinson, Ariel Visconti  
**CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING OFFICER**  
 Susan Webb

**ADDRESS CHANGES:** [alumni@yorku.ca](mailto:alumni@yorku.ca) or  
 1-866-876-2228. Update your communication  
 preferences at [yorku.ca/alumniandfriends](http://yorku.ca/alumniandfriends)

Publications Mail Agreement No. 40069546

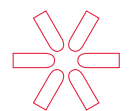
Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to:  
 Communications and Public Affairs  
 West Office Building, York University  
 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3  
 Tel: 416-736-5979 Fax: 416-736-5681

**THE YORK UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE** is printed and mailed to alumni and friends of the University once a year, in the fall. The summer and winter issues are available online only, at [yorku.ca/magazine](http://yorku.ca/magazine). Ideas and opinions expressed in the articles do not necessarily reflect the ideas or opinions of the University or the editors. To get in touch, email [yumag@yorku.ca](mailto:yumag@yorku.ca)

### ON THE COVER

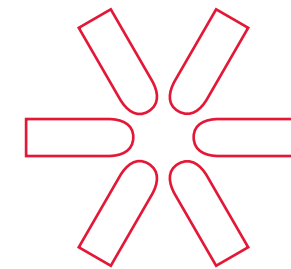


Eileen de Villa  
 Photography  
 by Mike Ford





## Democratizing Science



*Conversing with the public about the cosmos*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON

**A** **NEWLY APPOINTED** assistant professor in the Department of Science & Technology Studies, Jesse Rogerson (PhD '16) is an astrophysicist who believes in bringing science back down to earth.

His astrophysical area of expertise is quasars – supermassive black holes at the centres of very distant galaxies that are actively consuming large amounts of gas and dust. He also studies variable stars using data that ordinary people have gathered using telescopes around the world.

Citizen science projects are a growing international phenomenon that is expanding the frontiers of scientific discovery through mass information-gathering projects such as Rogerson's. But that's not the only reason he likes them.

"By including people in our work, we help to demystify the process, and we make science more democratic," he says. "People deserve to be able to engage with that content meaningfully."

Working with the public on complex science projects stems from Rogerson's experience working as a science communicator at the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto, Telus Spark in Calgary and the Canada Aviation and Space Museum in Ottawa over the past 10 years. There, he took complex ideas and made them accessible to the general public, forging connections between people and science in ways that might help them better understand their world.

Today, as a science educator at York, Rogerson draws from his present research projects and past science communication experience to make a difference in the classroom. In engaging his students with real astronomical data, he sparks a personal connection with the universe, inspiring future generations of citizen scientists to want to learn more.

"Science communication is a conversation, not a lecture. It requires true dialogue and empathy for scientific ideas to resonate with an individual, which creates benefits for us all." ●

— Deirdre Kelly

**W**ITH A LARGE PORTION of the population now partially or fully vaccinated, Canadians are undoubtedly eager to leave the COVID-19 era behind and resume their lives. But for young people who have had their formative years interrupted, entering post-pandemic life brings unique anxieties about what life will look like.

Long lockdowns during the pandemic have been extremely disruptive to young people. Teens would normally spend this time forming their identities and building independent lives outside of their families. Instead, they've spent months under lockdown in their households, missing out not only on celebratory rites of passage and milestones but also on common formative experiences – going to school, engaging in extracurricular activities, getting their first jobs, socializing with friends, and exploring dating and sexuality – that are crucial to their development.

Now that the country is entering post-pandemic life, what impact will this disruption have on teens as they move forward and transition into young adulthood?

York University psychologist Jennifer Connolly is optimistic that any disruption to teens' social development brought on by the pandemic will be temporary.

"I think it's more of a pause than a permanent delay for most youth," she says. "But sometimes there's growth from stressful experience as well as delay. I'm hopeful kids are going to recover, get back into school, get back with their friends and re-engage, and they'll start to feel better."

Connolly is a professor and Psychology Department Chair in York's Faculty of Health. Her research focuses on social development in adolescence, particularly romantic development, as well as resilience in youth who have experienced adversity.

Dating, an important part of many young people's lives, has been especially interrupted by the isolation and social distancing that dominated pandemic life. While teens are accustomed to socializing via their smartphones, as Connolly explains, developing or maintaining a romantic relationship without face-to-face contact is inherently difficult, and even more so for young people who are navigating romantic relationships for the first time.

"Youth are used to being in the virtual world and being online and using social media, more so than us, but there's always the other component of social interaction," she says. "Even though I think they have some adeptness in that,

relationships do not flourish as well without some kind of personal contact."

Connolly believes that there will be a "resurgence" of young people's interest in peer and romantic relationships following the pandemic. But she cautions that we must be "very cognizant" of the mental health challenges that the pandemic has caused for young people, including increasing rates of depression and anxiety that may linger.

She notes that the cohort of young people who have graduated from high school and entered post-secondary studies during the pandemic has faced particularly difficult challenges. Making this transition is already stressful, but doing so in an era of online learning, social distancing and lockdowns has completely upended their experience and impacted their ability to enter new social groups and romantic relationships.

"For these youth, this first-year university experience has been like nothing anybody has ever experienced," she says. "It's been a very isolating, lonely world. And I think they have especially felt that because they have, in a way, left their high school networks, their high school friendships, and they're transitioning to university relationships, but that has been very much blocked."

Similarly, students entering universities this fall, on the heels of the pandemic, may need extra support with the transition. Connolly emphasizes the need for universities to make sure mental health resources and services are available to students who are struggling with transitioning to post-COVID life, and to ensure that they don't face hurdles like wait-lists when trying to access support.

"I think that their needs are going to be immediate and temporary, and if we can just help them right away with these transitions, that's going to be really important. I think that universities are very aware of this issue and the resources are being put into place," she says.

Although it may take time, Connolly is confident that young people will find their footing and bounce back from the challenges they experienced during the pandemic.

"I'm just hopeful that they're a resilient and capable group of youth, and that, as things open up, they too will re-engage with the world with enthusiasm," she adds. "I think there's going to be a slower emergence; I think there will be lingering effects, but I don't think it's going to be permanently damaging." ●

— *Ariel Visconti*

*Teens struggle with living through a pandemic, York psychologist says*

## Are the Kids Really Alright?

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

## How York is fending off criminal hackers

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON

# CYBER SECURE



**T**HANKS TO THE QUICK THINKING of University Information Technology (UIT) staff, York was able to fend off a serious cyber attack last spring. A strike corrupted a number of York's servers and workstations, disrupting productivity for 24 hours. Luckily, no sensitive data was stolen.

Since then, the University has introduced new measures to prevent such a breach from happening in the future, including two-step authentication to improve the protection of York accounts and data, as well as the modernization of key systems that take an inside-out approach to block unauthorized manipulations of internal systems.

"The rapid move to working from home has provided much more opportunity for cybercriminals, and some industry sources have indicated a fivefold increase in the amount of ransomware activity globally over 2020," says York's chief information security officer, Chris Russel. "Zoom and other remote collaboration tools have a learning curve to use securely, and cybercriminals take advantage of that when there are a huge number of new and inexperienced users. Awareness and training for secure use of those tools is part of the solution."

Alerts about cyber security are now regularly posted to the York web page in addition to tips about how to avoid falling victim to outside phishing expeditions, fraudulent websites and other scams. Additional materials will become available in October, during what the University has designated cyber security month. Concurrently, York has deployed end-point detection and response (EDR) to most University PCs and laptops. The supercharged anti-virus software enhances the University's ability to protect, detect and respond to cyber events in devices being used remotely, outside the York network – a necessity in today's work-from-home reality.

Still, vulnerabilities persist, both locally and globally. In May of this year, hackers attacked U.S.-based Colonial Pipeline using ransomware – malicious software that blocks access to a computer system – triggering the shutdown of one of the biggest oil suppliers on the continent. Canada wasn't immune. The same month, hackers infiltrated Canada

Post and, later, JBS USA, the world's largest meat supplier, crippling operations at the company's plants in Alberta, Ontario and elsewhere. The perpetrators are sophisticated criminal gangs like DarkSide, who, in the case of Colonial Pipeline, were paid a ransom of 75 Bitcoin – the equivalent of US\$5 million, most of which was later recovered – to return stolen data.

The situation is complex and in immediate need of trained professionals to combat the proliferating posse of cyberworld bad guys. Enter York University's cyber security certificate program, offered through the School of Continuing Studies in a new accelerated 12-week course format.

A speeded-up version of the five-month cyber security program originally launched at York in 2016, this intensive initiative quickly delivers the skills needed for this in-demand field. In Canada, the profession is growing annually by seven per cent, with an anticipated 3.5 million job positions opening up globally in 2021 alone, according to the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security.

Given that cyber breaches have become a daily occurrence, fast-tracking the next generation of cyber security professionals is a high priority for businesses operating today, says advanced cyber program instructor Ed Dubrovsky (MBA '10), who contributed to the development of the curriculum surrounding network security engineering and vulnerability management within York's cyber security program. In his role as a chief security information officer, Dubrovsky has handled over 3,500 cyber attacks – experience he brings to his new role with access management developer Qnext, where he acts as executive cyber advisor on issues surrounding global security and data protection on the international stage.

"Cybercrime has reached an unprecedented and explosive momentum, driven by skyrocketing ransom demands and fuelled by a lack of skilled defenders to protect organizations and governments," elaborates Dubrovsky, who also sits on the University's Cyber Security Advisory Board. "The training of ethical, skilled defenders has become one of the highest needs for modern digital societies." ●

— Deirdre Kelly

# Brain Gain

*Using exercise to help young concussion patients recover*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

**Y**ORK UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR, athletic therapist and kinesiologist Danielle Dobney (BA '06) is working to make aerobic exercise a more widely used therapy for young patients who are slow to recover from concussions.

Dobney – who graduated from and is now an assistant professor in York's Kinesiology and Athletic Therapy programs – has been researching concussion management and working with concussion patients for over a decade. Her interest in this area was piqued as a York University student in 2006, during a time when research into concussions was taking off.

"People were just beginning to recognize that concussions weren't 'just a bump on the head,'" she says. "It was being recognized as a brain injury, and there was so much we didn't know. At that time, rest was really the only strategy in managing a concussion."

Traditionally, clinicians advised against exercise for children and teens who experienced persistent symptoms following a concussion. But for many patients she worked with, Dobney saw that withholding light exercise was having a negative effect.

"The longer they were inactive, the worse they felt. They experienced emotional symptoms from being so limited in what they could do. When I started letting my patients do a bit of exercise at a low level, it lifted their mood to be able to do something," she explains.

She focused on aerobic exercise as a concussion management strategy while pursuing her PhD in rehabilitation sciences at

McGill University under the supervision of Isabelle Gagnon, who was leading innovative research in this area.

In 2017, Dobney and her research team conducted a study that prescribed an active rehabilitation program to 277 youths experiencing persistent concussion symptoms. They found that the patients demonstrated improved physical, cognitive, emotional and sleep-related post-concussion symptoms following the treatment.

Despite its potential benefits, aerobic exercise is currently an underused therapy for concussion management.

In a study published in 2021 that surveyed 555 clinicians about what treatment they would recommend for two clinical vignettes, Dobney and Gagnon found that just over one-third prescribed aerobic exercise.

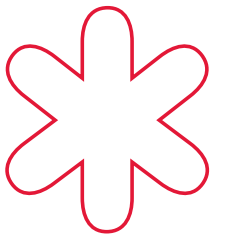
"Clinicians were prescribing a wide variety of treatments, many of which didn't have supporting evidence. However, treatment for which there is supporting evidence (such as aerobic exercise) was prescribed less frequently," Dobney explains.

The next step in the research will focus on knowledge translation and raising awareness of aerobic exercise as an effective concussion management strategy among clinicians.

"It took a long time to have this research move into clinical practice because having people with concussion symptoms take part in exercise was contrary to what had been previously recommended," Dobney says. "It takes a long time to move research into practice, especially when it contradicts previous knowledge or evidence." ●

— Ariel Visconti





*Eileen de Villa has calmly guided Toronto through the pandemic, making good on the promise of public health*

# The People's Doctor

BY PETER FENIAK  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD



**When it comes to speaking up for the public's interest, speaking up for public health, she does it, and she does it as firmly as anybody I've ever seen**

**D**URING THE DARK, anxious months of the COVID-19 pandemic, how did Toronto's Medical Officer of Health maintain her calming voice and message of assurance? Eileen de Villa (MBA '03) answers with typical directness.

"I think the calmness comes from 'I'm telling you what I know. This is not "dressed up." It is a very honest and earnest approach," she says from her office at Toronto Public Health, Canada's largest local public health agency. "I genuinely care about the three million people I call 'my patients.' And I'm genuinely telling them what I believe. You go to the science and you express the science in a way that the people can easily grab."

Delivering "the science" amid the heartbreaking toll of illness and death from COVID-19 (over 170,000 cases and 3,575 deaths as of early summer 2021), as she did, has challenged health leaders – and political leaders – everywhere. As Toronto fought the fast-spreading virus, Canada's largest city shrank into a "stay-at-home" version of a once-vibrant metropolis. But de Villa stayed the course. From an early age, she has followed a motto instilled in her by her own accomplished parents: "From those to whom much is given,

much is expected." She has also taken an amazing journey of learning – including a much-valued MBA degree from York University's Schulich School of Business – that has enabled her to make a difference during the health crisis.

With the surprise of a pandemic, de Villa's team delivered expertise in "outbreak management." That, says de Villa, meant "the essential data of the instance – where are the cases? Where are they coming from? What tests did they have? What does our experience on the ground tell us?"

**W**ITH HER OVERSIZED GLASSES, rotating collection of colourful, flowing scarves and ability to answer with clarity any and all of the hard pandemic questions, she became a reliable (if not downright fascinating) presence in the city's battle against COVID-19. Through it all, she projected honesty and commitment at press conferences held with Mayor John Tory (LLB '78) and Toronto Fire Chief Matthew Pegg, who led the city's planning and response team. All met early each day throughout the health crisis to discuss strategy. But de Villa didn't just offer medical advice. She determined the city's course of action. Said Pegg to a reporter at the time, "We all look to her. She sets the tone."

Over many difficult months, de Villa's frequent updates (appearing everywhere from Twitter to TV) made her something of a media star. Today, it's widely recognized that her calm authority in the face of the fast-breaking, frightening coronavirus developments lifted the spirits of a city under siege.

"She had so much credibility," observes former classmate Michele Farrugia, an obstetrician and gynaecologist at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital. "I think so many people really admired her, including everyone at all the downtown academic teaching hospitals. I think everybody really respected the way that she was so steady and consistent and straightforward with the messaging, particularly in those early days of the pandemic. I personally had a lot of admiration for her. I still do."

As the grim months ground on, politicians and media bickered over which measures mattered most. But de Villa continued forthright delivery of Public Health's findings.

She invited comparisons with someone she greatly admired – the late Sheela Basrur (Honourary Alum, LLD '07), who shone as Medical Officer of Health during the Toronto outbreak of SARS in 2003. "One key bit of information I took away from Sheela," de Villa recalls, "is recognizing that you're operating in a political environment, but that we're *not* the politicians. Our job is to deliver the best possible scientific advice in order to inform decision-makers."

De Villa speaks softly, plainly, but she is tough as nails. Toronto's mayor describes the city's top doctor as smart, fair and collegial, adding that "she is the original iron fist in the velvet glove."

"When it comes to speaking up for the public's interest, speaking up for public health," Tory ruminates, "she does it, and she does it as firmly as anybody I've ever seen."

But she doesn't do it alone. "I'm just the spokesperson," de Villa modestly but steadfastly insists. "When we talk about anything I've been able to achieve, it's because of the team, the people I have around me. They're doing the heavy lifting."

**H**ER SUPPORT GROUP includes her family. Married to Toronto cardiologist Richard Choi, de Villa is the mother of three teenaged sons who rarely saw their mother during the worst days of the COVID-related disruptions.

"Apparently, we all live in the same house," she says with a smile. "But there were some days when I'd literally see my husband and my children for just a few minutes. Throughout the pandemic, 18-hour days felt kind of normal. But my family remained so very supportive. They're the reason I do this."

Eileen de Villa was born in 1969 in Boston, where her parents – both from the Philippines – were completing their medical studies as foreign students. As a child, she lived briefly in Manila, where her parents began their medical practice. Her mother, Maria Antonina "Nenette" de Villa, worked as a cardiologist, and her father, Guillermo de Villa (now deceased), as an ob-gyn. But conflict with the hardline Marcos regime eventually drove them out again. In 1975, her parents resettled in Toronto, where they became important leaders in the city's growing Filipino community.

Educated at elite private girls' school Havergal College, de Villa took a bachelor of science degree at McGill but was initially uncertain about following her parents' career path into medicine. As an undergraduate, she connected with the United Nations and moved to Vienna as an intern with the UN Industrial Development Organization, where she learned of the fragilities of the developing world. She returned to Canada for a master's degree in health studies at the University of Toronto, and ultimately decided on and completed a medical degree at U of T in 1998. Next came residency accreditation – and her days completing an MBA at York University's Schulich School of Business.

Some might dismiss de Villa's pursuit of a master's of business administration as a diversion, but she is clear on the value it gave her as a public health physician.

"As the Medical Officer of Health, I oversee a team of 2,000 people. It's an organization," de Villa explains. "We have objectives and goals, we need to do strategic planning, we have to evaluate how our operation's functioning. Are we maximizing the efficiency of our service delivery? How do we adjust it so that we're getting more by way of outcomes? That's all learning that you can get from an MBA. You do not get it at medical school, I can assure you."

Farrugia, her medical colleague, concurs. "I think that Eileen has always had a different approach," she says. "Even in med school, she did an MBA as part of her graduate training, which gave her a perspective that went beyond the purely medical or scientific approach. I think she always had this idea that she could do a lot more than just being a practitioner treating more patients in a clinic. I think she wanted to have more scope than that."

De Villa began her career in public health in the Region of Peel in 2004. She became Toronto's Medical Officer of Health in 2017, and her stated goal from the beginning has been "to improve health status, reduce disparities in health status, and be prepared for and able to respond effectively to outbreaks and emergencies." But easier said than done.

"In terms of improving health status and disparities, it's all about the social determinants of health – income, education, housing, social connectivity, sense of hope, sense of belonging, transportation, built environment, natural environment," de Villa says. "All of these things are what creates and maintains health."

**It's delusional to think we can just take care of ourselves here in Canada and not think about the rest of the world**

**A** **S PAST-PRESIDENT** of the Political Affairs Club at Havergal, de Villa learned early on that politicians make the ultimate choices about what is funded for the public. This experience proved invaluable when the provincial government made deep cuts to the Public Health budget in April 2019; knowing that these cuts would have “significant negative impacts” on the health of Torontonians, she was quick to protest. Premier Doug Ford accused her of “fearmongering.” But her passion and persistence eventually won him over. “She’s a super bright, very smart doctor and a hardworking person, and she takes it so seriously,” Ford later said. “And I understand. She feels like she has weight of the world on her shoulders; she’s dealing with the [country’s] largest city.”

Thinking back on those pre-pandemic days when she had to fight to maintain the integrity of public health, de Villa reflects on how she has been able to guide the conversation with knowledge and compassion, often bringing opponents around to her way of thinking.

“It’s true that I don’t have a direct hand on a lever that controls budget choices,” she says. “But there is so much that I can do in the position I hold and with the team I have. I can influence some of the decisions.”

Given her strong leadership, persuasively informative communication style, executive training and sincere interest in the intersection of politics, economics and social justice, would she consider running for public office? It’s a question that came up at a Havergal Old Girl Association event held via Zoom last October, during which de Villa received a Lifetime Achievement Award from her former school. De Villa didn’t say no.

“I’m of Filipino background,” she says, “and there are many in the Filipino community who, frankly, are not privileged.

I feel a deep sense of responsibility to support them, particularly newly arrived members – recent immigrants – to the community.”

Globally, she sees another challenge. “As pleased as I am to see vaccine uptake here in the city, I’m very conscious of the fact that, unless we as a global community don’t ensure that the more resource-poor environments of the world – countries like the Philippines, India and others – have access to vaccines, we’re not going to be successful. It’s delusional to think we can just take care of ourselves here in Canada and not think about the rest of the world.”

How will she succeed in implementing positive change? Again, de Villa is direct in her answer.

“Vaccination is the best protection against COVID-19 and is still proving to be effective. But we need everyone who is eligible to be vaccinated as soon as possible,” she says. “We continue to work hard to make vaccines accessible with a focus on bringing vaccinations directly to workplaces, faith groups, organizations and communities with barriers to vaccination and low vaccine uptake. Our goal is to get the maximum number of people vaccinated as quickly as we can.”

But delivering these projects is not easy. It requires somebody with a logistical vision and a deep commitment to her fellow citizens.

“Fundamentally,” de Villa says as our conversation winds down, “I want people to know that I have a very strong value system and I’m deeply committed to doing everything I can to advance the social determinants of health, to improve the health status of people in this city, to reduce disparities and to ensure that we are in a good position to respond effectively to outbreaks and emergencies. That’s enough for me for now.” ●



# FLOORA

Women in the plant world are breaking ground



Rusty Shteir

PHOTOGRAPH BY SOFIE KIRK

# FEMINISTA

BY ALANNA MITCHELL



Lisa Der

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE FORD

**T**HEIR ANCESTORS, cyanobacteria, evolved billions of years ago to perfect the art of eating sunlight. Because that process – photosynthesis – creates oxygen, and because there were so many of these organisms emitting so much oxygen, they eventually changed the makeup of the atmosphere. And since the chemistry of the atmosphere determines what can live on the planet, that means photosynthesizers became the architects of life. We buckle to their will.

And you could argue that those who study plants are seditious in their own way, too. Just ask Ann (Rusty) Shteir (honorary LLD '06). A founder and director of York University's graduate program in the School of Gender, Sexuality & Women's Studies, now professor emerita, Shteir is one of the world's foremost scholars of the long love affair between women and nature.

Her latest book, edited during the pandemic, is *Flora's Fieldworkers: Women and Botany in 19th-Century Canada*. Based on presentations made at a workshop at York in 2017, this new collection is due to be published in the spring.

It's part of Shteir's lifelong passion to recover the lives of these erstwhile devotees of Flora, the goddess of plants. Many would have been lost but for Shteir's work.

"I start with women. What can I learn about these women and what can we see through their stories?" she says.

## I love green and what green represents

Her research has taken her to slender entries in the archives of centuries past, when women had little access to scholarship or intellectual work. Some of the records survived by sheer serendipity, including, she reveals, a letter from one of her recent female subjects preserved because it was tucked into the folds of a letter written by her husband.

During some of those eras, studying plants was one of the few socially acceptable scientific pursuits for women. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, for example, women were collecting plants, identifying new ones, drawing them, pressing them in albums for the breakfast room, fashioning them out of wax and even writing popular science books about them. It was, as Shteir writes, considered both "amusement

and improvement" for the female of the species. Studying these women and their work offers a glimpse into the power structures of the day, as well as the ways gender roles and ideology were enforced.

And it lends itself to unanswerable questions. What else would these women have studied had they had the chance? What was it that they derived from the work? Perhaps joy? A connection to nature? The opportunity to share their knowledge? Maybe a genteel kicking over of the traces?

The downside of this feminine passion for flowers was that, by the time the Victorian era drew near, plants had become so identified with women that men felt they had to wrest back control. For example, in a lecture in 1829, John Lindley, the first professor of botany at University College London, felt compelled to declare: "It has been very much the fashion of late years, in this country, to undervalue the importance of this science, and to consider it an amusement for ladies rather than an occupation for the serious thoughts of man."

It amounted to a campaign to reposition the science of botany as male.

"My language is that he 'defeminized' botany," Shteir tells me.

Shteir is not immune to Flora's allure. She's lived with a cherished staghorn fern for 53 years, among many other houseplants.

"I guess I'd be lost without plants," she says.

Shteir can trace her own love of plants back to when she was a graduate student (her PhD in comparative literature is from Rutgers University in New Jersey). She chuckles as she remembers writing a paper comparing different translations of a poem by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca about loving the colour green.

"I love green," she says. "I love green. And what green represents."

Natasha Myers (MES '01) does too. An associate professor of anthropology at York University, she describes not just falling in love with plants but being "abducted" by them three decades ago during an undergraduate class at McGill. Today, Myers, who tongue-in-cheek calls herself a "planthropologist" – which is to say an anthropologist of plants and people – is director of York's Plant Studies Collaboratory.

She had been on track to study biology when the abduction took place. Afterward, she found herself recoiling from looking at plants in a traditional scientific manner: dead on a dissecting table. To her, plants were far more than function or chemistry or discrete bits. She says she started to see botany

## That has been an incredible space for challenging all these colonial precepts about what a plant is and what a plant does

as a colonial science through which all the Earth's wealth began to be transferred.

And so, in line with emerging scholarship about how plants are sentient and intelligent and communicate with each other, she began to think about what plants get up to when they are alive. A dancer, she even began to dance plant movements, a feat she once demonstrated in one of Shteir's graduate seminars.

For Myers, it comes down to acknowledging the unique world-making capacity photosynthesizers have. Which prompts a question: they do all that for us and other species – what can we do for them?

"If our future literally hinges on the future of plant life, for every reason – climate, water retention in the soil, purification of the water, the oxygen we breathe – then the question is, how do we reckon with these beings as being worthy of address?"

Like Shteir, she seeks to honour plant narratives that have not always had their due.

"There are other plant knowledges all around us that need to be held in conversation with the sciences," she says. "Not as 'Oh, it's so nice that these people have these lovely beliefs,' but we know what goes on because we have the universal truth of science."

Myers has been deeply shaped by her work with the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle, a collective of Indigenous elders and others who came together in 2019 to weave a plan to restore High Park's rare oak savannah landscapes. The savannahs feature widely spread oak trees interspersed with tall prairie grasses and wildflowers. They are sacred spaces where Indigenous ancestors once grew gardens, foraged for food and held ceremonies.

"That has been an incredible space for challenging all these colonial precepts about what a plant is and what a plant does, how plants can be in relation, and where the source of knowledge is," she says.

She was fascinated to track the shifting relationship between people and plants during the pandemic. Forced to stay put (like plants) and worried about food scarcity, people gardened. Remember all those Instagram shots of celery stumps resprouting on kitchen windowsills?

"What I was observing was this urgent connection people were making with plants," she says. "People experienced something really beautiful through quarantine, with plants."

She even convinced her mother to liberate the front lawn and grow vegetables for the first time.

"Really beautiful adventures were had," Myers says, laughing.

Lisa Der (née Tappenden; BA '05) accomplished a similar floral rebellion. Der, a York graduate in psychology with a masters from OISE, is the adult education supervisor at the Toronto Botanical Garden. Her backyard is full of zucchini, spinach and tomatoes, with robust lashings of dandelions. The latter are for pollinators, and they love it.

## I've become much less interested in the ornamental value of plants and more invested in building a personal garden that supports a healthy ecosystem

"I find as I've gotten older, I've become much less interested in the ornamental value of plants and more invested in building a personal garden that supports a healthy ecosystem," Der tells me.

It marks a radical shift from the gardens she knew when she was growing up. Then, the ideal was a pristine, motionless, weed-free lawn where wildlife was unwelcome. She sees her garden as habitat, as regeneration. And, because she is an educator at the botanical garden, she wants to help others nurture their relationship with the Earth.

"We can learn so much from plants," Der says.

Strangely enough, the pandemic gave her an assist. Participation in the botanical garden's online programs quadrupled this spring, compared to non-pandemic times. Der's online workshop on botanical watercolour – a revered practice of the devotees of Flora in earlier centuries – was so popular this summer that she couldn't fit everybody in. ●

---

# Her View from the Wheelchair

*Nikoletta Erdelyi is ready, willing and able*

BY DEIRDRE KELLY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOFIE KIRK

**T**HERE ARE GO-GETTERS, and then there's Nikoletta Erdelyi (BA '16), an energetic, articulate and philosophically minded dynamo who lives her life from the perch of a wheelchair. Identified as a mentor to watch at the 2019 Canadian Women of Influence Awards, Erdelyi counsels youth at Toronto's Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital when not writing poetry and books or starring in her own one-woman theatre shows. At age 29, she embodies the Emersonian principle that there are no insurmountable barriers save individual weakness of purpose. And God knows, Erdelyi is not lacking in purpose. Her body is frail but her mind and will are strong. "I am super ambitious," she says. "I have so much I want to do, and I will do it. I must."

A native of Hungary, the York grad rose to prominence after acclaimed Canadian playwright Judith Thompson, a two-time winner of the Governor General's Award in the performing arts, commissioned Erdelyi to create and perform a monologue for her nine-person wheelchair-based play *Borne* at Toronto's Soulpepper Theatre in 2014. More collaborations have followed, among them 2019's *Welcome to My Underworld*, for which Erdelyi contributed *Ghost Tales*, a playlet about her father. Known for her works of activist theatre, Thompson likes working with Erdelyi, whom she calls an extraordinary talent.





---

THERE ARE NO LIMITATIONS TO KNOWLEDGE.  
IDEAS CAN COME FROM ANYWHERE,  
PROVIDED YOU HAVE AN OPEN MIND  
AND WILLINGNESS TO HEAR THEM

---

“Niki’s writing is both powerful and unique, and at moments it moves into sheer, unforgettable poetry,” Thompson says. “She is one of the most authentic people I know, and is not afraid to say exactly what she thinks, even when it makes us a little uncomfortable. She cannot abide being patronized and she is not afraid to call bullshit when she smells it.”

Born with a rare muscular joint condition affecting one in every 12,000 live births, Erdelyi has spent her life in a wheelchair. Arthrogryposis is a congenital condition that causes contractures of the joints and makes it impossible for Erdelyi to walk on her own. “I’ve lived all my life using a wheelchair. But I’m very independent, and compared with the tales that I have to tell, my wheelchair is the least interesting thing about me.”

But even if her wheelchair doesn’t define her, it is a necessary appendage, an essential mode of transportation that she especially relied on as an undergraduate to zip in and out of classes on York’s sprawling Keele campus. York, being a comparatively new university, has wheelchair ramps and other accessibility design elements built into its functionally modernist architecture. “It was the main reason I chose York,” Erdelyi says, “because I knew of the University’s reputation for inclusivity, which includes people with disabilities.”

At York, Erdelyi started in psychology but switched to communications soon after, thinking it a better fit for her innate writing talents. Philosophy became a particular passion, and today, as a gifted public speaker, she often draws upon lessons learned at York in her talks about personal empowerment. “I had one professor in particular, Dr. David Stamos, and I remember a favourite saying of his, that ‘politics does not determine good scholarship.’ I’ve always loved that, because it basically means that there are no limitations to knowledge. Ideas can come from anywhere, provided you have an open mind and willingness to hear them. Just because someone doesn’t think like you doesn’t mean their thoughts are invalid. If you’re a critical thinker, then you are capable of learning something from even the most controversial of minds.”

Erdelyi knows what it’s like to be on the margins wanting to be heard. As a descendant of the Romani, an ethnic minority in Eastern Europe, she grew up with stories about entrenched discrimination and centuries of persecution targeting her people. It’s one of the reasons she and her family came to Canada when she was six – to escape the prejudice dogging the Romani in Europe. The Roma have a history of living on the fringes where, in the popular imagination, they live itinerant lives as tinkers, palm readers and thieves. Erdelyi’s own father, a shoplifter who died six years ago in an Austrian jail after being refused medical treatment for cancer, might have fit the stereotype. But to Erdelyi, his ignoble demise, far from his family, is more than just a cautionary tale. “There’s sadness in this world,” she says, “but my mind is oriented toward finding the light in the darkness. Often, we find ourselves trapped by circumstances beyond our control. The absurdity of life is a universal experience. I find laughter brightens the dark. It exposes it for what it is: an essential part of the human condition.”

Erdelyi learned these life lessons early. When she came to Canada, she could speak no English. She had never even seen the inside of a classroom before. It took a year to get her settled in her new city of Toronto, and much of the delay had to do with finding a mechanized wheelchair that could accommodate her tiny size. She was seven when she entered grade one, older than the others in her class, and more determined, too. She has since mastered the language to the point that it has become her *métier* and bridge to a bigger world beyond the wheelchair.

The words keep flowing. In lockdown – when getting out at all, let alone in a wheelchair, proved especially onerous – Erdelyi spent the time writing a book. *Tinder Tales* is the working title of the yet-to-be-published new work. Erdelyi describes it as a humorous look at the online dating scene as told from the perspective of a young single woman in a wheelchair. The stories are mostly her own. “Able-bodied guys my age like me,” she says. “They like my confidence.” ●

# Giving

FRIENDS & PHILANTHROPY

Ten years and hundreds of students after it was introduced, Seymour Schulich's legacy scholarship program soars to new heights

**"When you change one life, you change the entire world"**

Schulich Leader Scholarships recipient Yaakov Green

BY IRA LAMCJA  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

**K**IARA MAVALWALA RECALLS *that* day in spring very well: heightened anxiety, pacing around the room, speaking out loud to herself, trying on dozens of different outfits. She was preparing for her interview with the Schulich Foundation as a candidate for the prestigious Schulich Leader Scholarships.

"I was so nervous," Mavalwala recalls, able to laugh about it now, all these months later. "And between all the nerves, I never allowed myself to imagine that I would get it."

But all Mavalwala's preparations worked. This past summer, she and incoming York student Aryan Soni were announced as two new Schulich Leaders who would be receiving \$100,000 and \$80,000, respectively, to attend York's Lassonde School of Engineering.

"I was shocked," says Mavalwala, recalling the moment she got the news during a Zoom meeting. "I screamed. I ran and told all my family, all my friends, and all my teachers. I couldn't believe it."

"It's beyond anything I ever dreamed of."

**WHEN CANADIAN BUSINESSMAN** and philanthropist Seymour Schulich founded the Schulich Leader Scholarships program 10 years ago, he wanted to give young students the same opportunity to excel that he was given when he received a scholarship that allowed him to pursue post-secondary education. This scholarship program is his way of paying it forward.

"It's gratifying that this important and meaningful investment in the future of Canada is off to a strong start," Schulich says. "Schulich Leaders will be the engine that drives prosperity for our country. We look forward to supporting exceptional students pursuing their STEM education for many years to come."

Today, the Schulich Leader Scholarships program is the largest undergraduate STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) scholarship opportunity in Canada, with more than 570 recipients across the country.

Out of a pool of approximately 1,500 high school students, 100 are chosen to receive a scholarship based on academic

excellence, demonstration of leadership and financial need. Since its launch a decade ago, the program has continued to increase the value of its scholarships, culminating in the January 2020 announcement of Schulich's additional and extraordinary investment of \$100 million.

"For more than a decade, the Schulich Leader Scholarships have provided forward-thinking students with the opportunity to advance their learning in STEM disciplines and develop their skills as entrepreneurial-minded technology innovators," says Rhonda Lenton, President and Vice-Chancellor of York University. "York is grateful for Seymour Schulich's visionary investment in Canada's youth, and proud to partner with the Schulich Leader Scholarships program to support the next generation of STEM leaders."

**IN SEPTEMBER 2013**, Yaakov Green stepped onto Keele Campus as part of the very first cohort of Schulich Leaders. Growing up as one of six kids in a large, tight-knit family, he was drawn to the sciences from a young age.

"I remember I had a fascination with physiology and genetics," Green says. "I was drawn to York because it was a large school with so many different opportunities that could foster my aspirations."

Applying the first year that the Schulich Leader Scholarships rolled out, Green doubted he'd be one of the first to receive the prestigious scholarship.

"I was with my family in the car, driving to visit my grandparents. All of a sudden, I got a call from a number that I didn't know. When I picked it up, the voice on the other end said it was [then] York President Mamdouh Shoukri." Green laughs a little when recalling this moment.

"When President Shoukri introduced himself, I just did not register it. So what I said was: 'Oh, hi, what's going on?' I remember thinking to myself, 'There's no way that happened. That must have been a prank call.'" That's when Green called the number back and found out that it really did belong to York University. "It was legit."

Studying biology at York, Green pursued courses that would lead to a career in medicine. He is now entering his fifth year of a dual MD/MBA program at Yale University's School

# Giving

I GOT THIS SCHOLARSHIP. AND THAT WAS A WAKE-UP CALL. I TOLD MYSELF, 'YOU CAN DO IT. YOU DESERVE TO BE HERE. YOU BELONG'

of Medicine, which combines a medical degree with a business degree. For Green, going to Yale wouldn't have been possible without the help of the Schulich Leader Scholarships program.

"This scholarship was so important in so many ways. It's been invaluable," he says. "It had allowed me to use my time to fully explore and learn, and that is huge. As well, it has given me access to an incredible network of people. My goal is to be a leader in health care, and the Schulich Leader Scholarships have helped to really shape that aspiration."

Recently, Green had the opportunity to work for the U.S. Federal COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force, which has a mission to provide specific recommendations to the U.S. President for mitigating inequities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's remarkable work with remarkable people," Green says. "We're working towards minimizing or eliminating health barriers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether it's vaccinations or mental health impact, and much more."

**AS A YOUNG GIRL,** Kyra McLellan had a deep love of science and technology. But growing up in the small town of Melfort, Saskatchewan, she didn't have science clubs to join.

"I used to make my parents take me to different science events," she says. "So this scholarship was my chance to expand my horizons and go somewhere I could pursue my dreams of working in science."

In 2015 – her last year of high school – McLellan was at a dance competition one weekend when a family member told her she had a voicemail from York University.

"But it was so busy that weekend, with the competition, that I didn't have time to check. I found out on Monday morning that I was going to receive a scholarship."

McLellan remembers it as a surreal moment. "I was freaking out," she says. "I yelled upstairs to my mom to let her know. I

told all my friends the next day at school. I couldn't believe that I was going to school in Toronto."

Today, McLellan is a graduate student at the University of Toronto, where she is completing a master's of applied science in mechanical engineering. Most important, though, is the confidence it has given her.

"When I was applying to science and engineering programs, I didn't think I could do it. I thought I was going to fail out of school," she recalls. "But then I got this scholarship. And that was a wake-up call. I told myself, 'You can do it. You deserve to be here. You belong.'"

**AS VICE-PRESIDENT** of the Schulich Foundation, David Goodman has had the privilege of meeting many scholarship recipients in the past. What surprises him most has been the incredible ecosystem of networks and support that has developed among students.

"Part of what makes the Schulich Leaders special is the sense of community," he says. "It wasn't the initial intention to have this incredible unity among them all, but it's naturally come about, and we've helped facilitate that."

As the Schulich Foundation continues to support and attract the top students to the program, what Goodman is excited about is that Schulich Leaders collaborate with each other on complex challenges and support each other in advancing their careers.

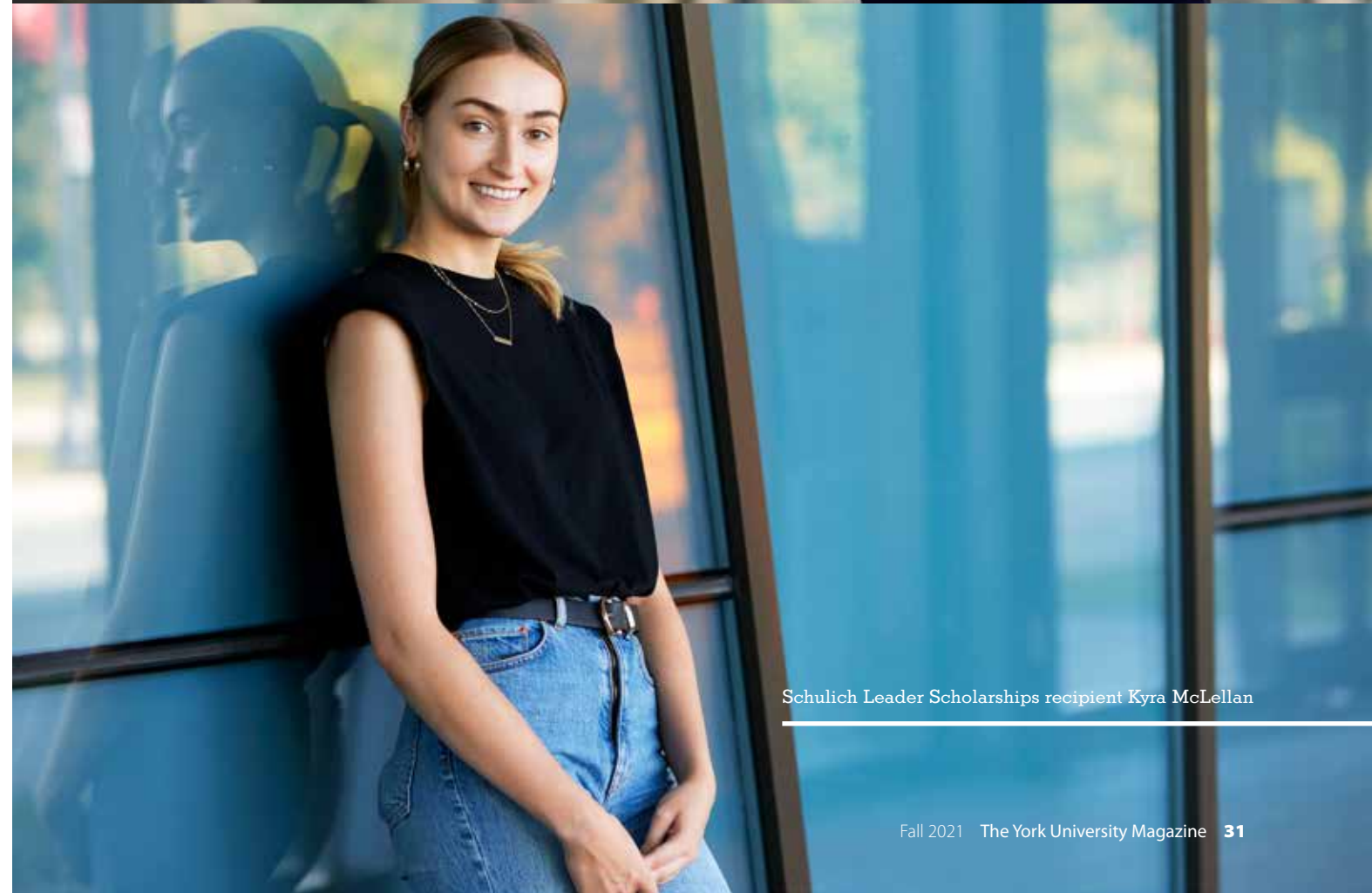
"When you change one life, you change the entire world," says Goodman. "It's so nice to see that we're not just helping incredible students, we're helping their families, their communities, and changing the world by being a part of their career paths. It's nice to be along for the ride and see them advance."

This new cohort of Schulich Leaders is no exception.

"Now it's finally starting to sink in, I'm going to be a Schulich Leader," Mavalwala says. "I'm so excited for all the doors that will open for me. I can't wait." ●



Schulich Leader Scholarships recipient Kiara Mavalwala



Schulich Leader Scholarships recipient Kyra McLellan



# Alumni

## No Boundaries

Artist Chase Joynt documents the transgender experience

BY KATIE NANTON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TANJA-TIZIANA BURDI

**T**HE PANDEMIC NOTWITHSTANDING, Chase Joynt (MA '11, PhD '16) has kept characteristically busy, adding steadily to a body of work that interrogates representations of gender and violence in their many forms. Since the fall of 2020, the internationally acclaimed artist, writer and scholar has been hunkered down south of the border working with queer theorist and writer Julietta Singh on *The Nest*, a feature-length documentary about radical maternities, interracial alliances and colonial histories across 140 years of Canadian history, all told through the story of a single piece of architecture: one house in Winnipeg.

This latest project follows on the heels of another feature-length documentary, *No Ordinary Man*, about trans-masculine jazz musician Billy Tipton, which Joynt made with co-director Aisling Chin-Yee. The film screened at Cannes Docs 2020 as part of the Canadian Showcase of Docs-in-Progress, and was named one of Canada's Top Ten after premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2020. Now the winner of seven festival awards, the film has been hailed by the *New Yorker* as "a genre unto itself," and by *IndieWire* as "the future of trans cinema."

Another of Joynt's films – *Framing Agnes*, a short about L.A.'s gender-nonconforming community in the 1950s – debuted at the 2019 Tribeca Film Festival to great acclaim, and is currently being developed into a feature film with support from Telefilm Canada's Talent to Watch program.

As if that weren't enough, Joynt is presently chipping away at his second book, *Every Difference Is a Likeness*, partly inspired by his recent discovery of a familial relation to Canadian media maverick Marshall McLuhan. Joynt's first book, 2015's *You Only Live Twice: Sex, Death and Transition*, detailed his transition from female to male and the near-death encounter with AIDS of his co-author, Canadian indie filmmaker Mike Hoolboom. Critically lauded, it was a 2017 Lambda Literary Award finalist and named one of the Best Books of 2016 by the *Globe and Mail* and the CBC.

Joynt also directed an episode of The CW's *Two Sentence Horror Stories* filmed recently in Vancouver and, since 2019, has held an assistant professorship in the Department of

Gender Studies at the University of Victoria. And that's just scratching the surface of projects on the go.

Joynt has overflowing talents that bridge many disciplines. No wonder he bristles against being identified as simply a filmmaker.

"The word *filmmaker* comes with such a pre-scripted set of expectations," says the tattooed creative with a flicker of a smile. "I'm an artist who traffics in non-fiction. For me, moving images are some of the most compelling ways to tell stories, because they open up different affective possibilities to think with sound, image, colour and texture."

On a deeper level, identifying as an artist is a mode of resistance against genre specificity for Joynt. It also alludes to a much broader project at work within his oeuvre: that of challenging presumed labels.

He took two degrees at York – a master's in gender, feminist and women's studies and a PhD in cinema and media studies. At the time, the School of Arts, Media, Performance & Design was examining the idea of artist-scholars, and the proposition of someone writing a dissertation and making a film at the same time. Joynt did just that, and his short *Between You and Me* was acquired for online distribution and streaming by CBC Short Docs.

"Chase was swift in his journey as a student," says Professor Allyson Mitchell (BA '91, BA '95), who sat on both his MA and PhD supervisory committees. "He was one of the most interesting and *interested* that I have ever had the pleasure of working with in my time at York."

Born and raised in a Toronto suburb, Joynt attended theatre school at the University of California, Los Angeles, as an undergraduate. While living in California, he became deeply involved in activist communities committed to the eradication of sexual- and gender-based violence. The experience made him realize that working within traditional industry might not be the most effective way to bring about social change.

After graduating from UCLA in 2004, he spent some time in San Francisco, then returned to Toronto to attend grad school at York. He arrived with a fresh perspective and a sharper lens with which to view the world. "It was then that I

**I always want people to recognize what's possible when you centre the voices and experiences of those most impacted by the story and its telling**

started to think out loud, and theoretically, about trans representation, both historically and in the contemporary moment," he says.

It was around 2010, while a student at York, that Joynt notably pivoted his work toward making moving-image representations of trans and gender-nonconforming people, after he spied a significant void. To help inform his journey as an art-making activist and academic, Joynt found inspiration in a group of faculty members who were working artists as well as professors: John Greyson (MA '10), Allyson Mitchell and Brenda Longfellow (PhD '93).

"I think a lot about the current cultural climate surrounding trans representation, and I ask, 'How can I intervene upon the stories about trans people that have so often been authored by the mainstream – the talk shows, the tabloid circuits – and what role can activists and experimental cinemas play in politicizing stories and reimagining histories?'"

Multi-layered and cerebral, Joynt's work can be at once deeply personal and emotionally affective but glimmers with humour and irony. In 2012, for instance, Joynt created an experimental short called *I'm Yours* with performance artist Nina Arsenault. At first glance, the work places Joynt and Arsenault onscreen answering personal questions about transitioning in a traditional documentary style. Beneath that veneer lies its true meaning: a satirical response to their ongoing frustration about the intrusive, repetitive line of questioning taken by the media about trans bodies, lives and experiences.

The film is in direct conversation with a piece called *Sackville, I'm Yours* by experimental video artist Colin Campbell; it's also a prime example of Joynt weaving others' texts into his work and acknowledging those who came before. "I never claim to be making up these ideas or strategies for the first time," he says, addressing how the publicness of his career was built on the generosity of other artists. That has

translated into a personal dedication to both sharing his platform and collaborating frequently.

One of those collaborators is York University professor John Greyson. The duo worked

together on a short film series of Greyson's entitled *Murder in Passing*, which aired on TTC platform monitors in 2013 and acted as an intervention into debates about anti-trans violence and transit issues. Joynt contributed research and also played the lead acting role. The duo's latest project is a hybrid feature of the work called *Last Car*.

"Chase has had, and continues to have, a huge and influential impact on my work and on my practice as an artist and filmmaker," Greyson says. "I consider his extraordinary works a profound inspiration and eagerly await his amazing McLuhan book."

There are many who look forward to his future works, including Telefilm Canada executive director Christa Dickenson (MFA '93), a fellow York University graduate and a big supporter of his work. "Chase is one of those up-and-coming filmmakers that we have been waiting for," Dickenson says. "With Chase's track record, co-directing *No Ordinary Man* and now developing *Framing Agnes* into a feature-length film, supported by Telefilm Canada's Talent to Watch program and the Talent Fund, we are optimistic that his stories will enlighten audiences at home and abroad."

Asked how he wants viewers to feel after experiencing one of his moving-image creations, Joynt pauses before answering, "I always want people to recognize what's possible when you centre the voices and experiences of those most impacted by the story and its telling." By challenging a history that is authored by those who have power, Joynt actively intervenes upon those well-worn narratives.

Indeed, through his work, Mitchell can see the canon change before her eyes: "I knew from the moment that I met Chase that he would make history." ●



Noteworthy



**TOUCHDOWN**

York student advances to the CFL

**T**HE CALGARY STAMPEDERS signed York University wide receiver Luther Hakunavanhu at the 2021 Canadian Football League draft, selecting him in the fifth round, where he was the 44th pick overall.

The CFL team chose him for a reason.

A member of the York Lions Football team since 2017, the 6-foot-4, 195-pound Edmontonian has consistently shown considerable promise on the playing field.

While pursuing his bachelor of commerce degree with a specialized honours in management (expected to be completed at the end of this academic year), Hakunavanhu played in all 16 games over the past two seasons, including starting

all eight in 2019. According to York University Athletics, that same year, he led the Lions in receiving yards (470) and touchdowns (three), and was second in total receptions (29). He registered 69 catches for 951 yards and six touchdowns.

Stamps president and general manager John Hufnagel (previously head coach) confirms Hakunavanhu's potential in a pre-published interview, calling his new recruit "an excellent prospect – a tall receiver with a big catch radius."

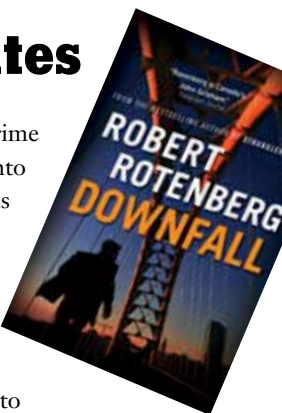
Hakunavanhu, of Zimbabwean descent, couldn't be happier. "This definitely means the world to me. It's one of the things I've envisioned for myself in my life," he says. "I've always wanted to play pro and getting this opportunity is tremendous for me." ● — Deirdre Kelly

**A Toronto lawyer's novel suspects**

**O**SGOODE HALL Law School grad Robert Rotenberg (LLB '79) is a practising criminal lawyer and novelist, known as "the John Grisham of Canada" for his six (soon to be seven) legal thrillers set in his home city of Toronto. His latest whodunit is *Downfall* (Simon & Schuster), a riveting page-turner about a serial killer of homeless women living

in a tent encampment close to a fictional elite golf club. An instant national best-seller upon its much-anticipated release last February, *Downfall* does for Toronto what Ian Rankin's own celebrated crime novels have done for Edinburgh: exposed the ugly underbelly of an otherwise mannered and peaceful city. "I think it's important to write about social issues," says Rotenberg, who, when not

embroiled in the real-life crime dramas he defends at Toronto Old City Hall, also works as a screenwriter for prime-time television. "Toronto has grown into a city of great promise and great conflict, which makes it a rich subject to write about." ● — Deirdre Kelly



# Classes

## 1974



**CLEMENTS, WARREN**  
(BA Film & Video)

After a long and distinguished career as an editorial board member at Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper, Warren took early retirement in 2008 to reinvent himself as an independent book publisher. Founded in 2012, Nestlings Press specializes in humour and illustration. Its 28th (and latest) title is *Leslie Brooke's Animal Fair*, a collection of illustrations by British picture-book master L. Leslie Brooke, known for his whimsical drawings of animals with human expressions.

## 1975

**HARDY, GIL**  
(BA LA&PS)

Gil started his journalism career at newspapers in Brampton, Kapuskasing and Timmins before joining the Thomson newspaper chain in 1982 as a member of the Parliament Hill bureau. Former press secretary to Toronto Mayor Barbara Hall and media relations manager for the NDP caucus at Queen's Park, Gil also held senior communications roles at the City of Toronto before retiring in 2017.

## 1980

**TERRY, MARK J.**

(BA English, MA Humanities '16, PhD Humanities '19)  
Mark is a faculty member at York with the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change (FEUC), and serves as the Chair of the ADERSIM Arctic Team and associate to the UNESCO Chair for Reorienting Education towards Sustainability. A fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and the Explorers Club, Mark is also a published poet whose latest book of poems, *Pandemic Poetry*, came out in 2020.

## 1988

**SAMBAR, ARTHUR**

(BA Computer Science)  
After York, Arthur pursued a career in IT in telecommunications and financial services, rising to senior manager at CIBC. He went on to become a regional vice-president at database management company Oracle, where his team supported financial services and telecommunications for 80 top North American clients. Arthur now works out of New York to lead a team of cyber security professionals at security tech start-up ForgeRock, where he continues to work as regional vice-president.

## 1994

**REISSNER, PETER**

(BA Computer Science)  
Following his graduation from York,



**RICHARD WEISER**  
BA English '96

Peter joined Northern Telecom in Belleville to develop telecommunications software and equipment. For the past four years, he has worked for Ford Canada, developing a leading-edge automotive platform in addition to next-generation automotive software.

## 1996

**WEISER, RICHARD**

(BA English)  
In March of this year, Richard published his first book, *The Real Mystery of Tom Thomson: His Art and His Life*. A creative director by profession, he has worked at digital design agency Critical Mass, Proximity Canada and his own Richard Weiser Consulting firm.

## 1998

**MCCULLOUGH, NORMA**  
(BSW Social Work)

Norma is a committee member for several organizations, including the Newmarket Seniors' Meeting Place (where she sits on the advisory board), the Altar Guild, the Flower Guild, and several Anglican church choirs in Toronto and York Region. Over the past

decade, she has served as an executive and archivist for her husband's regional social organization, Jimmy and Associates, at Fort York Armoury.

## 2002

**WENCKEBACH, KAREN**

(LLB Osgoode)  
In December 2020, Karen became the third woman to be appointed a resident judge in the Supreme Court of Yukon's history. She moved to Yukon from Ontario in 2007, initially working as a lawyer for the Yukon Legal Services Society, and later as legal counsel for the Government of Yukon, specializing in labour, human rights and administrative law, among other duties.

## 2004

**SANDER, HEIDI**  
(MES Environmental Literature and Writing)

"How We Live On" has won the International Prime Number Magazine Award for Poetry. Written in numbered sections with stanzas that explore the strength of connection through generations, the poem is part of Heidi's

collection *The Forest of My Mind*, completed in 2020. Poets from 19 countries submitted poems to the American literary competition, whose top prize includes publication in the October issue of *Prime Number Magazine*, US\$1,000 and a Pushcart Prize nomination. Born and raised in the Kitchener-Waterloo region of Ontario, Heidi lives in nearby Stratford, where she is presently working on a new collection while developing an online program for other poets.

## 2008



**LIBERATORI, ABRIL**  
(BA French Studies, PhD History '18)  
An assistant professor in York's

Department of History, Abril has been appointed the University's new Mariano A. Elia Chair in Italian-Canadian Studies. A historian by training, she focuses her research on the experiences of Italian-Canadians in the post-Second World War period.

## 2010

**KELLY, ASHLEY**  
(BA Kinesiology & Health Sciences)  
Ashley is co-founder and CEO of CultureAlly, continuous learning software providing diversity and inclusion training to organizations. Using data, metrics and other measurement tools, the personalized programs aim to help companies increase employee

engagement, boost team productivity and build inclusive workplaces.

## 2011



**KACHAJE, EVELYN**  
(BA English)  
Since 2020, Evelyn has operated as a legal officer with the UN

International Organization for Migration (IOM). Previously, she worked as a legal officer with the UN World Food Programme Youth Network. Originally from Malawi and raised in Botswana, Evelyn was recently named a *Forbes* 30 Under 30 in the international magazine's 2021 Social Impact category.

## 2012

**SHEARSTONE, PAUL**  
(BA Psychology)

A motivational speaker and psychotherapist with over 35 years of experience, Paul has several books, including his latest, *The Resilience Formula*, which outlines the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to minimize and control unwanted stress. A landscape designer as well as a business coach, he offers dynamic sales training through his company, Success 150.

**SINGH, DAVE**  
(EMBA Schulich)  
An "out and proud gay man," Dave is chief financial officer at Internet services company Tucows, where

he co-founded the first LGBTQIA+ employee resource group in 2016. Prompted by the George Floyd protests and the shutdowns necessitated by the ongoing pandemic, last year he created another employee resource group for diversity and racial justice.

## 2014



**KHONDOKER, MAYESHA**  
(BCom Administrative Studies)  
As senior marketing executive at

Evercare Hospital Dhaka, a private hospital in Bangladesh, Mayesha led the development of an in-house graphic design and communications team as part of a 2014 rebranding and modernization project. In 2020, she became director of Shanta Holdings, her family's real estate development company in Bangladesh.

## 2017

**AL DAJANI, ALI**  
(BA Kinesiology & Health Sciences)  
Since graduating from York University, Ali has worked in the health-care sector as a clinical kinesiologist at King Fahad Specialist Hospital in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, and has served as president of the Saudi Arabian Rugby Federation in Riyadh. In May of this year, he started prototyping an independent project in immersive technologies to provide a platform for therapy and sports integration for the

Dhahran-based King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, better known by its Arabic name, Ithra.

## IN MEMORIAM

**FINGERHUT, BEVERLEY**

(BA History '77)  
Beverly was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, but made her mark in Toronto. She was one of the very first female IT executives in Canada, becoming vice-president at CGI Canada and, later, national program director at the Centre of Excellence in Business Analysis at York's Schulich School of Business. A devoted mother and grandmother, she passed away in Toronto on April 5, 2021.

**MORGAN, JOHN**

(BA Glendon '68)  
After completing his degree at York, John went on to obtain his PhD from Cambridge University with a specialty in 17th-century English social history. He taught at the University of Western Ontario, Queen's University and Ryerson University – where, for six years, he worked as chief negotiator for the Ryerson Faculty Association. A passionate bibliophile, soccer fan, wine lover, international traveller and academic, he passed away on March 10, 2021, after suffering catastrophic brain injury in a tragic accident three days earlier. He was 73.

**WANT TO BE IN CLASSES?**

Email us at [magnotes@yorku.ca](mailto:magnotes@yorku.ca)



## Flashback

Have a great  
photo from  
your days at  
York?

Email us at [magnotes@yorku.ca](mailto:magnotes@yorku.ca)

**AS DANCE STUDENTS**, we took up space in a huge studio we unofficially called “the fishbowl.” Fitted with floor-to-ceiling windows, it was inviting and bright, and the ceiling seemed endlessly high. It was the largest dance studio on campus at the time, located in the fine arts building, and usually reserved for ballet. Thirty years ago, I entered it after hours to improvise and cut loose at the end of a long day of dance classes. I felt completely uninhibited knowing that no eyes were on me. The people who usually watched us dancers from the other side of the glass on the landing above had all gone home. All, that is, except fellow dance student Karen Morch (BA '84), who had her camera lens focused on me playing around. I was a shy late bloomer to dance, having just started my training with York's dance program, and I remember that it was the first time I found freedom in my off-balance body. Everything I've done since, from performing in New York to launching, in Toronto, Kaeja d'Dance, the company I've collaborated on with my husband Allen Kaeja (MA '09) since 1991, has been informed by that fishbowl moment. I continue to seek freedom in a destabilized world through the essence and ephemerality of dance. ●  
— Karen Resnick Kaeja (BFA '84)



# RIGHT THE FUTURE™

Amazing things happen when diverse communities work together to tackle world issues. When our students apply their knowledge, they have the power to make things right.

Join us in creating positive change.  
[yorku.ca/rightthefuture](http://yorku.ca/rightthefuture)

**YORK**  
UNIVERSITÉ  
UNIVERSITY

# The **York University** Magazine

# Subscribe!

**Digital.  
Anytime.  
Anywhere.**

Sign up and receive  
three digital issues a year  
of York University's  
award-winning magazine  
on your phone, tablet  
or desktop.

Stay in touch to enjoy  
more news, features,  
alumni stories  
and our latest updates!



**Just go to**  
**[yorku.ca/magsubscribe](http://yorku.ca/magsubscribe)**