

# The York University Magazine



# Cartoon King

Michael Hirsh on building an animation empire





## The Future of Learning Has Arrived.

York University is inviting employers to partner with our new Markham Campus to help fill your organization's skills gap by tapping into a new stream of talent. Join us in creating positive change. Connect with us today.

[yorku.ca/markham](http://yorku.ca/markham)



The  
York University  
Magazine

# Contents

4 The President 5 Editor's Notes 6 View 30 Giving 32 Alumni 38 Flashback

**12**  
**BRIDGING THE SOUND GAP**

*Deaf education gets  
a high-tech makeover*

**16**  
**EASY RIDER**

*York student William Moran  
isn't just horsing around*

**20**  
**THE FUTURE REIMAGINED**

*York's Jean Augustine Chair  
boosts Black student achievement*

**24**  
**CARTOON KING**

*Nekvana founder  
Michael Hirsh's wild ride*

## THE PRESIDENT



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

**FOR MOST OF HISTORY**, universities catered primarily to society’s most privileged groups. Immense changes following the Second World War – from the shift to a knowledge-based economy to a focus on civil and human rights – reshaped the landscape of higher education for the better.

York University was founded in this postwar period, rooted in the idea that education is not a luxury, but an established human right. Today, universities like York are in a process of ongoing transformation as they strive to create new ladders of opportunity for historically marginalized groups, decolonize ideas and confront persistent systemic inequalities through collaboration.

While York is a leader in reducing financial barriers to entry and welcoming students who may not otherwise have had the opportunity to attend university, our commitment to accessibility is much more comprehensive and has been achieved without compromising academic standards.

Initiatives such as the Kindergarten to Industry (K2I) Academy have been designed with a thorough understanding of the intersectional factors that prevent youth from pursuing higher education and enrolling in competitive programs, and how best to address those barriers and support student success through early exposure, mentoring and a host of other services.

A broad range of experiential and work-integrated learning opportunities also help students advance social networking and career development long after they graduate from university.

There is also another lens to accessibility. In the words of disability and diversity activist Tim Rose, “Accessibility should be built in, not bolted on.” Whether by engaging student groups in the development of culturally relevant placements, recruiting diverse alumni for mentorship programs, advocating for open education resources, launching Indigenous teacher education programs, or creating guides for special education placements and programs, the York community is embodying this view – that accessibility needs to be considered from the outset.

The plans for York’s new School of Medicine exemplify our well-established approach of “built-in” accessibility and inclusion with a rigorous commitment to academic excellence. It is designed to graduate talented primary-care doctors who will learn in the communities from which they are selected, with tailored supports to remove systemic barriers for disproportionately affected students. To that end, we have already forged partnerships with organizations such as the Indigenous Primary Health Care Council to collaborate in areas ranging from curricular development and student placements to joint research.

These kinds of partnerships – with institutions across sectors – help us provide the necessary frameworks to ensure that we are not leaving talent behind. The Métis Nation of Ontario’s gift, which established the province’s first graduate fellowship in Métis studies, and the donation from alumnus Michael Eubanks to create the Lenni Eubanks Memorial Award are just a few recent examples of how these relationships have enriched York. Since no barrier occurs in isolation, neither should our efforts to increase access to higher education.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOFIE KIRK

## EDITOR’S NOTES



### Silver Linings

**AS THE CALENDAR TURNS TO 2025**, I find myself oddly captivated by the number 25. It’s not just a marker of time or the quarter coin in your pocket; there’s a certain allure to it that tugs at the imagination.

Think about it: 25 sits at the crossroads of youth and maturity. It’s the age when many of us first truly grapple with adulthood, balancing dreams with practicality, idealism with reality. Yet it’s also an age of potential, of paths not yet chosen and adventures still to come. Across various cultures, 25 often signifies a cycle of renewal, a time to re-examine timeless questions with fresh eyes. Much like the silver anniversary that marks 25 years of marriage, it’s a milestone that gleams with both accomplishment and promise.

In the world of music, 25 keys span two octaves on a piano, encompassing a rich range of tonal possibilities. It’s as if this number offers us a metaphor for the breadth of human experience, all contained within its bounds.

Even in mathematics, 25 holds a special place. As a perfect square, it speaks to a certain completeness, a fullness of potential realized. Yet, like any number, it’s merely a waypoint in an infinite sequence, reminding us that completion is always temporary, always leading to new beginnings.

As I ponder the significance of 25, I’m struck by how it resonates with the stories in this winter issue of *The York University*

*Magazine*. Within these pages, we explore diverse topics that embody both accomplishment and potential: from how Nat Taylor’s cinema gift continues to shape our film studies, to the innovative work York alumni are doing in creative healing arts. We spotlight a York PhD recipient’s ambitious project creating human organs from stem cells in space, and trace the evolution of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Teacher Education Program as it embraces cutting-edge technologies. Each story illustrates how past contributions fuel future innovations, and how education and research continually adapt to meet changing needs and unlock new possibilities.

These narratives echo the essence of 25 – reminding us of the delicate balance between experience and potential, between what we know and what we have yet to discover. As we embark on this year, let’s celebrate our achievements while remaining open to fresh perspectives and unexpected connections. After all, isn’t that what growth is all about? ●  
— Deirdre Kelly

THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE OF YORK UNIVERSITY

**The York University Magazine**



Volume 10, Number 2

**PUBLISHER** Jacqueline Janelle

**EDITOR** Deirdre Kelly

**DESIGN** Communications & Public Affairs

**CONTRIBUTORS**

Neil Armstrong, Mike Ford, Horst Herget, Ian Kennedy, John Lorinc, Moira MacDonald, Rebecca Payne, Dick Snyder, Joanna Thompson

**CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING OFFICE**

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

**THE YORK UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE** is available three times a year online, at [yorku.ca/magazine](http://yorku.ca/magazine).

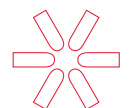
Ideas and opinions expressed in the articles do not necessarily reflect the ideas or opinions of the University or the editors.

To get in touch, email [yumag@yorku.ca](mailto:yumag@yorku.ca)

### ON THE COVER



Michael Hirsh  
Photography by  
Mike Ford





*James Won suk Jahng's research could help humans survive long-term space travel*



# Cosmic Cure

**S**PACE TRAVEL is hard on the human body. After a few weeks in microgravity, astronauts may begin to experience a range of symptoms including headaches, visual impairment, bone loss and muscle atrophy. Many of space flight's biggest health risks come from spending time outside of Earth's gravitational pull – but not all of them. “Actually, there's an even bigger risk called space radiation,” says James Won suk Jahng (PhD '20), a York University biology graduate who is now an instructor and researcher at Stanford University.

Overcoming space radiation will be critical for humans to be able to explore our solar system beyond Earth and the moon. Jahng's research aims to minimize the harmful effects of cosmic rays – and it could have important applications closer to home.

On Earth, we are mostly shielded from space radiation by the magnetosphere, which blocks dangerous rays from reaching the planet's surface. Beyond our atmosphere, astronauts are constantly bombarded by high-energy space radiation, which can damage major organ systems – notably, the cardiovascular system and nervous system – or cause cancer. The longer someone is exposed to space radiation, the greater the likelihood they will experience these negative effects.

Jahng's lab is currently working to develop drugs that hinder space radiation damage. To do so, the researchers are giving experimental drugs to mice and then exposing them to high doses of radiation. While the types of radiation that someone might be exposed to planet-side differ from what

astronauts encounter in space, “we hypothesize that there's some common pathway that causes damage to our human body,” Jahng says.

One of the main ways radiation harms living beings is by breaking strands of DNA. These breaks can interfere with the way DNA replicates; enough breaks can even kill cells outright. In blood vessels, this leads to stiffening that mimics the effects of plaque buildup and causes heart disease. The researchers are currently investigating drugs that might help stave off DNA breakage or damage.

Future crewed missions to Mars (or beyond) will likely hinge on our ability to protect astronauts against such health impacts. And in the near future, it will be important for space exploration closer to home. Agencies including NASA are already planning to build permanent bases on the moon. Protective drugs will be crucial for anyone living on these stations for an extended period of time.

Yet, “there are many applications beyond, you know, space,” says Jahng. For example, radiation-protective drugs could be beneficial for nuclear power plant workers. They could also reduce the chances of adverse outcomes for people undergoing radiation therapy for cancer or other health conditions.

In the future, Jahng hopes to move on to drug trials with larger animal models, such as pigs, and eventually humans. And while he plans to stay in the U.S. for the time being, he hopes to have a chance to work with Canadian institutions again one day. “I'm very open to collaboration,” he says. “Especially for any collaborative project that's relevant to Canadians.” ● — *Joanna Thompson*

## CURATING THE COURT

**I**N THE HEART of Canada's largest city, a new exhibit is set to bounce on to the scene, chronicling Toronto's evolving basketball culture from street courts to sold-out arenas.

York University, a longtime incubator of athletic talent and academic excellence, stands at the forefront of this ambitious project, bringing together sports history, urban studies and community voices in a dynamic showcase of the city's deep connection to the game.

Opening in March at the Museum of Toronto (the city's dedicated urban history museum), the exhibition promises to showcase the sport's profound impact on the city's diverse communities.

York alumni and faculty have poured their expertise and personal experiences into the curation of the exhibit. This isn't just a static display of memorabilia; visitors will actively shape the exhibit's narrative.

At the helm of this endeavour are Museum of Toronto executive director Heidi Reitmaier (BFA '90) and Sarah Bay-Cheng, dean and professor at the School of the Arts, Media, Performance & Design. "We're striving for a sense of connection," Reitmaier says. "We want visitors to see themselves reflected, to recognize their role in the game's evolution in our city."

York University's basketball pedigree runs deep. Alumni including Mark Jones (BA '84) and Tim Rider (BA '86) led the men's team to glory in the 1980s. Jones's voice now echoes through living rooms as a renowned broadcaster, while Rider's legacy is enshrined in York's Sport Hall of Fame. The University's recent partnership with the Toronto Raptors as their official Canadian university partner further cements its place in the city's basketball ecosystem. This collaboration offers York students unique opportunities to gain hands-on experience in sports-related fields, from business and marketing to media and event management, directly connecting academic programs with professional basketball.

The exhibit's launch coincides with the Toronto Raptors' 30th anniversary in the NBA, but it aims to tell a broader story.

The exhibit will examine the long history of the sport in Toronto, from the city's first women's basketball club in 1895 to the present day, showcasing how basketball has reflected and shaped Toronto's cultural identity. It will spotlight the grassroots teams that sprouted in diverse communities, from Chinese-Canadian youth squads to pioneering Muslim women's groups.

"Basketball became a cornerstone of Toronto's identity," wBay-Cheng observes. "Its success here speaks volumes about our city's resilience and community spirit."

The exhibit aims also to illustrate how basketball has kept pace with Toronto's changing face, influencing everything from fashion to music. The exhibit will be located at 401 Richmond, with other locations at community courts in Scarborough and North York.

A duo of guest curators will work alongside Reitmaier and Bay-Cheng to execute the exhibit: Kayla Grey, a Canadian sportscaster with TSN, and Perry King, a journalist and author of *Rebound: Sports, Community, and the Inclusive City*.

The exhibit's innovative approach encourages visitors to contribute their own stories, creating a living document of Toronto's basketball heritage.

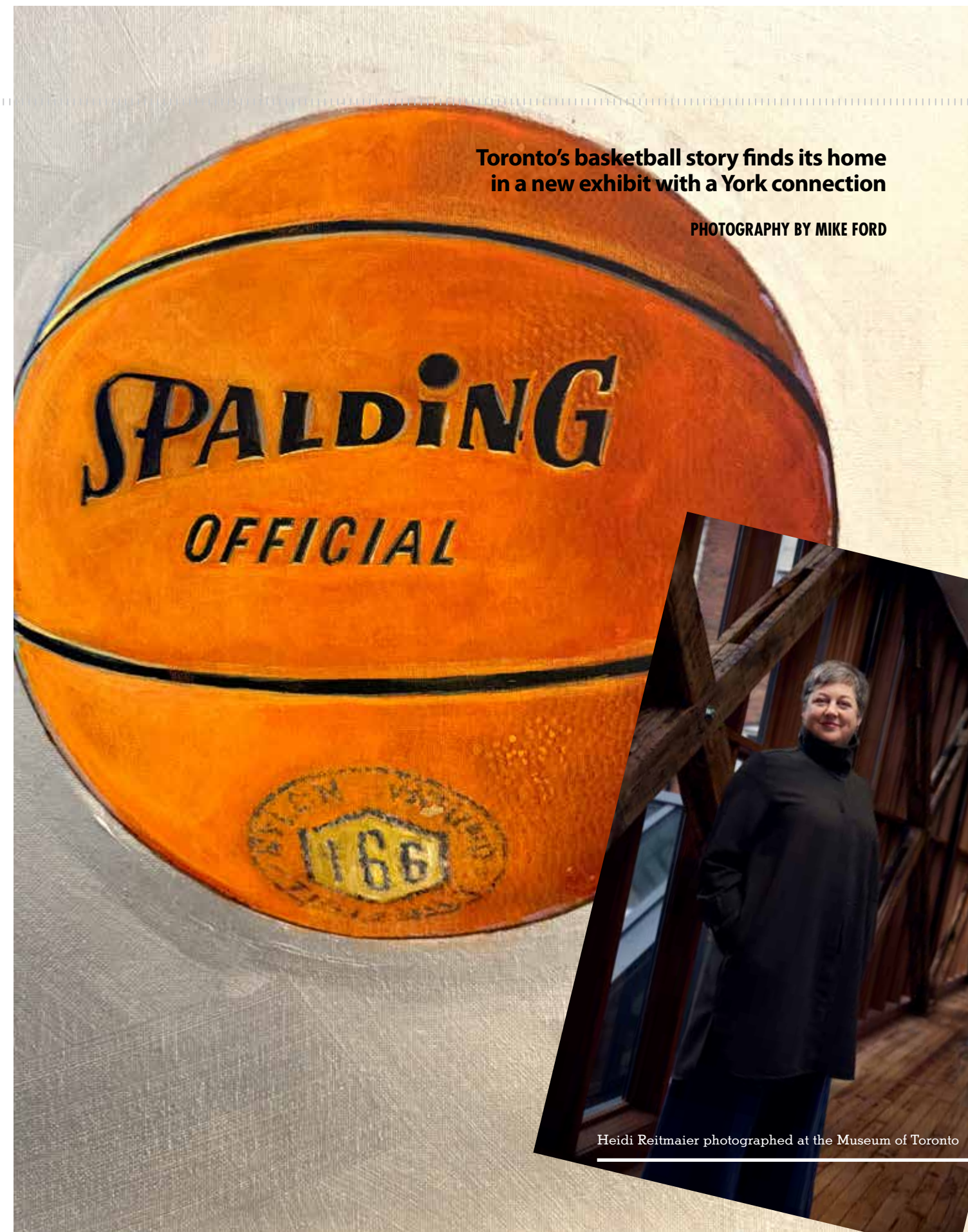
While the Raptors' 2019 NBA championship was a defining moment, the exhibit reaches deeper, tapping into the stories forged on neighbourhood courts across the city. As Toronto prepares to welcome a WNBA franchise in 2026, this exhibit stands as a testament to the city's enduring love for the game and its future in the city.

"We can't capture every facet of this complex history," Bay-Cheng admits. "But we can outline the known story, highlight the key players in Toronto's basketball culture, and create space for new voices to join the narrative. This is an evolving record of who we are as a very complex, diverse, multicultural, multinational city." ● — Ian Kennedy

*The Museum of Toronto's basketball exhibit is at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, May 21 to October 30.*

Toronto's basketball story finds its home in a new exhibit with a York connection

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD



Heidi Reitmaier photographed at the Museum of Toronto

# SOCIAL MEDICINE

A new prescription for health equity

**R**ARE DISEASES, affecting fewer than one in 2,000 individuals, often receive inadequate attention in pharmaceutical research. This neglect leads to exorbitant treatment costs and limited options for patients with conditions such as cystic fibrosis, Duchenne muscular dystrophy and various genetic disorders.

At York University, Conor Douglas is addressing these challenges through the Social Pharmaceutical Innovation (SPIN) project, which aims to enhance the development and delivery of treatments for rare diseases. He has coined the term “social pharmaceutical innovation” to describe a collaborative model that unites patients, NGOs and public sector entities to improve access to affordable treatments.

“We need to eliminate the barriers that prevent individuals from accessing essential care,” says Douglas, a professor in the Department of Science, Technology and Society.

The SPIN initiative involves partnerships across Brazil, Canada, France and the Netherlands, supported by funding from the Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities. By leveraging insights from social innovation research, SPIN addresses critical issues related to treatment availability and affordability. “The science is ready for implementation; it won’t make an impact unless we tackle social, political and economic systemic challenges related to research, regulation and coverage of medicines for rare diseases,” he emphasizes.

Grounded in a commitment to social justice, the project

acknowledges that many drug innovations originate in public research institutions, but often become privatized. This shift can inflate prices, rendering essential medications unaffordable for many patients. The initiative aligns with York University’s mission to promote social equity and supports several Sustainable Development Goals, including good health and well-being, as well as reducing inequalities.

A significant achievement of the project has been a clear definition of social pharmaceutical innovation itself. This clarity has resonated with organizations such as BioCanRx, facilitating collaborations on public-sector treatment manufacturing and exploring alternative pathways for drug development.

According to Douglas, transforming entrenched drug development processes presents challenges, due to established practices and substantial financial interests. Ongoing work for SPIN will focus on fostering collaboration with Health Canada and provincial health systems to challenge conventional industry practices. The aim is to support initiatives that might otherwise be overlooked due to market failures.

With the establishment of York University’s new School of Medicine, there is an opportunity to integrate these efforts into the training of future health-care professionals who are committed to addressing health equity challenges. “Change is underway,” asserts Douglas. “A different way of doing things is possible.” ●

— Deirdre Kelly

# BRIDGING THE SOUND GAP

Deaf education gets a high-tech makeover

BY MOIRA MACDONALD  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET

**I**N the mid-1980s, when Pam Millett (PhD '06) was an audiology student, hearing aids were the primary assistive devices available. These devices were larger than today's models and had inferior sound quality compared to modern hearing aids. "That was pretty much all, because that's the technology there was," she recalls.

Nearly 40 years later, as a professor at York University's Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) Teacher Education Program, Millett guides teachers through a vastly different landscape. During an intensive week-long course that is part of the curriculum, these educators explore the multitude of technologies that have emerged since Millett's student days, when American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ) were

more commonly used as languages of instruction for deaf children in Canada.

While not technicians, York's students must understand how these devices function – or might malfunction – to help their learners achieve educational milestones once thought unattainable. This shift was already underway as Millett completed her audiology training; within two years of her graduation, Ontario saw its first pediatric cochlear implant surgery.

Since then, cochlear implants have transformed the lives of countless deaf children by enabling them to hear. Though still imperfect, these electronic inner ear devices have steadily improved. They've been joined by other implantable devices, including nearly invisible

Melanie Simpson, Connie Mayer and Pam Millett

Bluetooth-enabled hearing aids enhanced by artificial intelligence, and remote microphone systems that stream a teacher's voice directly to a student's hearing device.

"The technology is amazing and I never expected to see kids like this when I started," Millett says. "But the thing that I say to our students every year is that many of our deaf and hard-of-hearing students are just one dead battery away from not learning anything that day."

The York program prepares its students to address a wide range of challenges. These include practical issues such as replacing dead batteries or identifying when poor sound quality discourages hearing aid use. They also tackle more complex tasks such as supporting delayed literacy skills and ensuring signing children can continue learning through sign language. In addition to ASL and LSQ, Canada also recognizes Indigenous sign languages, reflecting the diversity of communication needs. Ultimately, the program emphasizes that the primary goal for these future educators is to maximize deaf and hard-of-hearing students' access to classroom curricula and learning opportunities.

In Canada, approximately one to three out of every 1,000 children are born with hearing loss annually, a rate considered "low incidence." This figure doesn't account for hearing loss that develops later in childhood.

"We're not trying to pretend that all these deaf kids have become hearing kids," says Professor Connie Mayer, who, along with Millett, is a program academic coordinator. "We're always saying to classroom teachers, 'Be mindful ... what they can hear is amazing, but they have to put more effort into the listening than the average joe.'"

Established in 1991, York's DHH Teacher Education Program continues a legacy of specialized teacher education that began in 1919 at the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf in Belleville, Ont. This transfer of responsibility marked a significant shift in the preparation of DHH educators in Canada.

Building on this legacy, York's program has grown to become the country's largest of its kind, with approximately 50 students divided between a year-long, full-time option, and a three-year, part-time program. It is also one of only three such programs in the country, alongside those in British Columbia and Nova Scotia. As a result, most certified DHH teachers in Ontario graduate from York, where they earn a post-baccalaureate diploma.

To gain admission, students must already be certified teachers, hold a bachelor's degree in education and have completed at least two sign language courses, although fluency is not



required. York's program structure has evolved in parallel with significant changes in deaf education.

As DHH teacher education transitioned to York, the educational landscape for deaf children was already shifting from primarily separate classes and schools to greater integration into mainstream classrooms, aided by advancements in hearing technology.

Today, most DHH students are taught in regular classes and York's program is designed with this reality in mind. The program prepares graduates to work in a range of programs and settings, acknowledging that most will become itinerant specialists. These professionals will visit their students' schools to provide focused support and collaborate with other educators involved in DHH students' education.

As of 2021, Statistics Canada reported that only about 38,270 deaf Canadians (roughly 10 per cent) use ASL and LSQ. This decline in sign language use has led to less frequent use among teachers as well. While York's program has never taught sign language itself, every cohort still includes fluent signers and teachers who use sign as their primary language.

Congregated settings remain but, "it's not the same job that it was," says program course director and practicum facilitator Melanie Simpson (MEd '13), a teacher of the deaf for more than 20 years, who is currently pursuing a PhD at York.

As important as understanding students' hearing technologies is, language and literacy development for DHH students is a critical topic in the York program's curriculum, and an area where DHH students are most at risk of falling behind. That risk has been mitigated by much earlier identification and intervention.

Ontario introduced universal newborn hearing screening in 2001, and implants can be done before a child turns one year old. "We can assume that many more of the children come to the table with closer to age-appropriate language development upon which they can build literacy," says Mayer, a language and literacy specialist, who also taught deaf

children for more than 20 years before coming to York. "So what we're teaching tends to go further down the path of, 'OK, how can we teach more complex vocabulary?'"

As a result, "we can't believe what we're seeing in terms of what kids can hear and their spoken language," Mayer continues. "Kids who speak two languages who are profoundly deaf, who speak them fluently, who are in French immersion – that was never happening."

Still, technology remains imperfect. Subtle sounds and frequencies can be lost, while the peripheral noises of a boisterous classroom, HVAC systems or even an open window can make hearing more challenging. DHH students expend significant cognitive effort filtering this cacophony of sounds, potentially missing casual conversations where incidental yet important information and words are shared. Their specialist teachers are vigilant about all these aspects, working to ensure students don't miss crucial learning opportunities.

Heather Kessler, who completed York's DHH Teacher Education Program in 2021, now serves as a DHH literacy curriculum leader at Toronto's Northern Secondary School. She recalls a pivotal insight from Mayer: "Our students are like Swiss cheese. They will know things and they will have huge gaps in unpredictable ways."

This analogy resonates with Kessler, who applies it broadly. "I think about that for all our students: What do you know? Where are the gaps? Where are they hiding?" For students with multiple disabilities, DHH teachers face the additional challenge of determining which exceptionality is impacting specific aspects of learning.

Kathleen O'Connor (BA '93, BSW '95), a York program graduate and elementary grade itinerant hearing specialist teacher at the York Region District School Board, notes a growing trend. She's encountering more students, including newcomers from other countries or jurisdictions, who are identified late as having hearing loss. These students often face significant academic challenges and require intensive support to catch up with their peers.

"It's a totally different situation than a child who is identified right away at birth," O'Connor says, requiring more collaboration with family, teachers, community and health services to ensure the student gets the help they need.

York's program simulates the technological environment DHH teachers will encounter in their future classrooms. All classes feature real-time captioning and ASL interpretation when needed. During in-person sessions, microphones are used to ensure clear audio transmission, mirroring the assistive listening devices commonly used in educational settings for DHH students.

However, this in-person scenario has become a rarity. Since the pandemic, the full-time program has transitioned entirely online, delivered synchronously. This shift has maintained the program's commitment to accessibility, with virtual classes still featuring captioning and ASL interpretation. The online format has also extended access to teachers across Ontario and beyond, with the program now reaching educators in B.C. and Alberta. The part-time program, online since 2008, had already paved the way for this broader accessibility. For Ontario teachers, tuition is covered through provincial government funding.

This expanded reach is crucial for improving access to education for DHH students. The program's small team frequently receives inquiries from school boards seeking qualified DHH teachers, reflecting an ongoing shortage of these specialists. Enrolment is partly constrained by the availability of practicum placements, which require both a sufficient number of DHH students and mentorship from qualified DHH teachers. "We've become really creative," says Simpson. "There are willing retired volunteers if we need them. And we've also actually done some mentorship over Zoom."

Despite advancements in hearing technology, the need for specialist support remains critical. School board administrators sometimes underestimate the importance of providing DHH specialist teachers, especially when DHH students appear to cope well in the classroom.

York's program faculty work to educate boards that "the need hasn't gone away; it's just different," as Mayer emphasizes. Graduates emerge equipped not only to teach, but also to advocate for their students and empower them to self-advocate – essential skills in ensuring DHH students receive appropriate support and access to education.

Back in the classroom, technology continues to advance rapidly. Kessler's classrooms now feature live captioning for even casual conversations, thanks to a company called Streamer. Additionally, the development of assistive learning and literacy software, such as Google's Read&Write, is once again transforming the educational landscape for DHH students. For teachers of DHH children, keeping up with these innovations is not just beneficial – it's essential.

"There's going to be new technology that you won't understand or that you won't recognize," says Kessler. She emphasizes the responsibility that comes with the role: "It's our job. We need to figure it out. We need to know what it is and how to use it best – because we are providing access." ●



# Easy Rider

*York student William Moran isn't just horsing around*

BY DICK SNYDER ● PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

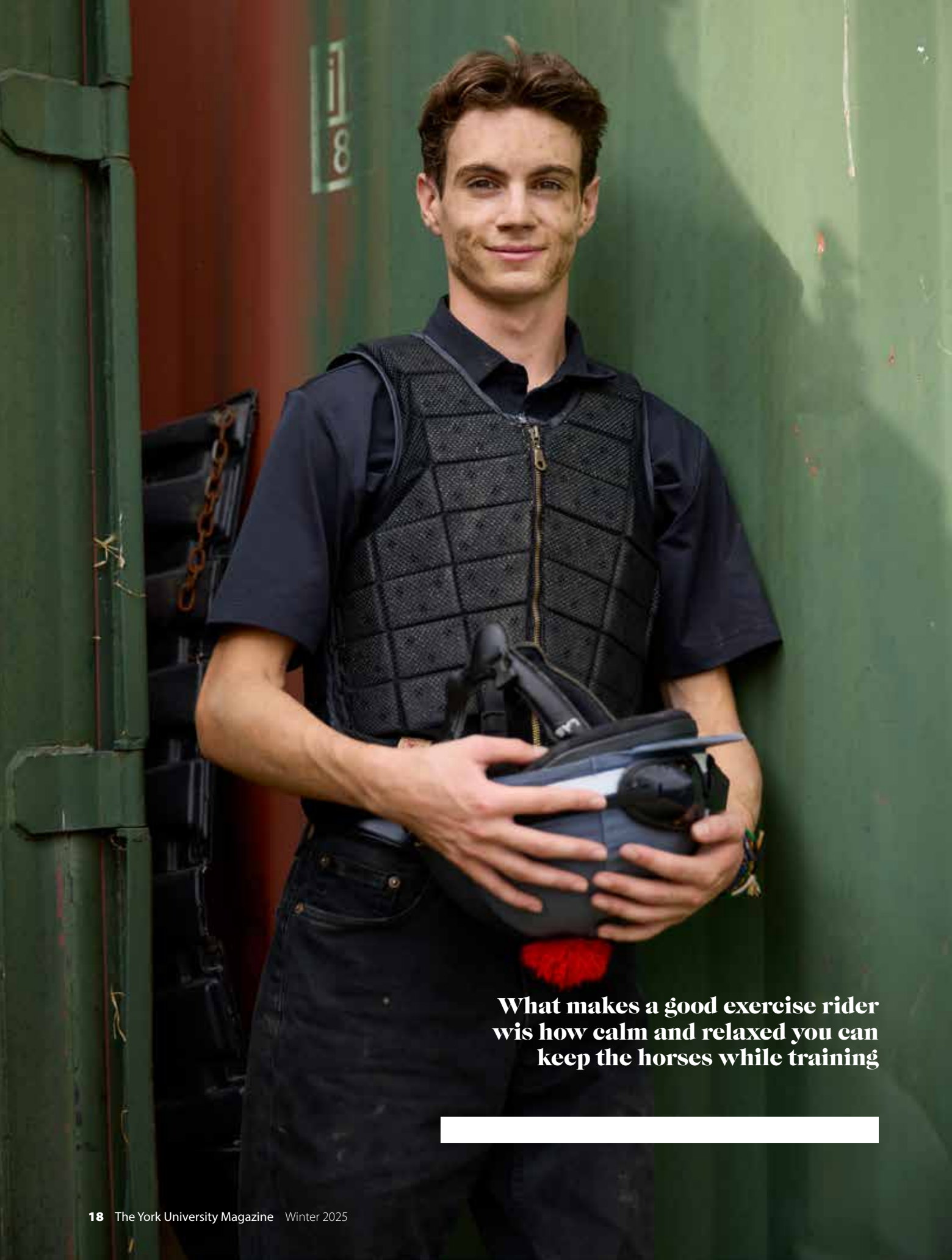


**W**ILLIAM MORAN, a York software engineering student, gets up every morning at the crack of dawn – not to get a jump on his studies, but to get to Woodbine Racetrack before the sun fully rises. This is where, six days a week, the 20-year-old takes racehorses out for a mile-and-a-half gallop as part of their daily training regimen. He's been doing it for the past four years, and for him, being an

exercise rider is more than just a job – it's a continuation of his family's deep connection to the track.

Horse racing runs deep in Moran's bloodline. Both his parents have significant ties to the sport. His father, David Moran, is a professional jockey with 558 career wins over 14 seasons at Woodbine. His mother, Sarah Moran, originally from Italy, was also a skilled rider before moving to Ireland to pursue her racing career. It was there that she met David,





**What makes a good exercise rider  
is how calm and relaxed you can  
keep the horses while training**



and the couple had William, the eldest of their nine children, while still based in Ireland. The family settled in Canada in 2011, where the equine legacy continues. In 2024, William's 18-year-old brother, Pietro, joined the professional circuit, competing alongside their father. "It's in our blood, I guess you could say," Moran says.

"I've been riding horses since I can even remember," he says, noting that exercise riding is much different than recreational horseback riding. "These animals are born to run. That's what they're bred for – and they're always pumped up with adrenalin. You can feel the power beneath them whenever you're on them. It can be a very fun thing, but also very dangerous. Last summer, my dad got in an accident and broke his foot."

The goal of the exercise rider, says Moran, is to tune the horse so it's fit, healthy and happy – then, when it comes time to race, it can hit peak performance.

"And what makes a good exercise rider is how calm and relaxed you can keep the horses while training, because they can hurt themselves very easily if they're acting up. My role is to keep them calm so that they don't also drain their energy."

Moran works with five or six horses a day. The trainer tells Moran what to work on with each horse. "I go about a mile and a half around the track – that takes about five minutes. You gallop the horse, which is not race speed. We don't go into a full sprint."

For both horse and rider, this five-minute excursion – though seemingly brief – is intense. "It's a full-body workout every time you get on one. You're working your arms to make sure they don't go too fast. And then also your legs, your core ... everything just to hold this powerful machine."

Now in his fourth year at York, Moran considered a software career path carefully: "I just know it's the future. It's not something that's going to disappear." Meanwhile, as he ponders what he'll do when he graduates – currently a toss-up between pursuing a master's, entering the workforce or travelling – it's the riding that keeps him grounded. He's musing on ways to apply his software and equestrian pursuits, perhaps with an app related to horse training and data tracking. "I really hope I can find a career that involves both, because I really do love working with horses. Once you get that bug bite, it just sticks with you." ●

**York's Jean Augustine Chair  
boosts Black student achievement**

**BY NEIL ARMSTRONG  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET**

# The Future Reimagined



Sonia Lewis

**I believe that our intellectual property is something that we carry with us for a lifetime, and we can reinvent it in ways that can help us secure our needs and our livelihoods**

**I**N A BUSTLING TORONTO HIGH SCHOOL, a group of Black students is getting a taste of university life – minus the hefty price tag of tuition. It's all part of an innovative program spearheaded by York University's Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora, aimed at addressing costly academic transfers and dropouts among Black youth.

Sonia Lewis (BA '10, MEd '13), a PhD student in education at York, created the Beyond High School program after uncovering a troubling pattern.

"What we found was that the students were qualified to go to university. They had the grades or for those who chose to go to college first, they qualified for that too. But as soon as they got into the space, they felt alone, isolated, excluded from the teaching and learning process, and from the curriculum; they were othered by professors and peers alike," Lewis explains.

The research revealed many Black students bouncing between university and college, searching for a sense of belonging. This costly cycle prompted Lewis to act. Partnering with James Cardinal McGuigan Catholic High School, she designed a program to give students a real taste of post-secondary life before they commit.

Beyond High School isn't just campus tours and brochures. Students attend actual lectures, work in labs and learn to navigate university resources such as archives. "They are not lacking the academic aptitude; what they are lacking, we found, was exposure to the space and the ability to make informed choices," Lewis says.

Genelle Levy, program director of the Levy McLean Family Foundation – which funds scholarships for Beyond High School – cites stark statistics driving their involvement. "A 2016 Statistics Canada report indicated that only 60 per cent of Black students in Canada thought getting a university degree was achievable although 94 per cent of students want to get a university degree."

The foundation, co-founded by Don Levy (BA '86), funds activities such as academic writing workshops and goal-setting sessions. Students also experience university life firsthand by attending lectures and interacting with current and former students at York University. "We really see education as the pathway to freedom. I believe that our intellectual property is something that we carry with us for a lifetime, and we can reinvent it in ways that can help us secure our needs and our livelihoods," Levy says.

The Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora, currently held by Carl James (BA '78, MA '80, PhD '86), oversees these initiatives and provides wrap-around support for Black students. Honouring its namesake – the first Black woman elected to Canada's Parliament and a former York University governor – the Chair extends this work beyond education into health, housing, employment and social justice for Black communities across Canada.

Anika Forde (BA '11), director of research and programs for the Chair and a PhD student in sociology at York University, highlighted this broader impact during an appreciation gathering in October. "Your support plays a vital role in our ongoing work to enhance access, equity and inclusivity in education, and the work we do in health, housing, employment and social justice for Black students and communities across Canada," she said.

Richerd Edwards, a third-year human rights and equity studies major at York University, credits his involvement with the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora for transforming his educational journey. Edwards, who is of Jamaican heritage, entered York as a student athlete, but has since shifted his focus to academics.

As a research assistant with the Chair's Black Student-Athlete Research and Mentorship Program, he explores issues facing Black student athletes in institutional athletics, examining identity and community within sports.

"It's changed my life in the way I thought of myself,"

**We're seeing positive results, but there's still work to be done. The real test will be long-term retention and graduation rates**



Edwards says. "It has allowed me to untether myself from the engulfment of sport and it has allowed me to step forward in a new purpose, reimagine myself, and reimagine my future."

The Jean Augustine Chair's initiatives, including Beyond High School, are part of a larger effort to address systemic barriers in education. As the program enters its second cohort, early data suggests promising outcomes. Of the first group of participants, 85 per cent successfully transitioned to post-secondary education, with 60 per cent entering university programs and 25 per cent pursuing college diplomas.

However, Lewis cautions against complacency. "We're seeing positive results, but there's still work to be done," she says. "The real test will be long-term retention and graduation rates."

As Chair, James is now expanding its focus to include support

for Black students throughout their post-secondary journey. This includes mentorship programs, research opportunities and initiatives to increase Black faculty representation.

This expansion includes programs targeting high school students, bridging the gap between secondary and post-secondary education. Alanah Broomfield (BA '22, MA '23), a PhD student and research assistant, has been working for two years with the Black Internship Program, which brings high school students to the University each July.

"I can see the impact it has on those children in the way that they grow into finding themselves and standing firm in that," Broomfield says. "When they started, the students were tentative, but as they progressed through the program, they became very comfortable with themselves."

Broomfield's observations highlight the importance of early intervention and sustained support in fostering Black student success. These programs aim to create a seamless pathway from high school to university, addressing the challenges identified in Lewis's research.

"It's not just about getting students through the door," James emphasizes. "It's about creating an environment where they can thrive, where their experiences and knowledge are valued, and where they see themselves reflected in the curriculum and faculty."

As universities across Canada grapple with issues of equity and inclusion, the Jean Augustine Chair's work offers a blueprint for meaningful change. But James is clear: this is just the beginning. "We're laying the groundwork," he says, "for a transformation in how we approach education for Black students and communities. The goal isn't just access – it's excellence, it's leadership, it's changing the face of academia itself." ●

BY DEIRDRE KELLY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

Michael Hirsh's wild ride on *The Magic School Bus*, along with *Franklin*, *Little Bear*, *Rolie Polie Olie* and other celebrated characters born at Nelvana, the powerhouse animation studio he helped to create

# CARTOON KING

**A** S A MOTHER OF TWO, I often joke that while I may have given birth to my children, it was Michael Hirsh who truly raised them. As one of the founders of Nelvana, the groundbreaking Canadian animation studio behind such beloved shows as *The Magic School Bus*, *Franklin* and *Little Bear*, Hirsh has helped shape the childhoods of millions. His animated creations filled our Saturday mornings with laughter and learning, becoming staples in our home. From catchy theme songs to a wealth of merchandise – including books, lunch boxes, backpacks and board games – his work has been transforming children's media for more than half a century, inspiring and engaging new generations of young viewers and creators alike.

Now in his 70s, Hirsh continues to inspire through his recently released memoir, *Animation Nation: How We Built a Cartoon Empire*. The book offers a behind-the-scenes look at his remarkable career, from co-founding Nelvana in 1971 – a scrappy, countercultural experiment born out of cramped apartments and wild ambition – to transforming it into a global leader in children's entertainment and one of

North America's most influential animation studios. "I have been a workaholic because I have been super-focused on my goals," he writes, reflecting on decades spent bringing imaginative worlds to life. His passion for storytelling remains undiminished, even as he transitions into what he jokingly calls "retirement" – a phase that seems anything but quiet.

Hirsh's unlikely rise to becoming a cartoon king began in the late 1960s at what was then known as Glendon College, where he initially pursued philosophy. The son of Holocaust survivors, Hirsh grew up with a deep appreciation for resilience and reinvention – qualities that would come to define his career.

Drawn to the dynamic course catalogue at York University's Keele Campus, he quickly discovered that the descriptions often outshone the actual classes. The long commute between campuses became an increasing frustration, prompting him to leave after three years and fully commit to his budding passion for filmmaking.

He immersed himself in Rochdale College – a controversial hub of counterculture in downtown Toronto. Equal



All our peers thought we were nuts starting an animation company when there was virtually no animation industry at the time

parts commune, art experiment and anarchist free-for-all, Rochdale became fertile ground for his creative ambitions. “We are young and wild – dropping acid and dreaming big,” he says over a recent lunch of sushi and jasmine tea – his treat. “It is all about finding like-minded people who want to change the world through animation.”

This period of artistic exploration set the stage for Hirsh to connect with collaborators, including Patrick Loubert (BA '69), a fellow York student brimming with ideas and a shared love of avant-garde cinema. Together, they formed Laff Arts, a small production company that produced experimental films and animations, laying the groundwork for their future ventures. Joining them was Jack Christie (BA '68), whom Hirsh had met when both were students living down the hall from each other in residence. Christie recalls those early days as a time of unbridled creativity.

“Glendon’s leafy campus was an island of tranquility where Michael and I, aided by consciousness-altering medicinals, let our imaginations run wild, particularly on weekends when the residences emptied out, as most of our fellow students headed home. Glendon’s bilingual curriculum was a unique approach to bridging the ‘two solitudes.’ That avant-garde spirit rubbed off on us and flavoured our fledgling cinematic aspirations.”

Their first break came when animator Marc Chinoy approached Hirsh with a proposal. “Marc asked me to put together a small crew [so] that he could try to produce stop-motion animation, so we got to make five animated shorts for *Sesame Street*, learning how to animate as we went along.”

That early work gave Hirsh and Loubert the confidence to take on more animation projects, but finding their footing in the industry was anything but straightforward. “Patrick and I went out to make sales wearing old suits we bought at the Salvation Army,” Hirsh recalls. “We often celebrated jobs we thought we’d get, but they didn’t materialize. Were we too optimistic or too stoned to pick up on reality? Eventually, we stopped using hash or opium beforehand and started pitching sober.”

That clarity of focus soon led to something far more ambitious: the founding of Nelvana in 1971. Hirsh and Loubert co-founded the studio with Clive A. Smith, an English animator educated at the Ealing School of Art. Smith had worked on the Beatles’ animated TV series at Halas and Batchelor before moving to Toronto in search of new opportunities. Introduced by Carole Pope and Kevan Staples – who would later form the band Rough Trade – Smith brought precise technical skills as a character designer and 3D-model

builder, complementing Hirsh and Loubert’s vision with his ability to actually draw and animate.

“All our peers thought we were nuts starting an animation company when there was virtually no animation industry at the time,” says Smith, who initially kept the fledgling studio afloat with commercial and government contracts. “We actually were nuts, which is why it worked. Fearless were we.”

The trio named their company Nelvana, after Canada’s first female superheroine from the 1940s comic book series *Triumph-Adventure*. This was no coincidence. Hirsh and Loubert’s 1971 publication, *The Great Canadian Comic Books*, illustrated by Smith, had revived interest in wartime Canadian comics. Their research preserved forgotten cultural history and provided seed money for the studio, reflecting a commitment to Canadian stories that would define Nelvana’s future.

“We weren’t just starting an animation studio,” Hirsh says. “Patrick and I were passionate Canadian nationalists who wanted to show what our country could do.” Loubert adds: “We believed animation could be something bigger – it could be art.”

But their beginnings were far from glamorous. Nelvana’s first office – a third-floor walk-up above a printer on King Street West – was an eccentric space with a bathtub inexplicably in the middle of the room. Their first animation stand? It was built over a toilet bowl using a 16-mm Bolex camera.

In its early years, Nelvana faced constant financial pressure. Hirsh and his partners scraped by on \$25 weekly draws – when they could afford it – and picked up freelance work for CBC Radio or magazines to make ends meet. At home, Hirsh and his wife Elaine Waisglass – whom he had met at Rochdale and would later marry and have a son with – shared a house with other creatives, living what Hirsh calls a “bohemian lifestyle.” Bills often went unpaid until someone came knocking to cut off the power or phone. Meanwhile, Waisglass – trained as an artist – began building her editing career at CBC’s *As It Happens*, her steady paycheck helping to sustain the household while Nelvana’s founders worked tirelessly to get their animation venture off the ground.

Everything changed in 1977 with *A Cosmic Christmas*. The animated holiday special blended traditional themes with a science fiction twist, earning praise for its sophisticated storytelling and European-inspired animation style. The concept was Loubert’s brainchild. “The idea of *A Cosmic Christmas* came to me by way of a personal experience with a UFO – I believe that term has been replaced, but who’s counting? –

and a High Anglican upbringing, which of course involved Christmas carols mentioning the Three Wise Men.”

The program aired on CBC and caught the attention of George Lucas, who commissioned Nelvana to create “The Story of the Faithful Wookiee,” an animated segment for *The Star Wars Holiday Special* that aired the following year. Featuring the first-ever appearance of Boba Fett, the project launched Nelvana on the international stage. The company was soon working with partners in France, Ireland, Korea and beyond, setting a new standard for Canadian animation. “Michael was the driver of the business,” says Jocelyn Hamilton, who worked at Nelvana in the 1990s and is now president of television at Lionsgate Canada. “He represented Nelvana to the world at a time when the export of Canadian animation wasn’t yet proven. He started it. He established that Canada could be an international powerhouse. He led that charge.”

The company’s growing reputation opened doors for collaborations across creative industries, with musicians such as Rick Danko of the Band contributing to Nelvana’s evolving musical storytelling. These creative partnerships set the stage for Nelvana’s most ambitious project yet: 1983’s *Rock & Rule*. The studio’s first feature-length film brought together an all-star lineup of musicians – Debbie Harry of Blondie, Lou Reed, Cheap Trick, Iggy Pop and Earth, Wind & Fire – and attempted to merge animation and rock music in a way that had never been done before. “We wanted iconic rock artists to compose and sing the songs,” Hirsh says.

However, the film’s darker tone and mature themes made it difficult to market effectively, and its limited release left it unable to recover production costs. The commercial failure left Nelvana in significant financial trouble, pushing the studio to the brink of collapse.

It was during this turbulent period that Robert J. Foster, a York University donor, member of the Order of Canada and founder of Capital Canada Limited, stepped in. An early supporter of Nelvana specials such as *The Devil and Daniel Mouse* and *Rolie-O and Julie-8*, Foster provided critical financial backing through a debenture investment, ensuring the studio could weather the crisis.

“Michael is a bold, high-risk entrepreneur who was willing to challenge a sector where Canada had limited presence, build relationships, and create a world-class business,” Foster says. His belief in Hirsh’s vision helped stabilize Nelvana at a pivotal moment. Though *Rock & Rule* failed commercially at the time, it later achieved cult status – a reflection of Nelvana’s boldness and willingness to take creative risks that defined its reputation as a trailblazer.

With its footing restored, Nelvana entered a new phase of growth, turning its attention to television projects that would define the studio’s identity throughout the 1980s. Partnering with major networks, Nelvana produced animated series such as *Inspector Gadget*, *The Care Bears* and *Babar*. These shows not only solidified Nelvana as a leader in children’s entertainment, but also proved that Canadian animation could compete – and thrive – on the global stage. Hirsh directed that development.

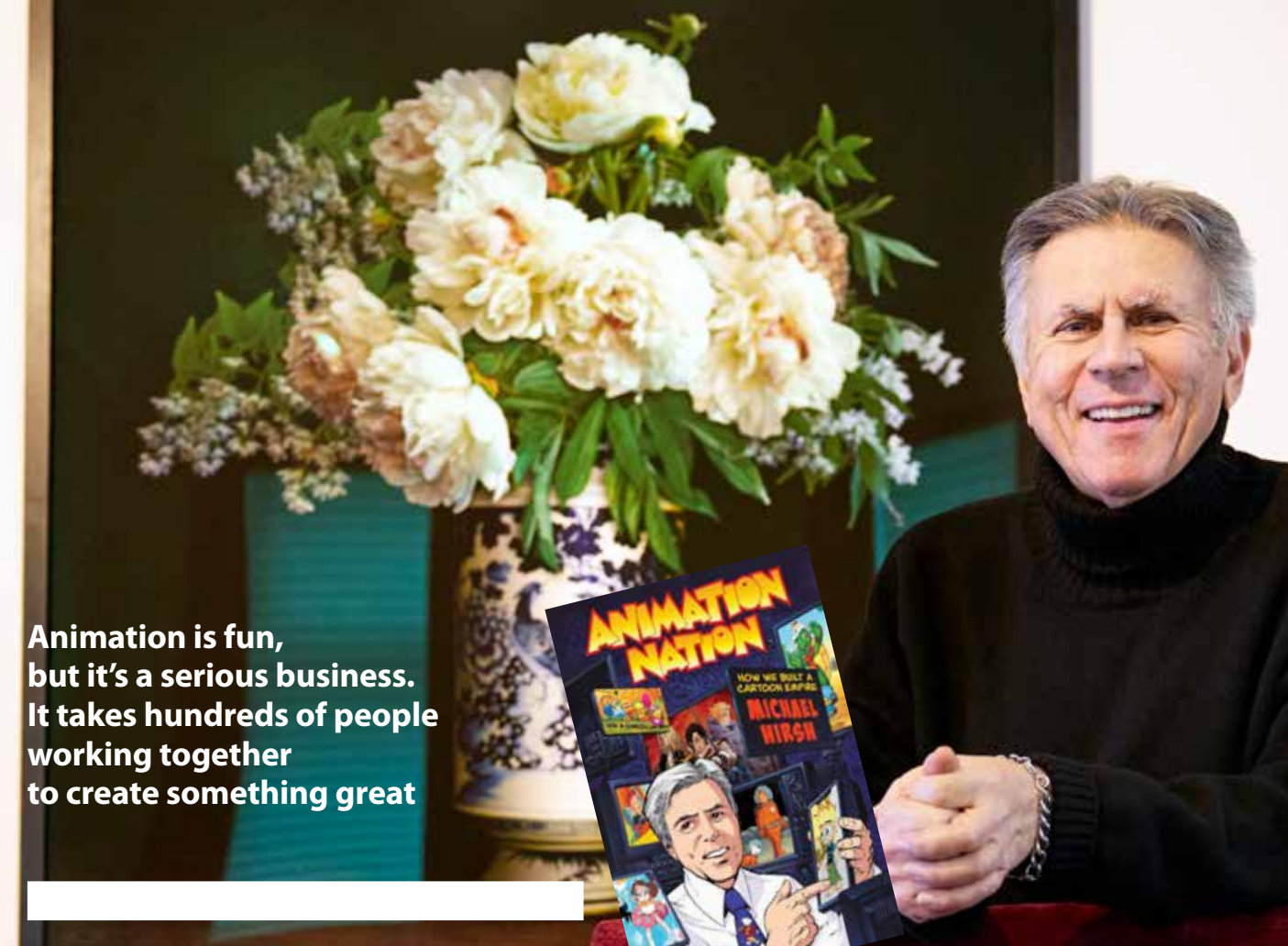
As Nelvana grew, his leadership became defined by his pragmatic approach to business. “Michael was always about the objective,” says Vince Comisso (MBA ’92), co-founder and CEO of 9 Story Media Group, who started his career working at Nelvana soon after graduating from York. “He didn’t get angry or loud – he stayed methodical and logical. I live by that. It’s binary: you either meet the objective, or you don’t. And with Michael, the objective always was clear.”

Hirsh’s laser-focused concentration on the end goal allowed Nelvana to evolve beyond its early successes, embracing new technologies and expanding its global footprint. By the following decade, Nelvana transformed animated storytelling with *Beetlejuice* and *The Adventures of Tintin* – international hits that showcased the studio’s global reach. It had also revolutionized its production process, moving beyond traditional hand-drawn animation by integrating digital tools such as Animo software for ink-and-paint and compositing.

“Animation is fun, but it’s a serious business,” Hirsh says. “It takes hundreds of people working together to create something great, and the real challenge is keeping that team together between projects. Salaries need to be paid, software licences maintained and the lights kept on – even when there’s no work coming in. Those lean times test your resolve, but they also push you to innovate.”

Nelvana’s commitment to innovation continued to drive its growth. The acquisition of Windlight Studios in Minneapolis in 1997 marked a turning point, enabling the studio to experiment with CGI. This investment culminated in *Rolie Polie Olie*, one of the first fully CGI-animated series, which earned multiple Emmys for its innovative approach. Even traditionally styled shows like *Little Bear* and *The Magic School Bus* benefited from these advancements, as Nelvana blended classic aesthetics with new digital efficiencies, setting a precedent for hybrid production in children’s animation.

But as Nelvana reached new heights, Hirsh and his partners faced a pivotal decision. Scaling the company to meet growing global demand required resources beyond what they could provide alone. In 2000, they sold Nelvana to Corus Entertainment for \$540 million (equity value). The deal ensured the studio’s continued growth, while giving



**Animation is fun,  
but it’s a serious business.  
It takes hundreds of people  
working together  
to create something great**

Hirsh’s *Animation Nation* book

Hirsh the freedom to pursue new creative challenges. “It was bittersweet,” Hirsh says. “We had built something extraordinary, but we knew this was the right step to secure its future.”

Not long after, Hirsh was already turning his attention to rebuilding another animation powerhouse. In 2004, he led a group of investors to acquire CINAR, a Montreal-based company mired in financial scandals, and rebranded it as Cookie Jar Entertainment. Determined to restore its reputation, Hirsh revitalized beloved properties such as *Arthur* and *Caillou*, while championing original hits such as *Johnny Test* and *The Doodlebops*. The latter became a cultural phenomenon, with Disney Channel backing and live tours across North America.

As streaming platforms began reshaping how audiences consumed content, Hirsh saw another opportunity to adapt. In 2012, he sold Cookie Jar to DHX Media (now WildBrain), a move that made DHX the largest independent owner of children’s programming globally. Though he stayed on briefly as executive chairman – overseeing projects including a reboot of *Inspector Gadget* for Netflix – Hirsh was already looking ahead to the next frontier.

In 2016, Hirsh co-founded WOW! Unlimited Media, merging Rainmaker Entertainment (a Canadian animation studio) and Frederator Networks (a digital animation company) to create a powerhouse built for the streaming era. WOW! quickly became a hub for digital-first storytelling, producing content for platforms such as Netflix and YouTube. For nearly a decade, Hirsh steered WOW! through the ever-changing landscape of digital media, adapting to new platforms and audience preferences with the same innovative spirit that had defined his career. As the company continued to grow and evolve, Hirsh found himself contemplating the next chapter of his own story.

As 2023 drew to a close, Hirsh found himself facing what he playfully calls in his book “a problem” – retirement. At 75, he stepped down as CEO and chairman, but true to form, Hirsh’s idea of retirement is anything but conventional. For him, stepping down simply means stepping into a new chapter of creative possibilities.

His latest goal? Buying back Nelvana – the company that started it all. “Animation is limitless,” Hirsh says. “There’s always another story to tell.” ●

# Giving

FRIENDS & PHILANTHROPY

## Measuring Up

*Drew Green invests in York's athletic future*

BY JOHN LORINC

**DREW GREEN (BA '97)**, founder and CEO of Canada's Indochino menswear brand, has built his company into a global success. Yet, his most meaningful work is empowering student athletes through philanthropic initiatives that ease financial burdens and fuel basketball aspirations.

Green's passion for supporting York University stems from his own experience as a cash-strapped student. As the only child of a single mother in Scarborough, Ont., Green understood early on that he would need to finance

his own education. The varsity athlete and fitness enthusiast leveraged his passion and skills, establishing himself as a personal trainer. He systematically grew this business while balancing his academic commitments and his position as guard on York's basketball team.

"It kind of mushroomed," Green says, sitting in his souvenir-cluttered Vancouver office, still a bit jet-lagged from a long flight back from Hong Kong. "As my clientele grew, I started hiring trainers at a facility downtown and eventually sold the business."

As with many entrepreneurs, Green learned the ropes not in a classroom, but through hands-on experience with his self-made venture. "The experience provided me with the opportunity to learn how to start a business, to build a business and see how to create value. That experience helped form the rest of my business life."

Over the past three decades, Green has built an impressive career as an award-winning entrepreneur and investor. He has founded, developed and sold multiple companies in both the U.S. and Canada. His expertise extends to raising hundreds of millions in equity investments for various firms. Green also serves as a director for tech startups and has held a position on the York University Alumni Board since 2022. Most recently, he became an owner (and Chair) of the Canadian Elite Basketball League.

But he is perhaps best known for transforming Indochino from a small online bespoke tailor into a global brand that now creates custom clothing for customers in more than 50 countries, supported by a network of 145 retail locations across major North American urban centres. Under his leadership, the brand has also forged partnerships with the NBA and NFL, outfitting rising stars such as RJ Barrett, now a shooting guard for the Toronto Raptors. His passion for basketball extends to helping the next generation succeed on and off the court.

Green's commitment to supporting student athletes is rooted in his own experience. He was offered a basketball scholarship from the University of British Columbia after high school, but chose York University instead, finding the idea of moving across the country at 18 too daunting. At the time, York didn't offer sports scholarships, making it necessary for Green to fund his education through his personal training business.

In recognition of these challenges, Green established the Drew Green Lions Award at York University. This annually endowed scholarship supports high-achieving male and female basketball players, with a particular focus on students from Scarborough, his home community.

The Drew Green Lions Award not only alleviates financial pressures, but also recognizes recipients' exceptional accomplishments both on the court and in the classroom. By empowering the next generation of talented Lions, the scholarship aims to strengthen York's basketball programs

and boost their competitiveness among Ontario's top-tier university athletic programs.

While Green entrusts the University's staff with selecting candidates from among the applicants, he underscores the importance of supporting high-achieving student athletes who might otherwise struggle to balance academic and athletic commitments due to financial constraints.

"What I try to do with the awards is hopefully look for athletes from Scarborough – my hometown and a place I'm very proud of – and help them realize their dreams of being a student athlete or varsity athlete at university."

Green has established a similar scholarship at the University of British Columbia. Over the past 10 years, this initiative has provided awards to a dozen students, further demonstrating Green's commitment to supporting student athletes across Canada.

At York, Green makes a point of taking the scholarship recipients out for lunch and getting to know them personally. This hands-on approach reflects his broader philosophy of giving back. "It's a great thing, right? I think any time you can be grateful for your journey and give back with gratitude, then we need to do that. It's something we've tried to do as a family for decades, regardless of our status or ability."

Green emphasizes that the point isn't just about providing young people with opportunities to play basketball. As a father of two sons who compete at top U.S. schools, he firmly believes in the character-shaping power of sports, particularly team sports.

As he puts it, "You learn how to fall in love with something and gain a passion. You learn how to work, and work really hard to improve at something. You learn the value of teamwork. You learn how to win. You learn how to lose. You learn how to be a leader. You learn how to serve others, and to pick up your teammates and make them better."

Although Green no longer plays basketball, the experience of nurturing young athletes continues to shape his life and philanthropic efforts. Through his scholarship, he's not just funding education – he's passing on the valuable lessons that shaped his own success, ensuring that the next generation of student athletes has the support they need to excel in all aspects of their lives. ●



# Alumni



## TACKLING CHANGE

How three-time York grad Lauren Wolman is transforming the future of Canadian rugby

BY DEIRDRE KELLY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET

**W**HEN CANADA'S WOMEN'S RUGBY sevens team captured silver at the 2024 Paris Olympics, it was a moment of triumph built on years of progress both on and off the field. The achievement wasn't just a testament to the players' grit and skill – it also reflected the growing strength of rugby in Canada, a sport that has seen increased participation, improved governance and a stronger emphasis on inclusivity in recent years. At the centre of these developments is Lauren Wolman (BA '01, MA '14, PhD '21), whose three-decade career in rugby has helped lay the foundation for these successes.

Wolman's impact on Canadian rugby is rooted in her unique ability to bridge grassroots development and high-level governance. As Chair of Rugby Canada's Governance and Ethics & Integrity committees, she has worked to implement policies that prioritize safe sport principles, accountability and inclusion. These efforts have not only strengthened the organization, but also created pathways for more Canadians – especially women and youth from underserved communities – to participate in rugby.

"Rugby taught me that everyone has a place on the field," Wolman says. "Now, I'm working to ensure that principle applies across the sport at every level."

Wolman's journey into rugby began in high school, where she found a sense of belonging through the sport's inclusive culture. That same spirit led her to York University in 1996, where she chose her undergraduate program specifically to play varsity rugby. At the time, York's women's rugby program was underfunded and still finding its footing. By her third year, Wolman had taken on the role of team president,

leading efforts to secure better funding and recognition for the program. Her leadership coincided with rugby being officially recognized as a CIAU (now U Sports) sport.

After graduating with an undergraduate degree in fine arts cultural studies and a certificate in sports administration, Wolman took her passion for rugby overseas to England in 2001. There, she played competitively while working for the National Health Service, focusing on improving delivery and access to health services across London and particularly for hard-to-reach and equity-deserving groups. This experience deepened her understanding of how sports can be a vehicle for social change.

Wolman returned to Canada in 2009 and reconnected with York University as a graduate student. Under the mentorship of faculty members Jessica Fraser-Thomas and Yuka Nakamura, she completed her MA and PhD in kinesiology and health science. Her doctoral research examined sports participation among youth in inner-city Toronto – a subject that inspired her ongoing work with grassroots organizations such as the Toronto Inner-City Rugby Foundation, Urban Squash Toronto, Impact Skateboard Club and Hijabi Ballers.

These initiatives reflect Wolman's commitment to using sports as a tool for youth development. "Sports can be transformative," she says. "They teach resilience, teamwork and confidence – skills that extend far beyond the field."

In 2022, Wolman was appointed to the board of directors for Rugby Canada and spearheaded the creation of Rugby Canada's Ethics & Integrity Committee, which is comprised of professionals from across Canada who work in sports



development, academia, governance, human rights and law, that provide advice to the board and senior leadership on ethical situations and decision-making.

Since joining the board, Rugby Canada has gone from strength to strength. In 2023, Rugby Canada became a Program Signatory of the Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner (OSIC), enhancing the organization’s commitment to safe sport. As well, the national women’s team gained great success in 2024, in addition to its silver at the Olympics, the team was ranked second in both seven-player and 15-player formats by World Rugby, making them one of the strongest international women’s programs.

For Wolman, one of her proudest moments came during the Paris Olympics when Asia Hogan-Rochester – a former York student whom Wolman coached as a junior player – helped lead Canada to its silver-medal finish. “Seeing Asia succeed at that level was incredible,” she says. “It’s a reminder that

**SPORTS CAN BE TRANSFORMATIVE. THEY TEACH RESILIENCE, TEAMWORK AND CONFIDENCE – SKILLS THAT EXTEND FAR BEYOND THE FIELD**

our work at every level – from grassroots to governance – can have an impact on the field.”

As Canadian rugby looks ahead to the Women’s World Cup in England this fall, Wolman remains focused on ensuring the sport continues to grow sustainably. Her vision extends beyond medals: she wants rugby in Canada to be a model of inclusivity, accountability and excellence: “Rugby Canada’s philosophy is ‘One Squad.’ We’re building something bigger than wins or rankings – we’re building a community where everyone belongs.” ●



**Drawing Insights**

Merging data and design for increased climate literacy

BY DEIRDRE KELLY

**B**HABNA BANERJEE (BFA '20) stands at the intersection of art and science, wielding data as her paintbrush to illustrate the stark realities of climate change.

The interdisciplinary scholar and former creative director of York’s student newspaper, *Excalibur*, launched Planet Anomaly in 2022, a platform that transforms complex climate data into visual stories accessible to all.

“Mountains of climate data existed,” Banerjee explains, “but there were no sources translating this information into actionable insights.”

Her path from student journalist to data storyteller was shaped by the sweltering heat of her native Kolkata. There, unseasonable floods and shifting disease patterns laid bare the urgent need for climate communication that transcends educational and cultural barriers.

Planet Anomaly’s visualization of pollutant PM2.5 concentrations in global capital cities has garnered widespread acclaim for its accessibility and impact. Originally published in *Visual Capitalist* and later translated into French and Spanish by *Courrier International*, the work caught the attention of industry experts.

Among them is Danny Ashton, founder of NeoMam Studios, a creative agency renowned for transforming complex data into shareable visual content. Ashton recently featured Planet Anomaly’s visualization in his company’s annual

Jealousy List, commending the project for transforming “complex data into something visual that anyone can digest and understand within a few seconds.”

As Banerjee expands her platform’s reach, she remains focused on one goal: “We want to show not just the challenges, but the innovative solutions communities are developing worldwide. It’s about inspiring action through knowledge.” ●



Examples of data visualizations

# Classes

## 1975

**PRICE, JOHN PATRIC**  
(BA '75, THEATRE)

John spent 30 years as arts administrator at George Brown College, starting first with the Dance Department and expanding over time to include the entire Performing Arts Department. He retired in 2007 and started a semi-professional career as a fine art photographer. In 2015, he joined two semi-professional bands playing guitars and vocals.

## 1978

**FREY, JOSEPH**  
BA '78, HISTORY

Joseph is vice-president, executive committee, Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and former vice-president and director, Explorers Club, New York City. A commissioned Canadian Armed

Forces officer, he has written on field sciences and exploration for *Time*, the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*, contributing to five books, including Canadian bestseller *Franklin's Lost Ship: The Historic Discovery of HMS Erebus*. Joseph's honours include the Canadian Forces Decoration, Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal, Erebus Medal, Camsell Medal, Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal and King Charles III Coronation Medal.

## 1982

**STANWAY, CY**  
(BA '82, PSYCHOLOGY)

After graduation, Cy entered rabbinic school at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, graduating in 1987. He has since led congregations in Hattiesburg, Miss., Las Cruces, N.M., and Elberon, N.J., where he presently lives with his wife.



MARC BHALLA

## 1986

**SUBRAMANIAM, SREEDHAR**  
(MBA '86, BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION)

Sreedhar recently relocated to Atlanta, Ga., to serve as vice-president of equipping at Haggai International Institute. In this role, he prepares strategic leaders from more than 100 countries to effectively demonstrate and present the gospel. Over the last eight years he has built friendships across more than 120 countries. He is married to Lee Yen and they have four adult children living in New Zealand and the United States.

## 1988

**STANTON, ROBERT**  
(BA '87, POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY, BA '88, PHILOSOPHY)

Robert, diagnosed with bipolar disorder years ago, began his recovery following an extended hospital stay in 2024. He continues to work as a professor of linguistics and philosophy at the University of Western Ontario.

## 1996

**TIMM, KAREN**  
(BA '96, ANTHROPOLOGY, BED '96, EDUCATION)

Karen is an educational leader, consultant and researcher, as well as an author, artist and musician who passionately advocates for neurodiversity. As the founder of the Neurodivergent Infinity Network of Educators (NINE), she promotes human rights-based, neuro-affirmative practices in education and beyond. Her expertise in building neuro-inclusive environments

has made her a sought-after speaker and consultant for school boards and agencies across Ontario and elsewhere.

## 2001

**STEEL, ZACK**  
(BA '01, PHILOSOPHY)

Zack has published 25 books on numerous topics, including branding, business presence, digital marketing, philosophy, political content and social justice.

## 2002

**LELASSEUX, SEBASTIEN**  
(BFA '01, VISUAL ARTS, BED '02, VISUAL ARTS)

Presently in his 23rd year with the Durham Catholic District School Board, Sebastien teaches media and visual arts. He launched the school's ceramics program in 2023, attracting 90 students initially and growing to 120 registrants by 2024. In November 2024, Sebastien showcased his paintings in a solo exhibit, "FUSION," in Ajax, Ont.

## 2003

**HEAGY (MCQUARRIE), BARBARA**  
(MA '03, DANCE)

Barbara retired in 2012, and published a memoir and co-authored another, both relating to loss and grief. Her most recent memoir/cookbook, published in December 2024, is entitled *For the Love of Food: Family Edition*, a celebration of food as a language of love through five generations of her family.



ANJALI OBEROI

## 2006

**BLACK, REBECCA**  
(MES '07, ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES, GDBE '07, BUSINESS AND THE ENVIRONMENT)

A design strategist and eco-entrepreneur, Rebecca works exclusively at the intersection of sustainability and business. She is the founder of environmental communications agency Black Current, and co-founder of both the dESiGning ESG training program for sustainability professionals and Women in Renewable Energy (WiRE). Rebecca also chairs the board of the Tapestry Renewable Energy and Community Finance incubator. In March 2024, she launched the Trellis Fund in honour of her mother, Veronica Barnes (Gardner), to support students who plan to work in the clean energy sector in Canada.

## 2009

**DAVIES, HEATHER**  
(MFA '09, THEATRE)

Heather is launching the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region's

first MFA in Theatre and Live Performance Creation at Sharjah Performing Arts Academy, UAE. The program trains theatre directors, producers and set and costume designers.

**KHANJIAN, ARBI**  
(MBA '09, BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION)

In 2012, Arbi left his career in banking to join his brother at Solitaire x Alex Armen, where he applies his business acumen to the art of jewellery. Known for its bespoke creations, the company combines traditional craftsmanship with modern design.

## 2020

**BHALLA, MARC**  
(LLM '20, ALTERNATE DISPUTE RESOLUTION)

Marc has been named vice-president, policy, programs and dispute resolution, at the Condominium Authority of Ontario. He is also a faculty member at Osgoode Hall Law School and the York University School of Continuing Studies.



## Want to be in Classes?

Send us your photos and news.  
Email us at [magnotes@yorku.ca](mailto:magnotes@yorku.ca)

## IN MEMORIAM

**SLEIGH, JAMES**  
(MA '80, PhD '04, ENGLISH)

James had a diverse career that included years in film production at TVOntario (TVO) and teaching at various Toronto high schools. His passion for writing led to the publication of several works, including his 2021 novel *A Parcel of Rogues* – a fictional comedy exploring Scotland's independence from Great Britain. Demonstrating a lifelong commitment to learning, James completed his PhD in English literature at York University post-retirement. He passed away peacefully on Nov. 21, 2024, at age 69.

**APLIN, DAVID**  
(MBA '71)

A pioneer in the Canadian recruitment and staffing industry, David established David Aplin & Associates in Edmonton in 1975, which grew to become one of the country's largest professional recruitment firms. Under his leadership, the company expanded across Canada, opening offices in major cities and rebranding as Aplin Group in 2022. He passed away on Aug. 11, 2024, at the age of 85.



Roy McMurtry (second row, fourth from left) with the 1956-57 Osgoode Hall hockey team

**ROY MCMURTRY (LLB '58, [HON] LLD '91)**, who died last March at the age of 91, was a towering figure in Canadian law, politics and sports. He served as Ontario's attorney general, chief justice of Ontario and as York University's 12th chancellor from 2008 to 2014. Throughout his life, McMurtry's passion for athletics was as evident as his commitment to law and public service. His enthusiasm for sports continued throughout his legal career and into his tenure at York. In this posthumous reminiscence, we share an excerpt from McMurtry's memoir that highlights his experiences with the Osgoode Hall hockey team during his time as a law student there in the 1950s:

"The Osgoode Hall hockey team was led by Joe Kane, a future judge, who later became our playing coach. We had some excellent junior A and senior intercollegiate players in addition to Kane – Jack Weldrake, Jerry Fitzhenry and Bob Dale. I played defence with Kane, who liked to bestow nicknames on most of our teammates. My favourite was "the Vulcan" for our goalkeeper John Goodwin. John had so many pucks shot at him

every game, Joe explained, that he was being steadily vulcanized (rubberized).

My best anecdote about my Osgoode hockey career relates not to any hard-fought victory, but to sitting in a dentist chair in Kingston on a Saturday afternoon immediately after a game with Queen's University. Late in the game, I managed to stumble headfirst into the opposing goalkeeper's skate, resulting in some badly damaged teeth ... The emergency dental treatment turned into an informal cocktail party. The Queen's hockey coach was Keith "Moon" Flanigan, a local lawyer, who later became a judge. He arranged for a dentist friend to see me in his office right after the game. Flanigan, [Osgoode coach Allan "Buck"] Leal, and our keen supporter Professor Donald Spence sat themselves around the chair, sharing a bottle of whiskey. The dentist appeared to enjoy having spectators for his skills while helping himself to an occasional sip as he worked on my teeth."

*Excerpt from Memoirs and Reflections by Roy McMurtry, published for the Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History by the University of Toronto Press in 2013.*

## Flashback

Have a great photo from your days at York?

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

**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)

The **York University** Magazine

# Subscribe!

**JUST GO TO**  
[yorku.ca/magsubscribe](http://yorku.ca/magsubscribe)

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!

**Digital.  
Anytime.  
Anywhere.**

