

The York University Magazine

Winter 2026



Check It Out

Toronto Public Library City Librarian Moe Hosseini-Ara

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The York University Magazine

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How York's scientists are flexing new muscle



THE PRESIDENT



LISA PHILIPPS
INTERIM PRESIDENT
AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

IN THE SUMMER OF LAST YEAR, I had the immense privilege of being appointed as York University's interim president and vice-chancellor. As I step into my new role, I am both humbled and excited to lead this remarkable institution at a time when we have such a vital role to play in supporting a healthy society and economy. I see every day why York is renowned for catalyzing positive change, and the power of that commitment in the current moment.

Every role I have had at York has taught me something new about our University. In 2011, I became an associate vice-president, after 20 years as a law professor. This experience gave me further insight into our distinctive character as a research institution. Through York's foundational commitments to collaboration across disciplines, community-engaged scholarship and international knowledge networks, we have built up capacities that are uniquely suited to the present moment. Universities are being called to work actively with other sectors to develop new responses to urgent challenges, and York can lead the way.

During my time as senior policy adviser to the president, a temporary role I held from October 2024 until July of last year, I led one of the projects under the York U Forward Action Plan: the Faculties of the Future initiative. To prepare the final report, I met with more than 2,000 faculty, instructors, students, staff and academic administrators, and in doing so gained a first-hand appreciation for the extraordinary wealth of creative ideas and energy within our engaged University community.

And, of course, as provost and vice-president academic – my longest administrative responsibility at York – one key takeaway stands out: in a challenging context for institutions of higher learning, we are nonetheless finding myriad ways to bolster our capacity for transformative learning, knowledge creation and positive impact.

One of the many opportunities I see for York during this period is expanding our robust research and innovation activities. A recent report by the Council of Canadian Academies demonstrates that universities not only contribute 35 per cent of Canada's gross domestic R & D expenditures (far outpacing the OECD's 16 per cent) but also provide a high level of self-funded research compared to other countries.

York was created in 1959 to open up the university sector to new populations, new ideas and new ways of doing things. This forward-looking mandate has allowed us to grow into one of Canada's most impactful post-secondary institutions, one that truly embodies our motto, *Tentanda via*, meaning "The way must be tried."

Our groundbreaking research leadership is a testament to this: from spearheading the country's first research initiative focused on inclusive technology to launching Canada's only university-based Emergency Operations Centre for research, training and operations to celebrating the opening of the first Canadian research hub for psoriatic arthritis, we continue to embody a spirit of innovation, collaboration and determination to make a better future for all. Looking forward, I see that York is well positioned to seize further opportunities to advance the bold and progressive solutions that are so greatly needed in this era. I continue to be inspired by the many York community members whose creativity and dedication make our University such a powerful nexus of ideas, discovery and action, and a place where we are all asked to think harder about how to create positive change for the communities we serve, near and far.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

EDITOR'S NOTES



So when the Toronto Public Library recently appointed a new head – York grad Moe Hosseini-Ara – and started reshaping itself, I didn't see just a piece of news. I saw a turning point for every person who ever found inspiration among its shelves. That's why the story landed on the cover. When a place so woven into your life changes in bold and hopeful ways, it deserves to be spotlighted.

The future of the library is on view at Markham Campus, where the collection now includes sewing machines, cameras, digital resources and tools for curiosity. Anything you can imagine awaits somewhere in its lending bins. That's the transformation: the library as font of invention, not just repository.

Other features – on cleaner energy, the University's Muscle Health Research Centre and alumni giving back – spring from the same ground. Each is a branch of the library's wider ecology: distinct, but united in curiosity, generosity and excellence. Reading these articles, I am transported back to that first stamped library card and the discoveries that followed. Here we gather, and here we begin again. ●

— *Deirdre Kelly*

Book Ends

WHEN I WAS SEVEN, newly arrived in Toronto and measuring my new neighbourhood, a girl my age led me by the hand to the local library. The librarian was gentle and patient, writing my name in looping cursive and stamping the card, the first possession that felt truly mine, marked like something official. That card – more a key – opened the library's expansive territory to me: a world where myths and legends, fairy tales and ancient cities shimmered within reach, all for free.

Over the years, the library became my study, my refuge, my escape. At university, I commuted nightly to the 13th floor – lucky number, lucky stillness – completing assignments among weighty books and the anonymous endurance of study. When silence grew heavy, I drifted down several floors to research tables where strangers bent over books and there was always a librarian who knew the curriculum better than anyone, ready with an answer or a harder question. At the reference desk, the Oxford English Dictionary awaited: a monument, big as a galleon stuffed with gold, and twice as precious for the strange words it yielded on the way through an essay.

Those essays examined the genius of Thomas Hardy and T.S. Eliot, the marvels of baroque architecture and the gestural tug of abstract expressionism. Post-graduation, I returned to research centuries of dance for a book about ballerinas, and to time-travel through microfilm and vintage magazines for another on the Beatles. The library was social too – talks given, talks received, coffee meetings on the ground floor: scene and ongoing edification. It was a second home to me; whatever happened there always mattered.

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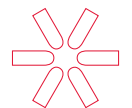
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ON THE COVER



Moe Hosseini-Ara

Photography by
Chris Robinson



View

OUTLOOK & IDEAS

Leading by Example



York's new interim president, Lisa Philipps, begins her term in classrooms and labs, listening and learning as she sets priorities for the University's next phase

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

IN HER FIRST WEEKS as York's interim president and vice-chancellor, Lisa Philipps (LLM '92) has been spending as much time in classrooms as in her office high up in Kaneff Tower on the Keele Campus. Rather than easing into the role behind closed doors, the law professor and long-time provost has been dropping into lectures, labs and seminars to see first-hand how the University's plans are playing out day to day. She wants a direct view of how growth and new programs are affecting students and faculty before setting priorities for the rest of her interim term.

This is a good moment to be looking closely.

Philipps took over on Jan. 1, following Rhonda Lenton's nearly nine-year leadership, a period when York expanded rapidly with the launch of Markham Campus and a new medical school. Those projects now anchor York's next phase of growth and will shape the University's academic profile and financial planning for years to come. As provost, Philipps helped chart that trajectory; as interim president, she is now testing how well it works in practice, course by course and hallway conversation by hallway conversation.

An alumna of Osgoode Hall Law School and a respected

scholar in tax law and public policy, Philipps has spent much of her career at York, moving from faculty member to senior administrator. As provost, she was central to academic planning and budget strategy during a volatile period for Ontario universities, balancing expansion with pressures on funding and enrolment.

Now, as interim president, she wants to deepen research intensity, widen access to transformative learning experiences and strengthen the University's partnerships with governments, employers and community organizations in the GTA and beyond.

The classroom visits are a way of grounding those goals in what is already happening on the Keele and Glendon campuses, and now at Markham, rather than treating them as abstract targets.

"I am honoured to serve this vital institution and look forward to working together with the York community to advance our mission," Philipps says.

An international search for a permanent president will begin later this year. ●

— Staff

Tom Hooper's scholarship sharpens how Canada's queer communities view their own history

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON

AT A TIME when viral hashtags and influencer followings dominate public conversation, Tom Hooper (PhD '16), professor in York University's Department of Equity Studies, insists that real influence is measured differently. For Hooper, it's found in the hard-fought history of queer activism: a legacy of resistance, dignity and rights that often goes unrecognized.

Hooper contends that the leaders behind these movements may never see online fame or big sponsorship deals, yet their efforts remain pivotal to Canada's progress on human rights.

"Their struggles and triumphs," he says, speaking from Toronto, "have shaped today's most imperative movements."

This conviction drew Hooper – who came to York for his PhD after completing his BA and MA at the University of Guelph – into the orbit of some of the University's most influential mentors. Professor Emeritus Craig Heron introduced him to historians' rigour in analyzing labour and activist movements; Professor Emerita Miriam Smith challenged him to dissect the complexities of Canadian queer politics and law.

"We never had to start from scratch," Hooper says. "There were York courses from earlier generations for us to build upon and innovate. That huge foundation is rich material for me."

For Hooper, York was "the perfect laboratory" – a place to move past easy celebration in queer history and insist that advocacy must precede applause. He used the University's resources to critically reassess events such as Pride, arguing for a legacy that values resistance as much as recognition. As Pride exploded into annual national and global celebrations from the late 1970s and especially through the 1980s, he noticed the line between political act and festival had blurred, a shift he sees as risky for how queer history is remembered and understood.

"There's a danger when corporate and political festival narratives overshadow essential advocacy," Hooper warns.

If Pride's story risks becoming sanitized, Hooper's scholarship pushes in the opposite direction, toward the tumult and resistance that shaped the queer movement. His doctoral research began with a deep dive into the 1981 Toronto bathhouse raids, when police stormed several clubs catering to gay men and arrested nearly 300 people, charging them under laws that effectively criminalized their sexuality.

The highly publicized arrests marked a critical turning point. Scenes of police violence galvanized a generation, provoking new questions about civil liberties, privacy and justice. In the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, Hooper traced the overlooked work of the Right to Privacy Committee, a legal and political group that not only fought for those arrested but also helped shape the trajectory of Canadian queer activism.

Hooper's scholarship illuminates how communities responded: challenging myths (such as the supposed full decriminalization of homosexuality in 1969) and revealing how institutions – and official records – distort public memory.

Hooper brings the same purposefulness to his classroom. "I want students to walk away realizing that their morality and ideas about identity have been shaped by a variety of forces," he says. "I want them to be critical of their world, to understand their place and their ability to change it."

His influence as both scholar and educator has garnered the attention of leading voices in Canadian queer history. Tom Warner, author of *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada*, sees him as a next-generation chronicler carrying forward the visibility and resistance Warner once pushed into the mainstream. "Hooper brings a liberation activist's lens, making queer history engaging and accessible."

Gary Kinsman, author of *The Regulation of Desire*, has repeatedly called on Hooper's expertise, most notably inviting him to write the afterword to the book's latest edition. "Tom's work on the Right to Privacy Committee and queer resistance made him an obvious choice," Kinsman says. The two have also collaborated on policy change, drawing connections between the bathhouse raids and ongoing struggles for justice.

That sense of connection runs through Hooper's current research on Toronto's Cabbagetown Group Softball League, founded in 1975, just before the AIDS crisis began to decimate its ranks. Though still an active organization, many of its original players lost their lives to HIV/AIDS. Work began on the project in July, and Hooper's list of the deceased now includes 126 names.

"This research is deeply personal," says Hooper, who joined the league in 2012 and continues to participate in games.

"It's connected me to my community in ways I never anticipated." ● — *Elio Iannacci with a report from Deirdre Kelly*



MEETING RESISTANCE

Professor Maxxine Rattner rethinks
how we look at palliative care

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET



Present with Suffering

ON SEPT. 16, 2024, Shelagh Keesmaat's father, John, surrounded himself with everything he loved: family, sunlight and Sinatra. Outside on the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre's patio, he walked a final lap with everyone, posed for family photos and smiled broadly. He was ready. After eight-plus years of cancer treatments, a tracheotomy and pain that had become unbearable, he chose a planned, peaceful goodbye through medical assistance in dying (MAID).

"We were all there," Keesmaat recalls. "There was so much peace for us as a family because everyone came together to be with him. And I think it gave him immense relief to know there was a planned end in sight."

That kind of emotional clarity and calm doesn't always accompany death. According to Maxxine Rattner, a professor at York University's School of Social Work, we often overlook an entire category of end-of-life suffering: the kind you won't find on a typical medical chart.

Rattner's research explores what palliative care professionals call "non-physical suffering" – a tangled web of fear, grief, loss of identity and emotional pain. It includes the dread of being a burden, mourning the future or feeling pressure to "die the right way."

In fact, Canadian data shows that 35 per cent of MAID requests cite psychological pain – emotional distress, anxiety, fear or existential suffering – as contributing factors. While many people may think about dying as a purely medical issue, there's so much more going on below the surface in someone close to death.

Keesmaat's father never said he felt like a burden. But his actions hinted at it. "He didn't want to interrupt our lives,"

she says. "He'd say, 'You didn't have to come all this way,' and try to send us home after 20 minutes."

Yet during his final weeks, something shifted.

"He stopped trying to protect us," she says. "He let us stay." That vulnerability, Rattner says, is often key to a peaceful death. But getting there takes psychosocial care.

The problem? It's often the first thing to be cut.

"We lack training specific to non-physical suffering," says Rattner, who works with front-line palliative care teams. "Social work and spiritual care are often understaffed and under-resourced."

Without that support, patients and families are left to navigate complicated emotional terrain alone. Rattner's research shows that even clinicians feel helpless – expected to relieve suffering they aren't always equipped to fix. They need support too.

Sometimes, though, the best care isn't about fixing anything at all.

"In palliative care, we talk about bearing witness," Rattner explains. "But sometimes, just staying present with someone's suffering is the most human, most radical thing we can do."

Keesmaat believes her father got that kind of care. On his last day, he hugged every family member, told the doctor he'd had "the best" life, played Sinatra's "Young at Heart" as his final send-off – and died with dignity.

"Dying well isn't just about managing pain," Rattner says. It's about making space for the full emotional reality of what it means to say goodbye. "My work tries to expand that view." ● — *Kira Vermond*

A York engineer uses physics to turn pollutants into cleaner materials

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET

AT THE TOP OF HER WEBSITE, Cuiying Jian, a professor of mechanical engineering at the Lassonde School of Engineering, boldly declares that “carbon is cool.”

That sentiment, for the layperson, may seem out of step with the times: after all, carbon emissions have warmed the atmosphere to dangerous levels, and the by-products of carbon-based petrochemicals pollute our environment.

But for Jian, these substances – and the molecular and atomic building blocks they’re made of – hold all sorts of potential. They can be chemically recast into materials that help, rather than harm, the planet.

Her lab at York recently received a \$149,000 Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) grant and two major innovation awards for research supporting Canada’s shift to cleaner energy. Jian’s work uses lasers and computer models to transform toxic by-products from oilsands and waste plastics into high-value materials such as graphene.

“This work is about advancing the circular economy,” she explains. “If we really go to the atomic level, all the carbon atoms are there – they just need to be arranged differently so you can create new materials. One day, we might have the precision to arrange these atoms however we want to solve problems linked to waste.”

Originally aiming for theoretical physics, Jian stumbled across mechanical engineering while browsing university catalogues in China. “Mechanical engineering was described as applied physics,” she recalls. “Since I was always doing theoretical physics, I thought, ‘OK, why not try applied physics?’”

That shift set her on a global research path – through the Harbin Institute of Technology, the University of Alberta and MIT – combining theory with real-world application. In her teaching, she carries that balance forward, encouraging students to merge physics concepts with hands-on projects that result in tangible working models.

Jian’s current research sits at the same intersection. By studying the molecular dynamics and structures of the materials she aims to transform, she can determine how to reconfigure them. With sophisticated computer modelling and high-precision lasers, her team controls where to add heat and energy.

The next step: scaling up the process for industrial use, such as in waste management facilities. The recovered graphene – strong, light and versatile – has wide applications, from racing bikes and outerwear to membranes used in water treatment plants.

“Not only are these new materials not toxic,” she says, “they’re functional materials that can be used in other applications.” ●

— John Lorinc



WASTE NOT




**AI labs, cameras, creative tools
and gathering spaces: today's libraries
lend ideas and innovation
to how we connect, create and learn**

BY ANDREW SEALE ● PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON

Jacob Turola, critical making and makerspace coordinator,
performing 3D printer maintenance
with digital support and library assistant student staff member Susan Wu

CHECK IT OUT



**Digital literacy and understanding
what's real and what's fake
– we were doing that before it was cool**

STEP BACK FROM THE HAZARD TAPE. Jacob Turola points to the streaks of black and yellow lines marking out a corner of his carefully assembled universe on the third floor at York University's Markham Campus. On the counter, futuristic-looking jet-black and lime-green tents conceal a pair of 3D resin printers. "It looks super sketchy," Turola says, flashing a grin. "It's not that bad for you, but the more you get exposed to resin, the more allergic you become ... Also, it's a volatile organic compound, so, not that good for you."

This isn't some hidden science lab or start-up office. It's a "makerspace" – a hands-on studio within the University library, where books aren't the only thing on loan. Students experiment with 3D printing, laser engraving, circuitry, sewing machines and vinyl cutting. Next door is a podcast studio and green-screen room; down the hall is a studio with a wall of high-resolution screens run by the Campus's data visualization librarian.

"It's a place where people get access," says Turola, the makerspace coordinator. "Come here, try it out or learn a new resume-based skill. That's what this is for."

Rachael Denov, a second-year entrepreneurship student, remembers the moment she first saw the makerspace: a 3D-printed whale shark caught her eye. It was enough to get her into the space, and from there, she was hooked. She's since learned to use the laser cutter and is building an electric guitar from scratch. "I never viewed myself as someone who would be doing any building or tinkering. I'm in business, and the stereotype is that we're not doing any of this stuff," Denov says.

For her, the space isn't just a workshop; it's an open invitation to break stereotypes with tools and technology otherwise

out of reach. "For a long time, our society has celebrated intellectual elitism," Denov says. "Places like the library, and especially the makerspace, are trying to tear that idea apart."

But keeping open access – the kind that changed Denov's path – has become a fight for libraries. Every year, tighter budgets and political headwinds threaten what community spaces can offer. Across Ontario, libraries juggle rising costs for technology and staffing, all while defending public ground in an age of noisy misinformation.

YORK'S MARKHAM MAKERSPACE hints at the future libraries are working toward – a space for collective learning and experimentation. But this model faces daunting challenges. To understand what's at stake, look to Toronto Public Library (TPL), the country's largest and busiest system. Its new head, Moe Hosseini-Ara (BA '94), has stepped in just as the ground is shifting.

Hosseini-Ara is only a few months into the job, still absorbing the rhythms of a system that spans 100 branches, thousands of staff and millions of interactions a year. But he's not new to libraries. Before entering York's anthropology program, he started as a teenage page, shelving books long before "digital transformation" became a civic buzzword. He's watched libraries withstand predictions of technological doom – from the CD-ROM to the rise of the internet.

"When the internet was first out, I was working as a librarian, and everyone said it was going to kill the library," he recalls. It didn't – it became something libraries had to teach people about. "Digital literacy and understanding what's real and what's fake – we were doing that before it was cool. Now, it's what's eroding society."

That erosion isn't theoretical – it turns up in Toronto's libraries every day as they handle everything from



Students film an interview in the Markham Campus Library Multipurpose Studio

rising inequality to mental health crises spilling through their doors.

Hosseini-Ara calls the library a “canary” – not because it’s fragile, but because it’s exposed. Libraries remain one of the last places anyone can enter freely, no fee or appointment required, no need to prove they deserve to be there.

“We’re open and welcoming to all,” he says, “and that’s also the most challenging thing about libraries.”

The Canadian Urban Institute’s “OVERDUE” report, released in 2023, put it bluntly: public libraries, once neutral civic spaces, now serve as “de facto triage centres,” stepping in when other supports falter. Toronto’s answer has been direct. In partnership with Gerstein Crisis Centre, TPL launched crisis support services across 12 branches. They’ve fielded more than 12,000 interactions in 18 months – crisis workers offering immediate help to thousands and connecting even more to wellness checks, housing and income support.

“We’re not going to kick them out. We’re going to try to serve them where they are and connect them with support,”

Hosseini-Ara says. For him, this is what library work means: responding to needs as they show up and repairing the city, day by day.

That same imperative extends to digital inequity. Toronto’s branches have become coworking spaces, youth hubs and digital labs where people learn everything from robotics to artificial intelligence. “It is moving so quickly,” he says. “The role of the library is to make sure people understand how AI impacts their lives.”

This isn’t about turning libraries into miniature tech hubs. The goal is simple: ensure no one is left behind. Both at Markham Campus and across TPL, the mission is practical: close gaps in access and confidence. At Toronto Public Library, that means building AI learning cohorts with Google and running Digital Inclusion Week workshops. For Ab Velasco, TPL’s manager of innovation, it’s about creating a space for “the community to have welcoming and equitable access to information in all its forms.”

From April to September, TPL’s AI learning circles gathered more than 600 learners in 37 cohorts, logging 2,000 session visits. Participants included IT professionals, artists, teachers at every level and job seekers from every corner. “We even had elementary, high school and university-level teachers (who) participated in the learning circle,” Velasco says, adding that “everyone’s looking to build skills for what comes next.”

But beneath the success story is a real pressure: libraries are filling gaps left by shrinking public systems – even as per capita funding stands still. The hopeful scene of strangers gathered around a table is real, but it’s also the front line for digital and social divides.

A 2024 report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives underscored how precarious TPL’s footing has become. In 2023, Toronto’s library ran on a \$234.6-million budget – 91 per cent from the city, only 2.4 per cent from the province. Provincial support has dwindled; that leaves the system to stretch per capita funding, delay repairs and

Michelle Arbuckle, executive director of the Ontario Library Association



That is a huge risk right now to the library community – people not understanding the precarity of libraries

A man with glasses, wearing a dark suit, is sitting on a wooden bench in a library. He is leaning against a wooden bookshelf filled with books. The ceiling has recessed lighting. In the background, there is a large circular artwork on the wall.

**Books are still a big part of what we do.
You just don't see them**

Joseph Hafner, York University dean of libraries, Scott Library

stall new service rollouts. Nearly \$200 million in urgent infrastructure work looms over dozens of branches, even as daily demand climbs.

Michelle Arbuckle, executive director of the Ontario Library Association, sees the same struggle province-wide. “One of the biggest challenges that I face in talking with government and other stakeholders and decision-makers is getting people to understand just how fragile libraries are,” she says. “That is a huge risk right now to the library community – people not understanding the precarity of libraries.”

That sense of fragility accompanied Arbuckle to the International Federation of Library Associations summit for urban leaders, which took place in Toronto in October. The summit’s agenda focused on how libraries respond to social isolation, foster community resilience,



Alan Peng, supervisor, digital development, Markham Campus Library Editing and Music Studio



Students at work in the Markham Campus Library Podcast Studio



Sean Sweeney, creative media and digital technologies coordinator in the Markham Campus Library Visualization Studio and Gaming Lab

and promote civic engagement and democratic participation. Conversations drew out a larger truth: the stakes for libraries extend far beyond books or buildings, touching on whether communities remain connected and equipped for public life. “That is also recognizing the things that are currently at threat in our world around democracy, and how the work libraries are doing is really helping to combat that and bring people together,” she says.

Hosseini-Ara was at the summit as well. Eight years prior, he had warned colleagues about book bans and threats to intellectual freedom, concerns that others at the time felt were remote. “Now, they’re seeing these issues,” he says. “It’s spread around the globe.”

Trust vanishes quietly – until the loss is unmistakable. Hosseini-Ara draws attention to the recent surge of laws and campaigns in the U.S. aimed at removing books from shelves

and pressuring libraries, calling them a warning. Efforts to censor, he explains, are aimed at libraries precisely because they are relied on by the public to provide real, unrestricted information: “That is a sign that libraries are trusted,” he says. “The people who are attacking libraries recognize that that’s a bad thing for their cause, which is around misinformation, disinformation and preventing access to information.”

So this is the future for libraries: caught between precarity and underfunding, facing a tide of legislative pressures, censorship and rapid technological change. Yet the outlook isn’t all bleak. Libraries remain a vital refuge offering safe spaces, new digital skills and real access to knowledge and community support at a time when those qualities are needed more than ever.

The future for libraries also means adapting to rapid technological change. That transformation is visible at York’s

Markham Campus, where almost-empty shelves reflect a shift away from print to digital collections. “Books are still a big part of what we do,” says Joseph Hafner, York’s dean of libraries. “You just don’t see them.” About 90 per cent of acquisitions are now e-books. “We’re actually able to buy more books per year,” Hafner continues. “But the way that we buy books has changed completely in the last decade or two.”

Shifting to a digital-first model, the University buys in bulk through the Canadian Research Knowledge Network, then shares holdings across campus. “The days of needing to fill shelves with row after row of journals are not there,” Hafner says.

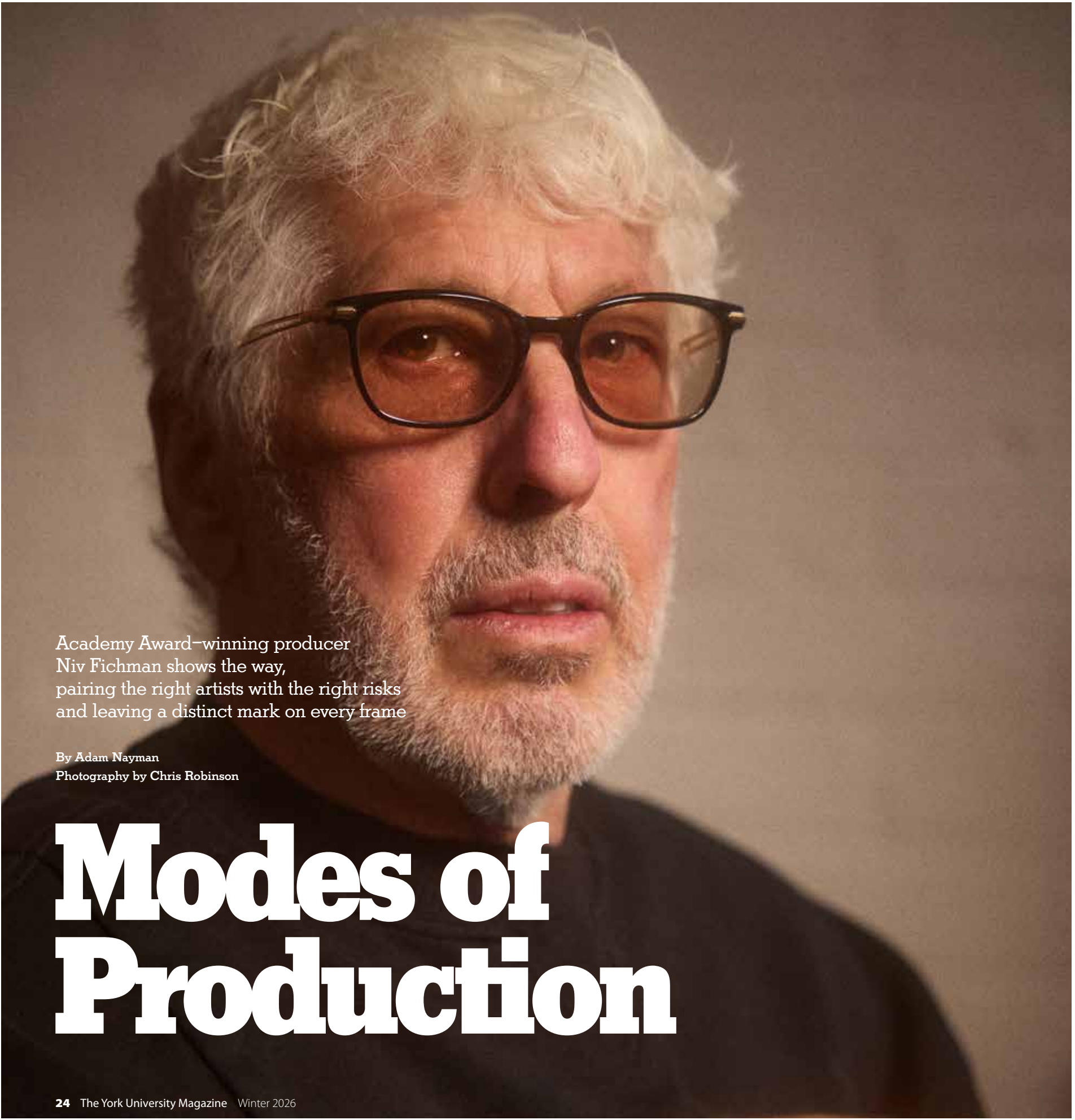
The other part of the story is that the Markham Campus itself is only two years old. “We haven’t rushed at Markham to buy a bunch of books,” Hafner explains. “We’re trying to

figure out what courses are being taught there and how the students interact with the things they need.”

Evolution is mostly invisible, but all you have to do is look at a resource like the library makerspace to see how different a library can look, how much it can evolve. That’s key to the future of libraries: adaptation, an institution that shape-shifts in real time. You can see it playing out in the halls of the Markham Campus Library just as much as in TPL’s adoption of AI literacy programs and crisis prevention.

As Hosseini-Ara observes, a library is both a real place and a story we tell ourselves about what it can be.

“We have evolved and morphed over time,” he says. “We exist to better the lives of the residents and the community ... and we’re going to do what we need to do within the mandate of libraries to ensure we stay relevant.” ●



Academy Award-winning producer
Niv Fichman shows the way,
pairing the right artists with the right risks
and leaving a distinct mark on every frame

By Adam Nayman
Photography by Chris Robinson

Modes of Production

IN 2016, FILMMAKER MATT JOHNSON (BFA '06, MFA '16) – known for such genre-bending films as *The Dirties* and *Operation Avalanche* – gave the *Globe and Mail* a blunt assessment of Canadian cinema: “A lot of people just have to die of old age for the system to change.”

One of the implied targets was Niv Fichman (LLD Hons.), the Oscar- and Emmy-winning producer whose fingerprints are on four decades of Canadian film, from David Cronenberg and Patricia Rozema to Guy Maddin and Denis Villeneuve. But Fichman, a Canadian film industry veteran, didn't take offence. In Johnson, he saw a kindred spirit and issued an invitation.

“I said, ‘I want Matt Johnson in front of me in my kitchen,’” Fichman says, seated in the open-plan offices of his production company, Rhombus Media, in downtown Toronto. “I told him I'd had the same feelings about older filmmakers when I was his age. I wanted them dead too – I just wasn't bold enough to say it in a national newspaper.”

Fichman wasn't just sizing up a challenger. He had a project in mind. He asked Johnson and his producer, fellow York grad Matthew Miller (BA '09, MFA '13), if they'd consider adapting *Losing the Signal*, the non-fiction account of the rise and fall of Research In Motion, the Canadian company behind BlackBerry.

Matching filmmakers to material – and reconciling creative risk with commercial reality – has long been Fichman's métier.

The resulting film, *BlackBerry*, a distinctly Canadian story released in 2023, set a record in 2024 by winning 14 Canadian Screen Awards and crossing the million-dollar mark at the national box office – proof of Fichman's instincts. The film is fast, funny and slyly self-aware, a story about disruptors swallowed by the system, made by a team bridging old guard and new.

“Working with Niv on *BlackBerry* was like a master class in producing,” says Miller, who won the Canadian Screen Award for Best Motion Picture alongside Fichman and Johnson. Miller also collaborated with Fichman on Telefilm Canada's Talent to Watch, a program supporting emerging directors. “Niv is a great producer because he's a great host,” Miller adds. “He brings people together to create something bigger than the sum of its parts.”

Fichman's own story begins in Tel Aviv, where he was born in 1958. He immigrated to Canada with his family at age eight, and today Toronto is home. When Fichman was a boy, his father, an engineer, brought home a movie camera. He noticed it made his father happy. “I associated that camera with joy,” he says.

In high school, he began making short films with that camera, building a portfolio that earned him a spot in York's fledgling Film Department. But after learning he wouldn't be able to shoot anything on 16 mm film until third year, he switched his acceptance to Ryerson (today

They all hated me. I'd just shown up, skipping two years

Toronto Metropolitan University). Later that fall, the phone rang at his mother's house.

"I got a call from somebody at York asking me, 'Where are you? You're not coming to class.' I said, 'I'm sorry, I decided to go to Ryerson.' They said, 'That's really terrible, because we were impressed with your portfolio and decided to put you straight into third year.' I said, 'You did? OK, I'll come.' I quit Ryerson and headed to York."

He arrived at the University in late October of 1977, younger than his classmates, who had already bonded. "They all hated me," he says. "I'd just shown up, skipping two years." He kept to himself, commuting across the city and sleeping under the mixing console to maximize time on campus. Gradually, he won over classmates and faculty, including the famously gruff Lithuanian-born filmmaker and York film Professor Vincent Vaitiekunas. "The only person he seemed to like was me, because I was a kid. Most film students then were on their second degrees."

York was a launching pad. Fichman skipped classes to attend the first Toronto International Film Festivals, and took a music performance course – "I played tuba. It was the only thing I wanted to do besides film." Music was the link to Barbara Willis Sweete (DLitt '98), a classmate who had already completed a degree in classical music before coming to York. Together, they made a short documentary about Fichman's brother, Yuval, a pianist. That summer, in 1978, Fichman took the film to Europe, prints in his backpack, trying to sell it. "You could only take a film somewhere on 16 mm," he says. "I think I checked the cans at the airport."

By their second film, *Music for Wilderness Lake*, they were already operating more like professionals than students – spending so much time on real-world projects that they were often away from campus. Some classmates resented this, feeling they weren't following the usual academic path.

"We convinced York to let us show a movie we'd made about Barbara's grandfather as our thesis," Fichman recalls. It was an unusual arrangement, but even with that exception, both he and Sweete were still short on required credits and ultimately didn't graduate.

Still, the momentum was undeniable. Their films were starting

to attract attention beyond York. In 1978, they founded Rhombus Media at York, and Larry Weinstein (BFA '80) joined soon after. From the outset, the company built a reputation for artful, ambitious films about music, theatre and dance. By the mid-1980s, Rhombus was attracting international attention with works such as *All That Bach* and, in the realm of dance, *Blue Snake*. Their collaborations with leading choreographers and companies – such as the National Ballet of Canada and Montreal's Carbone 14 – resulted in films such as *The Firebird* and the Emmy-winning *Le Dortoir*, which helped define the company's fluid visual style and global reputation.

As Rhombus expanded into feature filmmaking, *The Top of His Head* marked an early foray. But it was *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* that proved a watershed. When the film premiered at TIFF in 1993, the screening drew a packed house and an electric response, critics and cinephiles buzzing about its inventive structure and Colm Feore's lead performance as the Canadian virtuoso pianist. The film went on to win four Genie Awards, including Best Motion Picture, and its acclaim helped cement Rhombus as a leading force in Canadian filmmaking.

In 2016, Sweete and Weinstein left Rhombus amicably. Since then, Fichman has continued to expand the company's reach, collaborating with international auteurs such as Olivier Assayas and Park Chan-wook. Yet he remains committed to broadening the horizons of Canadian cinema. "One problem with Canadian cinema is it always wants to judge itself in a vacuum," he says. "I could talk about how horrible things are – as they always are, all these cycles and cycles of horribleness – or I could just suck it up."

At 67, he continues to champion new projects. Most recently, he executive produced *Mile End Kicks*, Chandler Levack's latest feature, about a 24-year-old music critic immersed in Montreal's indie rock scene. But these days, Fichman doesn't spend all his time behind a console. "There's so much to do in life. Sometimes I just want to zone out. I'm really interested in food and cooking." The question is, which filmmaker will he summon to his kitchen next? ●

— *With files from Deirdre Kelly*

One problem with Canadian cinema is it always wants to judge itself in a vacuum

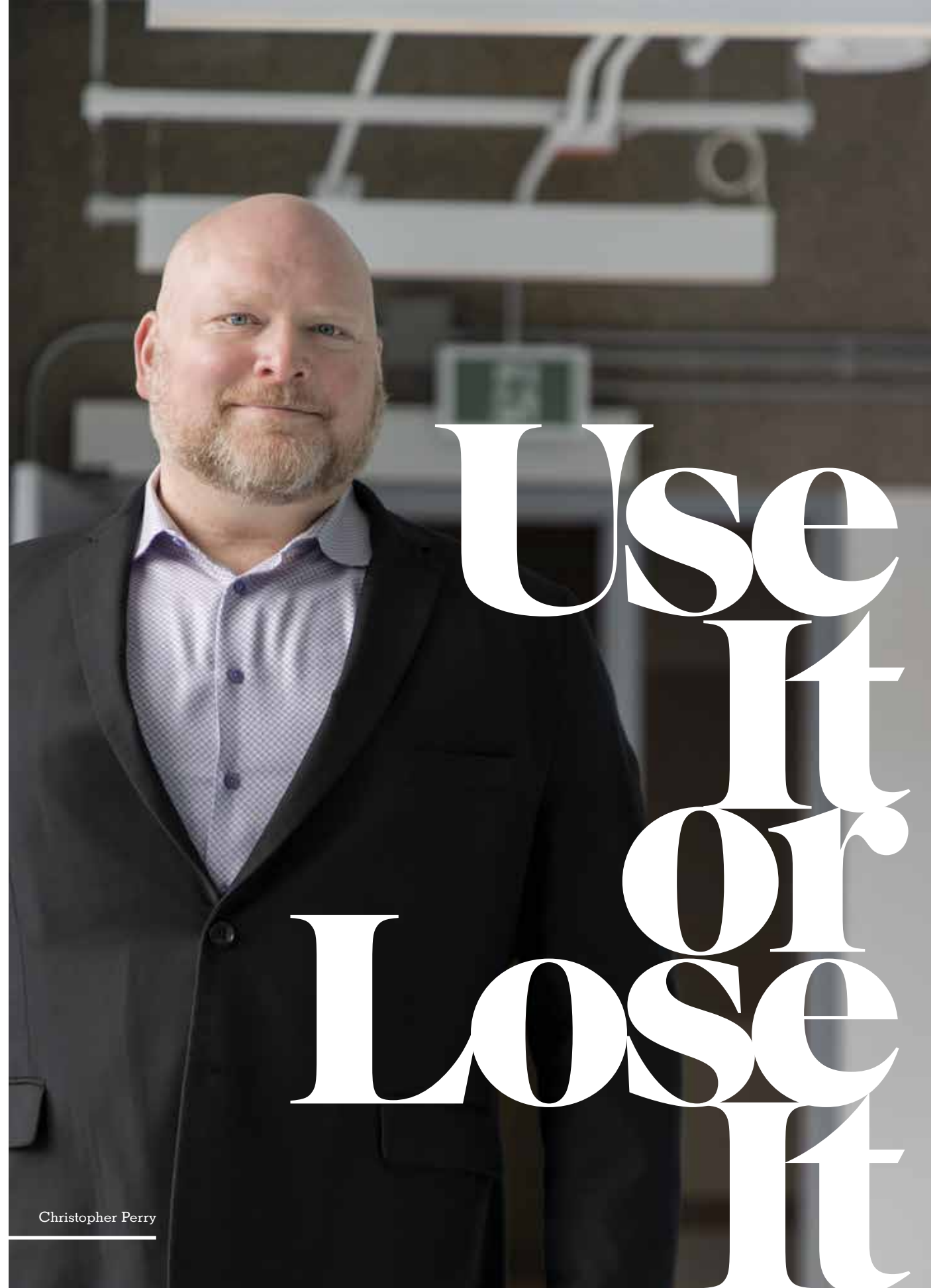




How York's scientists
are flexing new muscle
to engineer a stronger,
healthier future for everyone

BY SCOTT FOTHERINGHAM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET

Andrea Josse



Use It or Lose It

Christopher Perry

We test the impact of exercise and whole foods, like dairy and other high-protein sources, that people can easily include in their lives

AT A TIME when most Canadian teens would rather scroll than skate, the odds aren't in their favour for building strong bones and muscles as they age. The latest national figures are stark: just one in five teens gets enough daily physical activity, a drop that experts say could have lifelong consequences for muscle health and overall well-being. It's a challenge researchers at York University's Muscle Health Research Centre (MHRC) are tackling head-on, exploring how nutrition and exercise can help turn the numbers around and build resilience, from adolescence right through to older age.

"Bone health is foundational to overall well-being, yet it's often overlooked until later in life when problems like osteoporosis arise," says Andrea Josse, a professor in York's School of Kinesiology & Health Science, who has spent her career studying how diet and movement shape our skeletons.

"I study bone health to understand how nutrition and exercise work together to promote lifelong skeletal strength."

Josse is one of more than 30 faculty members whose work has earned the MHRC a global reputation. According to the ScholarGPS Institutional Rankings, the Centre now ranks fifth worldwide for skeletal muscle research.

MHRC director Christopher Perry calls it proof of a culture of collaboration.

"This global recognition reflects our commitment to publish work that truly makes a difference in people's lives," he says. Perry himself has published nearly 200 papers and more than 260 abstracts, numbers that underscore the MHRC's standing as a powerhouse of muscle science.

For Josse, the story starts with small choices: what children eat, how they move and how those habits persist into adulthood can profoundly affect skeletal health and reduce bone loss with age.

"Muscle and bone are interconnected systems," she explains.

"Targeted nutrition and exercise can synergistically improve both, leading to stronger, healthier bodies over time."

Her current research examines how protein intake supports both muscle repair and bone mineralization. The timing and quality of that protein, especially when paired with exercise, can boost bone metabolism, muscle function and overall body composition. "Stronger muscles place beneficial mechanical loads on bones," she says. "Exercise is essential to this paradigm and benefits the entire musculoskeletal system."

Collaboration drives everything at the MHRC. "Many of our members routinely collaborate within similar clusters of research themes," Perry says. Others, he adds, cross boundaries, pairing clinical and preclinical researchers to identify cellular mechanisms of disease.

Those themes range from uncovering how muscles derive energy from sugars, fats and proteins to studying the biological role of nutrients in muscle mass and strength.

The implications reach far beyond the gym. MHRC teams are uncovering pathways relevant to diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer-associated muscle loss. "There are limited therapies available to maintain muscle health as we age," Perry says. "We're identifying the mechanisms that determine muscle fitness, as well as those driving weakness and metabolic dysfunction."

Among the researchers tackling these challenges: Professor Jennifer Kuk, an epidemiologist, investigates how diet and exercise influence Canadians' risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes; Professor Devin Phillips, a specialist in cardiorespiratory physiology, studies how exercise stimulates the heart and lungs, and how to improve airflow for those with chronic lung disease; and Professor Michael Riddell, who focuses on exercise metabolism, explores how physical activity affects blood glucose in people with type 1 diabetes.

Josse calls the Centre's approach "research from cells to society." The complexity of the questions that MHRC sci-



Josse puts a sample of a participant's blood into a centrifuge to collect the serum/plasma for analysis

entists are investigating demands expertise across molecular biology, cellular physiology and community health.

"When we combine different skill sets and viewpoints," she says, "we generate ideas and solutions that wouldn't come from a single field alone."

That synergy transforms lab discoveries into practical tools. By studying how physical activity and nutrition work together, MHRC scientists are developing realistic ways to support musculoskeletal health and lower chronic disease risk. "Nutrition and exercise are practical, evidence-based ways to prevent bone loss," Josse says. "We test the impact of exercise and whole foods, like dairy and other high-protein sources, that people can easily include in their lives."

MHRC investigators share their findings widely, from journals to clinical partnerships. "We're paving the way for new therapies that not only maintain muscle health but also reduce frailty and complications across many diseases," Perry says. His and David Hood's research shows how exercise improves muscle's ability to extract energy from carbohydrates and fats, keeping metabolism healthy even as we age.

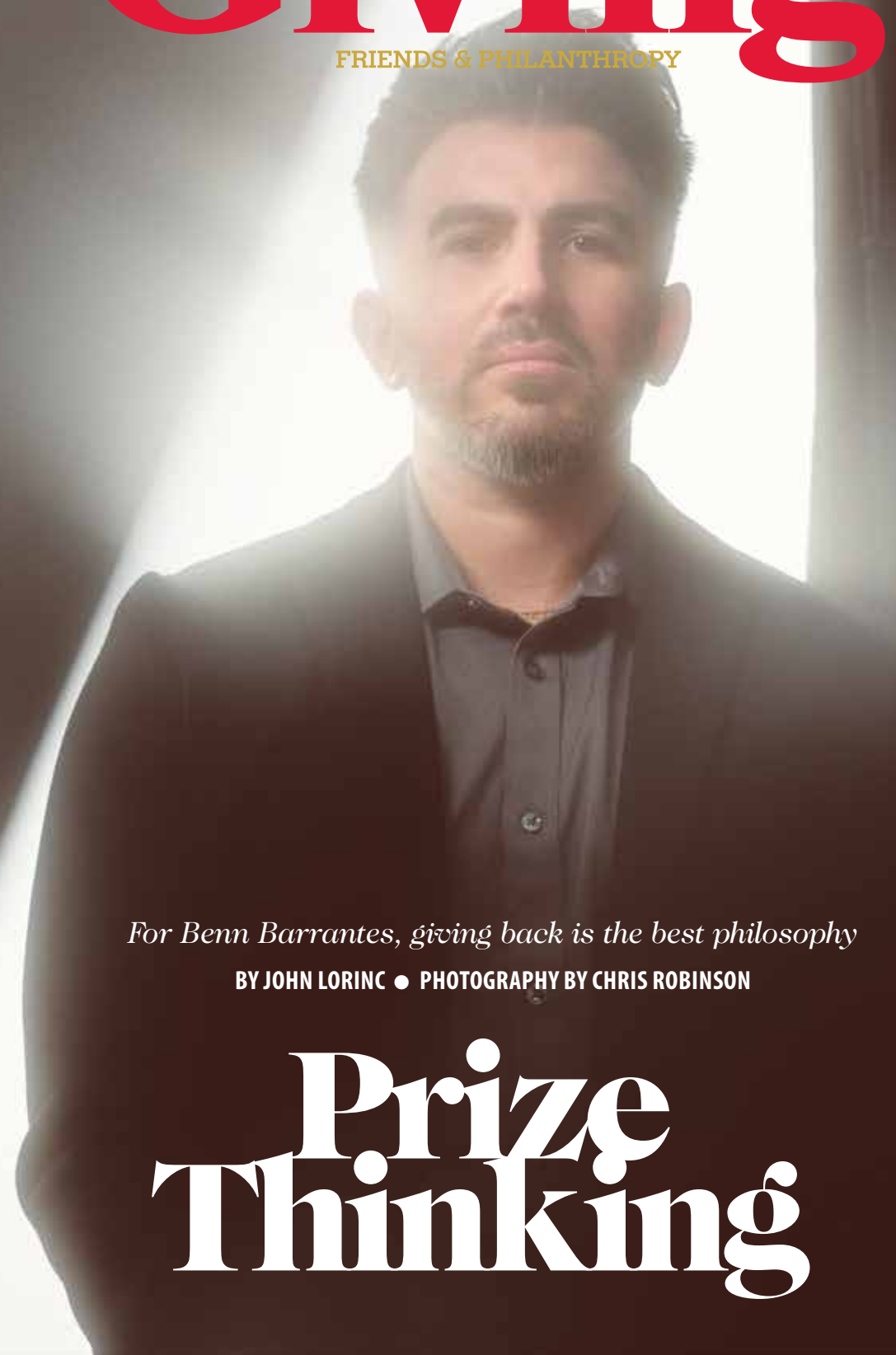
Perry succeeded Hood as MHRC director, but the founding professor's influence endures. A mentor to a generation of muscle researchers, Hood continues to explore how exercise trains muscles at the cellular level and improves performance. His pioneering work was recently recognized with the Sarrazin Award, the Canadian Physiological Society's highest honour.

The MHRC's reach extends beyond laboratories into local communities. Professor Angelo Belcastro runs the KIN KIDS program, a guided active play initiative that proves co-operation and movement can boost fitness and reduce future disease risk in children. Riddell's work on type 1 diabetes has also led to innovations in continuous glucose monitoring and automated insulin delivery, ensuring safer exercise for those managing the condition.

From playgrounds to hospitals, the MHRC is reshaping how Canadians understand movement and aging. By studying how nutrition and exercise intersect, these scientists are writing the blueprint for a stronger, healthier future. Their discoveries may determine not just how long we live but how well we move through the years. ●

Giving

FRIENDS & PHILANTHROPY



For Benn Barrantes, giving back is the best philosophy

BY JOHN LORINC • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON

Prize Thinking



IT WAS A CLASSIC entrepreneurial inflection point. In 2019, after spending 15 years working as a front-line counsellor in long-term care facilities, group homes and hospitals, Benn Barrantes (BA '13) reckoned he could set up his own business and leverage what he'd learned about the inefficient ways of the established social service organizations.

While many entrepreneurs get their start by figuring out how to build a better mousetrap, Barrantes arrived at his aha moment differently: after graduating with a social services diploma from Sheridan

Last year, he endowed a \$100,000 scholarship fund that will award six prizes per year – three to undergraduates, three to graduates – for five years

College, he'd completed a degree from York in philosophy, linguistics and psychology. That learning experience left him with a very specific habit of mind: he always approached problems philosophically, breaking them down, assessing the mindsets of those he was working with and always looking for ways to simplify complex systems.

But he'd barely gotten started when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Barrantes had all but drained his bank account and found himself wondering how he'd break into a market where the clients were in full panic mode.

"I had \$130 in my bank account, and I'm like, 'What do I do? Did I make a mistake? It is the worst time to be doing this?' In retrospect," he reflects, "it perhaps was the best time to do it, because all my competitors were pulling back."

He went paperless as soon as he could, recruited an administrator, and eventually hired a programmer to create an app that would allow his growing roster of employees to electronically share patient notes, schedules and so on.

Today, Barrantes & Associates is a well-established player in the Greater Toronto Area's social services sector, with 10 employees and two business divisions – one that offers placement supports for clients with developmental disabilities and another that provides counselling for clients with behavioural issues.

Barrantes, 37, comes by his profession honestly: he grew up in impoverished conditions, and he has family members with substance use issues. His Sheridan diploma pointed him in the direction of social services, but he credits his philosophy education with providing the problem-solving and critical thinking skills he needed to get a business off the ground.

Some of the philosophers on the syllabus left a lasting impression – for instance, Bertrand Russell, whose prose, Barrantes says, had a striking clarity.

"Anyone, even a non-philosophically trained person, can

pick up his books, and he will guide you seamlessly through a process of understanding the [data] table in front of you." In designing that app, in fact, Barrantes specifically directed the programmer to strive for this kind of simplicity.

He also cites David Hume, the notoriously dense Scottish philosopher. "When I was reading his books on epistemology, he goes for pages without nearly putting in a period," Barrantes chuckles. "I was just in awe of how somebody could write that way."

Learning to make sense of Hume's gnarly prose gave Barrantes the skills he needed to manage the legal documents that define the firm's relationships with government agencies and other clients. "I just liked it," he says of Hume's writing. "I didn't know how it was going to be transferable later on."

Five years after establishing the firm, Barrantes decided to formally acknowledge the role that philosophy education has played in his own career. Last year, he endowed a \$100,000 scholarship fund that will award six prizes per year – three to undergraduates, three to graduates – for five years.

The applicants, who need not be philosophy students, have to submit a philosophical essay, and a jury selects the winners. Barrantes isn't on the jury and has no say in choosing the finalists, but he enjoys reading the submissions and meeting the participants at a ceremony where the winners are announced. He recalls one essay this year by a student in a technical program who took a conventionally accepted idea and, in a Socratic way, systematically challenged all the underlying assumptions. "I love that idea of breaking down whatever is a standard practice," Barrantes says. "That one stood out to me a lot."

These days, besides running the company and keeping tabs on the scholarship, Barrantes is working on his master's in philosophy, and eventually plans to do a PhD. "Philosophy is so important to me," he says emphatically. "I talk to everybody about it. I love it so much." ●

Alumni

Home Run

A new memoir covers all the bases

BY DEIRDRE KELLY



PATRICIA DAWN ROBERTSON (BA '90) didn't ask for a front-row seat to Canadian sports history, but she's got the punchlines to prove she was there. Her recently published memoir, *Media Brat: A Gen-X Memoir*, turns the press box into a stage for sharp observational comedy, equal parts affection and absurdism, where newspaper deadlines and locker room legends invade family life.

Growing up in Toronto as the daughter of John Robertson – long-time Blue Jays and baseball columnist for the *Toronto Sun* and *Toronto Star* – Robertson spins coming-of-age stories thick with inside jokes. Sunshine Girls made more in a weekend than she did typing address labels. Her mother doubled as an on-call guidance counsellor, and spring training in Dunedin meant enduring both rookie pitchers and the politics of who got the best condo bedroom.

When she joined a newspaper herself, she found she was continually swinging at barbs.

"Can you write like your father?" her bosses repeatedly asked her.

Robertson couldn't. Then again, she didn't want to.

She wanted to forge her voice in print and so attended York University, where she hit her stride, majoring in English and women's studies. York is where she sharpened the lively edge that runs through her book. "My time at York was immersive and generative," she says, adding that the University is in one of her chapters. "I learned critical thinking skills, which I still prize."

Today, living in Saskatchewan as a writer and editor, Robertson uses her satirical lens to target everything from newsroom fashion headlines to the cliques of sports wives, never missing the moment to determine who is really calling the shots. It's smart, irreverent writing with the quirks and detours left in, from bad coat-check tips to being roasted by Dominican League all-stars for having the wrong last name.

The final score? *Media Brat* doesn't pitch for heroics. It's a love letter to the sidelines, a no man's land reserved for awkward daughters, press passes, inside-baseball family drama and the art of observing the action from just outside the infield. ●

Classes

1967

DIXON, MARGOT
(BA HISTORY)

Margot worked as an interpreter at a living history museum at Upper Canada Village in Morrisburg, Ont., from 1986 to 2014. In 2020, through a family scrapbook, she discovered old business documents and personal letters of a great-granduncle who was a sea captain from 1872 to 1892. At the age of 80, Margot decided to publish her first book, about her great-granduncle and her quest to discover his story, entitled *Captain Scott's Scrapbook: Mutinies, Mining and Mysteries*.



CHRIS BRITTON

1975

BRITTON, CHRIS
(BA THEATRE)

After graduating from York, where he was an associate fellow at Stong College, Chris launched a career as a professional actor in theatre, film, television and animation. He recently acted in two plays at the Belfry Theatre in Victoria, and he is the voice of Mr. Sinister in *X-Men: The Animated Series* and *X-Men '97*. He has written three film scripts, two of which won the Praxis Fellowship Award. He is hoping to develop a series based on a true Canadian crime and courtroom drama.

1989

SHARPE, GLEN
(BA PSYCHOLOGY)

Glen was recently selected as a recipient of the 2025 Arbor Award by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, in recognition of his exceptional volunteerism to the alumni and friends community at OISE.

1998

SLIWINSKI, SHARON
(BA ENGLISH, MA/PHD SOCIAL & POLITICAL THOUGHT '01/'05)

Sharon recently published a book, *An Alphabet for Dreamers: How to See the World with Eyes Closed*, about how dreams can help us both understand and radically change our world. She also recently launched a new project entitled "Dreamers of the 21st Century," which depicts a range of contemporary dreamers and explores the ways their dream life is connected to broader social and political realities.

2011

FERREIRA, MARIA
(BA POLITICAL SCIENCE)

In 2015, Maria completed an internship with Global Affairs Canada in La Paz, Bolivia, where she helped connect youth with opportunities to create work that they could sustain long-term. From 2021 to 2023, she worked at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR)



RENEE RAYMOND

before landing her current role as a development officer at the University of Toronto, where she continues to make a strong social impact.

2015

RAYMOND, RENEE
(BA KINESIOLOGY & HEALTH SCIENCE)

Renee went on to pursue a doctorate in psychology and postgraduate studies in sport psychology and mental performance. She now operates her therapy clinic, ReNu Counselling & Psychotherapy, in Toronto, and her mental performance consulting extension, ReNu Amplify. She currently also works as the team mental health and performance lead with York United FC, and as a contractor with the Canadian Olympic Committee's Game Plan, where she works with national team athletes as a psychologist.

AMRO SHUBAIR



SHUBAIR, AMRO
(BA POLITICAL SCIENCE)

Since his time at York, Amro has worked across several embassies and the United Nations. His work has covered political, consular and communications affairs, protocol and reporting on sustainable development goals. He has managed ambassadors' offices, handled diplomatic coordination and contributed to policy and research that connect international cooperation with

everyday diplomacy. He has also written articles that have been published by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy blog, *reUconnecting* digital magazine and *International Policy Digest*.

2023

HARRIS-TAYLOR, KIMORA
(BA CRIMINOLOGY)

Kimora is a paralegal and advocate working in the field of gender-based

KIMORA HARRIS-TAYLOR



violence as a legal coordinator with a focus on family and intimate partner violence. She also works as a youth leader, mentor and founder of Youth Unlocked, a non-profit organization that supports marginalized and justice-involved youth through mentorship, education and advocacy. In 2024, she authored an article entitled "Police Brutality and Its Unseen Victims," which explores the emotional and social impacts of state violence.

ALAM, SANZANA TASHFIA
(BA FINANCIAL & BUSINESS ECONOMICS)

Sanzana secured a full-time position at Definity Financial Corporation, joining their Claims New Graduate Rotational Program, where she is learning how the insurance business operates and how it correlates with major economic changes. She has also recently obtained her Life Licence Qualification Program (LLQP) licence.

2025

MOLINA, SHERLY
(BA POLITICAL SCIENCE)

While she was a student at York, Sherly volunteered in student clubs and was a campus ambassador for prospective students. She co-founded the Latin American Law Association at York – a student club created to uplift marginalized communities, amplify voices and advocate for more representation in spaces like law and higher education.

IN MEMORIAM

NANDAN, RIAZ
(BSc '21, KINESIOLOGY & HEALTH SCIENCE)

Riaz Nandan passed away at the age of 27 after his courageous battle with cancer. He served many leadership roles on campus, most notably as the 2021–2022 president of the York Federation of Students. Among his accomplishments, he was responsible for ensuring student club leaders were trained in active bystander knowledge to help address incidents of sexual violence.



Want to be in Classes?

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Have a great photo from your days at York?

Email us at magnotes@yorku.ca

Flashback

WINTER, 1966: Vanier Residence opens its doors for the first time. A solitary brick landmark on York's Keele Campus, marooned in a prairie of snow. No neighbours, no shortcuts. Just wind, footprints and the occasional snowdrift pressed against the doors. Inside, the first residents hang up parkas and puzzle over a college named for a governor general

most have only seen on postage stamps. The motto is "To belong and contribute," but for now, it's about finding warmth on the edge of nowhere. Sixty winters later, Vanier marks its anniversary at the heart of a sprawling campus, but in that first winter, it was simply this: a lone outpost, waiting for York to build around it. ●



York University leads \$318.4M first-of-its-kind inclusive next-gen technology research initiative

Is an equitable world that includes humans and machines possible? York University researchers believe it must be and have set out to make it so through a first-of-its-kind interdisciplinary research initiative called Connected Minds.

In partnership with Queen's University and 50+ partners ranging from hospitals, policy-makers, artists and Indigenous communities, researchers will work to discover how to balance both the potential risks and benefits for humanity, ensuring nobody gets left behind.

Join us in creating positive change.
yorku.ca/research/connected-minds



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