We're reducing our carbon footprint by 80,000 Degrees!

We're phasing out printed copies of the magazine to help save the planet. But fear not! Degrees is always just a click away. Scan the QR Code or go to degreesmagazine.ca to submit your email address. We'll be sure to let you know when new Degrees stories are available online. One lucky person who submits their email will win an iPad.
Lightning strikes light up the sky over the University of Regina during a July 2021 summer storm. The photo was taken by Greg Johnson, one of North America’s top storm chasers and severe weather experts. Johnson is an accomplished photographer, speaker and workshop leader. Visit his website at: www.tornadohunter.com.
“Join us online”
You see those words on the front cover of this issue of Degrees magazine but what do they mean?

After 15 years, we have decided to move away from the printed version of Degrees magazine. We will now tell the remarkable stories of our University of Regina alumni community via the website and social media. After all, it’s where the cool kids are hanging out these days!

This decision has long been coming. We first talked about the possibility of moving exclusively online or transitioning to some form of hybrid delivery in 2017. The University’s commitment to sustainability is certainly a key factor in our decision. By concentrating on our online presence, we will be able to bring you all the informative and engaging stories you’ve come to expect from Degrees and we’ll be able to bring them to you more often, with value-added visual content such as video or photo galleries.

We are excited by the prospect of bringing you enriched content. While we may no longer be printing the magazine we will continue to bring you stories and shine a brief spotlight on people in our U of R community who, in their own ways, are making the world a better place every day.

The website, www.degreesmagazine.ca, is now the place to go for the extraordinary stories of the alumni, students, faculty, staff and friends who make up our University community. You can be sure to be notified of the most recent websites updates if you’ve shared your primary email address with us.

If you haven’t already done so, go to https://alumni.uregina.ca/degrees-subscribe and submit your email address. Or scan the QR Code that appears below. Submitting your email address will ensure you don’t miss any of these great stories. One submission, selected at random, will win an Apple iPad.

I would like to thank our readers for their loyalty through the years and their understanding as we change with the times. I look forward to sharing more stories through the Degrees website.

So “join us online” is more than just a new way to read these stories, it’s an invitation to be part of our University of Regina community that is now more than 80,000 strong and spans the globe.

Greg Campbell BFA ’85, BEd ’95

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President’s Note

Concentric circles

In my first Degrees message in this fall/winter issue as President and Vice-Chancellor of your alma mater, I want to speak about how important alumni are to the University of Regina and, at the same time, how important the University should be to you. Our alumni connect us to the wider world, both in our immediate community and as a platform to pursue partnerships worldwide. When a university’s relationship with alumni works properly, meaningful, effective partnerships are established. Connecting with people who believe in and are committed to the institution’s success creates a positive impact. As graduates, alumni want to see their university thrive; in many ways, the university’s success is a positive reflection on them and the education they received. And, of course, alumni successes in different fields of endeavour reflect positively on a university and the education it provides.

With that in mind, I want to make the University and the University of Regina. Alumni are critical to the University’s success – and given the work that has been taking place in this regard recently, we have tremendous reputation and community awareness of our academic, cultural and social mission. Positive messaging and alumni stories is a pillar of the University of Regina family so that you see us as an important part of your social and professional lives. Expanding this involvement has multiple benefits. It builds recognition, reputation and community awareness of our academic, cultural, and social mission. Positive messaging and alumni success stories will bring more students and the University to the communities of that surround and support us. Thank you for always continuing to do for your fellow alumni, our current students and the University as a whole. It’s an honour to serve this great University with you.

Sincerely,
Dr. Jeff Keshen
President and Vice-Chancellor

Accolades

In October, the University announced changes to its Board of Governors. Joining the Board for a three-year term is Leanne Bellegarde BA’88. She was appointed by the Government of Saskatchewan through Atayi First Nation, Order-in-Council. A member of the Peppeskepi Cree Nation, Bellegarde is President of Akawina Technologies, where her focus and inclusion and diversity in the wider world, both in our immediate community and as a platform to pursue partnerships worldwide. When a university’s relationship with alumni works properly, meaningful, effective partnerships are established. Connecting with people who believe in and are committed to the institution’s success creates a positive impact. As graduates, alumni want to see their university thrive; in many ways, the university’s success is a positive reflection on them and the education they received. And, of course, alumni successes in different fields of endeavour reflect positively on a university and the education it provides.

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Sincerely,
Dr. Jeff Keshen
President and Vice-Chancellor

Of our approximately 80,000 alumni, only a small minority are truly and meaningfully involved with the University. This can be a consequence of being a commuter university, one that’s comparatively small in nature, because it can be harder to establish a sense of place for students and eventually alumni at such an institution. This isn’t unusual and it isn’t an insurmountable challenge. We do need to be more active with our alumni, and it can be done. We need to expand and promote the existing networking possibilities that are important to alumni and can connect them to current students. We need to facilitate the mutual benefits – and even the fun! – of alumni involvement in University life. We need to better connect our alumni with each other and with the institution as valued parts of the University of Regina family so that you see us as an important part of your social and professional lives. This can be a consequence of being a commuter university, one that’s comparatively small in nature, because it can be harder to establish a sense of place for students and eventually alumni at such an institution. This isn’t unusual and it isn’t an insurmountable challenge. We do need to be more active with our alumni, and it can be done. We need to expand and promote the existing networking possibilities that are important to alumni and can connect them to current students. We need to facilitate the mutual benefits – and even the fun! – of alumni involvement in University life. We need to better connect our alumni with each other and with the institution as valued parts of the University of Regina family so that you see us as an important part of your social and professional lives. This can be a consequence of being a commuter university, one that’s comparatively small in nature, because it can be harder to establish a sense of place for students and eventually alumni at such an institution. This isn’t unusual and it isn’t an insurmountable challenge. We do need to be more active with our alumni, and it can be done. We need to expand and promote the existing networking possibilities that are important to alumni and can connect them to current students. We need to facilitate the mutual benefits – and even the fun! – of alumni involvement in University life. We need to better connect our alumni with each other and with the institution as valued parts of the University of Regina family so that you see us as an important part of your social and professional lives. This can be a consequence of being a commuter university, one that’s comparatively small in nature, because it can be harder to establish a sense of place for students and eventually alumni at such an institution. This isn’t unusual and it isn’t an insurmountable challenge. We do need to be more active with our alumni, and it can be done. We need to expand and promote the existing networking possibilities that are important to alumni and can connect them to current students. We need to facilitate the mutual benefits – and even the fun! – of alumni involvement in University life. We need to better connect our alumni with each other and with the institution as valued parts of the University of Regina family so that you see us as an important part of your social and professional lives. This can be a consequence of being a commuter university, one that’s comparatively small in nature, because it can be harder to establish a sense of place for students and eventually alumni at such an institution. This isn’t unusual and it isn’t an insurmountable challenge. We do need to be more active with our alumni, and it can be done. We need to expand and promote the existing networking possibilities that are important to alumni and can connect them to current students. We need to facilitate the mutual benefits – and even the fun! – of alumni involvement in University life. We need to better connect our alumni with each other and with the institution as valued parts of the University of Regina family so that you see us as an important part of your social and professional lives.

Sincerely,
Dr. Jeff Keshen
President and Vice-Chancellor
including 28 journal papers, at over $170,000. Her research achievements and their impact were recognized at the Fall Convocation.

The University of Regina’s Chief Operating Officer (COHP) will get the opportunity to pursue an industrial training experience.

On October 29, Dr. Nevan Krogan (right) announced the largest-ever donation in U of R history; Krogan’s $25.48 million donation will go towards the Children of Haiti Project (COHP) Scholarship, ikon on hand for the announcement was Dominique Pierre (left) co-founder and country director of COHP.

The University of Regina’s Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) has partnered with the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce to deliver programming to chamber members across the province. With a focus on in-demand skills training, programming will include career and professional development through a suite of non-credit certificates, professional microcredentials, badges, prep courses and customized corporate training. The CCE provides scholarships by offering high-quality, accessible, innovative and responsive education developed in collaboration with local industry experts and the community.

The University of Regina and the Regina Rams Football Club celebrated the signing of a new community partnership agreement at a breakfast event in late October. The new agreement extends the partnership to 2024 and beyond. It allows the club to focus on the experiences of 10 Indigenous youth who will co-facilitate the Growing Mâmawêyatitân centre – a program that offers extensive services in one central location to build and enhance the community. Mâmawêyatitân is a Cree word meaning “let’s be all together.”

The University of Regina is one of the leading producers of postsecondary education services to students. The nurse practitioners at the Centre, located in Room 119 on the ground floor of the Parkview Tower, can help students and several in-person services to students and the families of students who live off campus.

The Department of Computer Science at the University of Regina is about to welcome the first cohort of students in one of two new professionally focussed Computer Science Master’s degree programs. One in Data Science and the other in Human-Centered Computing. Both fields show an impressive amount of promise for new graduates entering the workforce, and give existing professionals a chance to upgrade their skills to get into a new area of computing.

The Department of Computer Science and Engineering has a popular course-based Master’s degree program. The program is being replaced with these new programs that leverage the strengths of their faculty and address the needs of the computing industry.

Dr. Jeff Keshen was officially installed as the University’s eighth president and vice-chancellor at the ceremony. Two graduates were recognized for their outstanding academic achievements and their contributions to the University and broader community.

As U Sports). One year later, the Rams won the Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies’ 2020 Bateman Cup. Mang’s team will conduct a clinical trial comparing the effects of task-oriented exercise, general aerobic exercise and aerobic exercise on walking function and changes in the central nervous system in people with progressive MS.

Dr. Mike Dukewich’s research project will help identify culturally relevant ways to support Indigenous youth as wellness leaders in their communities. He’s $19,872 grant will allow him to focus on the experiences of seven young Indigenous youth who co-direct the Growing young Mothers after-school program run out of Regina’s mâmawêyatitân centre— a place that offers extensive services in one central location to connect, learn, play, develop skills and celebrate culture. Mâmawêyatitân is a Cree word meaning “let’s be all together.”

The University of Regina Rams Football Club competed in the Canada West Conference’s Hardy Cup and the Atlantic Bowl, and were runner-up in the Vanier Cup.

In late September, the University of Regina received its largest one-time donation — a $25.48 million scholarship contribution from alumni Dr. Nevan Krogan BSc’75, MSc’79, and his partner. The donation supports the Children of Haiti Project (COHP). The COHP scholarship provides two scholarships to graduates from the Children of Haiti Project (COHP) will get the opportunity to pursue an undergraduate degree in the discipline of their choice. The support will include tuition, housing, immigration costs and living expenses. Krogan’s interest in COHP started in 2015 when he became the director of the Quantitative Biosciences Institute at the University of California San Francisco. The work took Krogan around the world, including to Haiti, the birthplace of the ingenuity of the Child’s chief operating officer and one of the co-founders of the COHP, Jacqueline Fabus. The COHP was started in the aftermath of the magnitude seven earthquake that hit just outside the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince in January 2010, killing an estimated 300,000 people and displacing more than two million others.

Research

Four University of Regina researchers received funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to improve health outcomes for people living with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Dr. Michelle Mang’s team will conduct a clinical trial comparing the effects of task-oriented exercise, general aerobic exercise and aerobic exercise on walking function and changes in the central nervous system in people with progressive MS.

Dr. Omar El-Halfawy, Canada Research Chair in Chemogenomics and Antimicrobial Research, received $315,000 to uncover the microbial weapons unleashed by superbugs during infection that make them resistant to antibiotics.

Rather than work under standardized lab conditions – which don’t adequately represent the infection situation – El-Halfawy’s research will explore the microbial responses to antibiotics under conditions mimicking infection. The goal is to discover novel therapies that disarm the superbugs.

Dr. Natasha Gallant’s research findings could lead to better chronic disease management in Saskatchewan and across Canada. Gallant received a $160,410 grant to determine if therapy focused on helping individuals learn how to think and act in response to uncomfortable emotions will be as effective for people living with chronic diseases as it has been for those living with mental disorders.

Twenty-four researchers at the University of Regina have received more than $3.5 million in federal grants to delve into dozens of projects that span multiple disciplines. The grants, provided through both the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), will support projects ranging from the examining racialized hiring practices to determining if climate change is turning forests from carbon sinks into carbon sources.

Four University of Regina researchers received funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to improve health outcomes for people living with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) will support projects, Research

Dr. Nevan Krogan (right) announced the largest-ever donation in U of R history; Krogan’s $25.48 million donation will go towards the Children of Haiti Project (COHP) Scholarship, ikon on hand for the announcement was Dominique Pierre (left) co-founder and country director of COHP.

Royal Bank Canada Future Launch has committed $50,000,000 to support key programs at the U of R that assist Indigenous students as they further their Indigenous education, save their communities and work towards launching their careers. The monies will be used to support the Neekewakow (“they are leading”) Leadership Initiative (LIL) and the Full Circle Internship program. The LIL is an Elder-based leadership program that enhances cultural awareness and develops leadership skills in students through traditional and current ways of knowing. The LIL has four streams that are key to leadership development – personal, academic, professional and cultural. Supports within the LIL program are used to prepare Indigenous students to participate in career-related work experiences facilitated by the Full Circle Summer Internship Program – a program that has placed 75 Indigenous students in career-related internships since its inception in 2006.
The sky's the limit

Natasha Jaques BA'12, BSc'12 has come a long way since she first became fascinated by computers as a youngster. Today, after completing a PhD from MIT, she lives in Silicon Valley and works for Google Brain, one of the behemoth's research teams focused on artificial intelligence.

By Sabrina Cataldo BA’97, BJ’99, Cert. PR’04
Photos by Trevor Hopkin, University of Regina
Photography Department and courtesy of Natasha Jaques.

“Y ou stink.”

It’s not the most elegant piece of programming code Natasha Jaques has written but, to be fair, it was her first program and she was only seven years old at the time.

“We had this old computer – a Franklin 87 – with a black screen and a flickering green cursor,” she reminisces. Jaques’ father, a lawyer, was always interested in computers, and he passed that fascination on to his children. That first program she wrote allowed the computer to ask questions and react to the responses. If it inquired “How are you?”, and you typed “I’m sad”, it would respond, “What’s wrong?” If it asked your name and you answered with Sam, Jaques’ brother’s moniker, it would tell you, “You stink.”

Jaques and her brother were so obsessed with computers outside was during the other person’s turn,” she laughs.

Despite her love of computing, Jaques was undecided about her major when she started undergraduate studies at the University of Regina. “I had no idea what I wanted to do. I was taking classes in everything – philosophy, sociology, psychology and, of course, computer science.”

Then a professor suggested that she didn’t have to choose just one discipline or even one faculty. An extra year of university would earn her two degrees: a bachelor of science in computer science and a bachelor of arts in psychology. She was thrilled to follow this path, and it’s one that has garnered her great success in her career. “It’s a bit of an odd combination, but it’s like I’m a special butterfly. Businesses will say, ‘We don’t have a computer scientist and a psychologist.’”

After convocating from the University of Regina with her two degrees in 2012, Jaques earned an MSc from the University of British Columbia in 2014 and a PhD from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2019.

“MIT was great in terms of connecting you with a ton of opportunities. There were so many smart people to learn from. Through MIT, I was able to meet the top researchers at Google, creating career opportunities,” she says. Jaques interned at DeepMind and Google Brain, with the latter hiring her on as a research scientist in 2019. She’s also currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, where she’s combining her unique background of psychology and computer science to do research in reinforcement learning and affective computing.

Reinforcement learning involves building artificial intelligence (AI) agents that have intelligent capabilities. Affective computing uses computer science, machine learning and artificial intelligence techniques to detect and model human emotions and signals, for example, detecting a person’s level of stress. “I’m interested in artificial intelligence agents that can interact effectively with humans and do complex tasks, making a series of decisions to accomplish a task,” Jaques says.

The research agenda she’s working on at Berkeley is about how to use social learning to improve artificial intelligence. “What sets humans apart from other animals in terms of intelligence is social intelligence. There was an experiment with one-year-old children, where an adult would go up to a door carrying heavy books and would be unable to open the door themselves. The child would automatically open the door for them. They perceive what you are trying to do and want to help you. Apes don’t have those abilities. Learning and co-operating makes us unique,” she says.

In certain niche areas, such as detecting tumours, AI can be better than a human. They can analyze MRI scans and medical images, and detect tumours with more accuracy than a team of oncologists. But there’s no system that would be able to both detect tumours and play golf or move. In terms of walking and talking like a human, it’s not even close,” she says.

A real-world example of an application for reinforcement learning is autonomous driving cars. An autonomous car can learn to model the behaviour of other cars on the street. “If an ambulance comes, and others are pulling to the side of the road, the autonomous car should do that, too. Artificial intelligence should take cues from other agents and learn from them. That’s an example of why I think my research agenda is important,” Jaques notes.

The Jaques household was all abuzz about a new iMac in 2002. Jaques is seen here with her father Kevin and brother Sam.
Another example of reinforcement learning is controlling the switches in a power grid to improve energy efficiency. “Building electrical grid energy efficiency is really cool,” says Jaques, who has co-authored a paper on tackling climate change with machine learning. “Most grids have a combination of carbon-intensive sources and renewable sources. Solar and wind are unpredictable and there aren’t good batteries or storage for them. If we had better modelling of when solar and wind were available and of consumer demand – when everyone is going to turn on their dishwasher, for example – we could have better planning on how to turn on and off resources. By using artificial intelligence, we could save energy and reduce emissions.”

Jaques is also excited about recent developments in artificial intelligence that involve modelling language. “You can input text and ask it to predict what text comes next. If you do that with enough data, the model starts being able to answer questions. I expect that they’ll improve things like machine translation and web searches, and eventually improve things like Siri and Alexa. Far into the future, I hope reinforcement learning will bring improvements in robotics,” she says.

Jaques has received several accolades for her research, including an honorable mention for best paper in 2019 at the International Conference on Machine Learning – one of the top conferences in the field – and a best paper award at the NeurIPS ML for Healthcare workshop. She was also part of the team that received best demo at NeurIPS 2018. In computer science, it’s more prestigious to present at conferences than to publish a paper in a journal of machine learning research. “Computer science moves very fast; things are changing so rapidly, and the conference cycle allows you to publish things faster,” she says.

Her work has also been featured in Quanta, the MIT Technology Review, Boston Magazine and on CBC Radio. She recalls her time at the University of Regina fondly. “It was a wonderful place to learn. I had a good community there. The U of R allowed me to flourish without too much pressure.” It was where she discovered her love of research, being granted her first research opportunity by Howard Hamilton, computer science professor and director of the Laboratory for Computational Discovery. “That experience is the reason I went to grad school. He put me on to machine learning research. In the first year of my undergrad, I was doing genetic algorithms and reinforcement learning. Now I do that full time.”

Hamilton is a strong supporter of undergraduate researchers. “It’s an important opportunity for them, because they see through at least one small research project and get an idea of what it means. Many students in their first year think that research is something you do in the library. It’s a revelation to them when we’re doing a creative computer program to do something we don’t know how to do yet. It makes a difference in the potential they see in research to learn this early on,” he says.

Hamilton notes that Jaques was “the most forward-looking undergrad student that I’ve encountered. She was the one who caught my attention for having this long-term plan for her career. She was able to make use of her time and resources because she had a goal. She was always crossing back and forth between computer science and psychology. She had a good plan.” Her plan was very specific: she told Hamilton that she was going to do two degrees in computer science and psychology and then go to MIT to get her PhD. “She’s the only one, halfway through her first year, to have her whole career mapped out.”

In her time at the University of Regina, she also participated in a pilot project called the Supplemental Instruction program, headed by chemistry and biochemistry lecturer Stephen Cheng. Jaques was one of the first undergraduate students he hired. “She was exactly what we wanted – she had the personality, intelligence and people skills we needed,” he says. Students were assigned to a first-year class and attended the lectures. After each class, they would do three sessions per week outside the classroom. “In those sessions, Natasha would teach the lecture, go over examples and get the students to solve the problems on their own,” Cheng says. He was so impressed by her work that he later wrote recommendation letters for Jaques to do her MSc and PhD.

The day she convocated with her undergraduate degrees, the Department of Computer Science hired Jaques to teach a first-year class. Hamilton says, “It’s highly unusual for us to hire someone like that. But she was already providing special tutoring for all the students who took CS110. She went to the lectures for the class each time it was taught, and she was available in a friendly way for the students to talk to. I said, ‘Given you’ve attended the class all the way through four times, I’m sure you can teach it.’ When she taught CS110, she got sparkling reviews from the students.”

That experience will be useful as Jaques applies for faculty positions in the coming year. She plans to continue in the industry as a researcher as well, given that many universities allow professors to work 20 per cent of their time outside the institution.

Teaching will give Jaques an opportunity to make a difference in an area that she’s very passionate about: inspiring more women to go into computer science. “The field is super male-dominated. In my undergrad, my psychology classes were 90 per cent women, in computer science, I was the only woman in a class of 80 to 40 men. When I graduated from the U of R, only 10 per cent of computer science degrees were granted to women. Ten per cent of papers accepted to conferences are by women. I think that’s a tragedy, because computer scientists have a lot of job security. It’s a hot area,” she says, noting that while she was doing her PhD, companies were desperate to hire anyone with expertise in machine learning. “In 2012, there was a revolution in artificial intelligence with deep learning and neural network techniques. Canadian professors were instrumental in this. The industry hired so many pros and salaries skyrocketed. There are so many opportunities in this field; so few women participating makes me very sad.”

Jaques does her part by participating in mentorship programs such as Girls Who Code. “It would be nice if more women would see it as a valid career choice that’s a lot of fun.” She would also like to see more ethnic diversity in the field.

While she doesn’t know where in the world her career will take her next, she’s always had a special place in her heart for Regina. “I love how green it is, how uncrowded it is. When I was home last, I went for a bike ride. There were miles of super safe, super green, open parks. If you go biking in Boston, you can’t find a park where you don’t hear cars, and you’re likely to get hit by a car when you’re out biking. In New York, it’s hard to see a blade of grass. Regina is beautiful and I miss it.”

Sabrina Cataldo is an award-winning writer and communications strategist in Regina.
With Fall term wrapping up, we have a brief break before the new one begins, but—the Winter term will bring a big challenge for many students:

**How can you set yourself up to succeed if you can’t afford the textbooks you need?**

With costs of $150/book or more per course—students are often spending $500 - $1,000 on books every semester.

Some students work two or more jobs to afford their books. Some sacrifice groceries, winter clothing, or other necessities. Others though... **they try to do without a textbook.**

Not having access to a textbook means students don’t have the resources they need to succeed.

So, we created **Textbooks for All** — a program where the Library buys copies of the most needed textbooks and loans them out to students for study sessions.

Of the 476 books purchased to date, they have been borrowed over 50,000 times!

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Eman Bare BA’15 is a renaissance woman ready to take on anything that moves her. She’s been a force in ethical fashion design, yoga instruction, celebrity ghostwriting and investigative journalism, to name a few of her interests and professional pursuits. Now she’s got her sights on passing the New York bar exam and righting some of society’s ills in a court of law.

By Katie Doke Sawatzky MJ’18

Photos by Trevor Hopkins, University of Regina Photography Department, unless otherwise noted.

Eman Bare always knew she wanted to be a journalist; she’s been documenting experiences and telling stories for most of her life. As a child of immigrant parents, she learned to work the till at a very young age. But what she recalls most is deciding to embrace the fact that, as a Black Muslim girl, she wasn’t the norm.

During those years, there were moments that some might call blips or distractions, things wildly outside what might be expected for a newly minted graduate beginning a career in investigative journalism. Bare has become a yoga instructor, created an ethical fashion line, ghostwritten for celebrities and will soon prepare to take the bar.

Eman Bare describes her upbringing as “the most bizarrely cookie-cutter immigrant story” — her father owned a convenience store in south Regina and she learned to work the till at a very young age. But what she recalls most is deciding to embrace the fact that, as a Black Muslim girl, she wasn’t the norm.

When kids said her hair looked like spider legs, for Wacky Hair Day at school, Bare combed her hair into a full-on fro and put leaves and twigs in it. “A normal kid would have felt sad and upset, but I was like nope, this is my hair; this is what we’re doing today,” she says.

Bare was one of very few Black Muslim students at Islamic school and at Campbell Collegiate where she finished high school. She was the only player wearing hijab and tights on the Campbell girls’ rugby team, but joining the team was worth it to make friends and have fun.

“I don’t really look like somebody who would go around tackling people. It was a very unconventional sport for me to be playing so I just fully embraced it, absolutely loved it,” she says.

Thinking about what it is that compels her to use her ability to tell stories to share the truth, Bare says it goes back to bringing that kid who was OK with not fitting in.

“It makes you feel crazy when all of these things are so wrong and people say, ‘What can we do about it?’ Well, we can actually just change it. We can decide that these are no longer systems that we want to work with.”

Bare studied at the University of Regina’s School of Journalism from 2013 to 2015. The school has a long history of guaranteeing its students paid internships, which often lead to employment. Bare’s experience was no exception. She worked at Alberta Primestone, a current affairs show, and then Global Edmonton, which hired her a few days after she started.

Drawn to investigative reporting, she continued to work with Global for her last year of journalism school. After she graduated, she moved to Toronto to work on JATF, a national Global News investigative program. Bare returned home to cover local news and investigative stories for CBC Saskatchewan, then moved back to Toronto in 2017 to work for CBC News Network, the ‘it’ (now CBC Investigates) and Power & Politics as an associate producer and reporter.

Mitch Diamantopoulos, associate professor at the School of Journalism.

“You want a journalist who is fearless and who risks not winning a popularity contest to get to the truth. It was pretty obvious, early on, that Eman had a lot of investigative zeal. I thought she was either going to end up in jail or win a Pulitzer,” he laughs.

While in journalism school, Bare won the CTV Investigative Journalism Prize, given to the student who completes the best investigative work while in school.

Since then, a pattern has emerged in Bare’s journalistic work. She doesn’t shy away from stories that highlight systemic injustice. Most recently, she’s covered stories on Black identity in Toronto, racial slurs allegedly used by a teacher at an Ontario school, negligent care in Regina’s General Hospital and slurs allegedly used by a teacher at an Ontario school.

Bare’s motivation comes from her Islamic faith, which she engaged with more intentionally at 18 when she trained to become a yoga instructor. Verse 1:15 from Surah An-Nisa, the fourth chapter of the Qur’an which translates to “The Women,” is one she says she keeps in mind particularly during journalism school.

“It talks about how, for people who have faith, to stand firmly for justice even if it’s against your character, relatives or yourself,” she says. “God is always on the side of the truthseekers.”

It may seem unusual to hear a journalist acknowledge their faith as their inspiration, but Diamantopoulos it makes sense.

“The quest for justice, which is so important to so many people of faith, is also at the core of journalism,” he says. “It’s not simply about the truth... it’s about the truth to empower the public to make their lives better, to improve the world.”

“I’ve just learned over the years that I need to stop listening to other people’s ideas and thoughts on what I should do because, ultimately, it’s never led me to where I want to be,” says Bare.
Rachel Mielke, founder and CEO of Regina-based jewelry company Hillberg & Berk.

“It’s product that you can easily wear everyday but still makes a statement with simple silhouettes, beautiful fabrics and cuts to her designs,” Mielke says.

Along with bold fashion statements, Bare’s work addresses issues faced by women in the Global South and immigrant women closer to home. Bare’s own mother, who worked as a nurse’s aide, would bring Bare with her to work because she couldn’t afford childcare. Her employers were understanding, and Bare wants to pass that empathy forward in her work.

“I wanted to create a space where women could work and wouldn’t have to choose between being mothers and financially providing for their kids,” she says.

A woman named Asima, who left three of her children behind with family in Myanmar to pursue work at a women’s collective in Malaysia, has made turbans for Bare’s line. Now on to her second collection, Bare has also employed women from Morocco, Bangladesh and Turkey, striving to create safe and supportive working conditions for them.

“She has incredibly audacious goals and dreams and she just makes it happen. She’s an incredible model for women,” says Mielke.

Bare was also the only designer to use all Black models at New York Fashion Week, which she says forced the company that hired the hair and makeup team to make sure they had someone who knew how to style Black hair. “The vision behind it for me was, yes, the representation when the women walk on the stage, but also what was happening backstage,” she says.

Bare has no qualms about holding power to account as a journalist. After all, the phrase “Question Authority” is on notepads and magnets that J-school students receive their first week at the University of Regina. But she has experienced her share of frustration with power dynamics within news organizations.

As a minority reporter, she has felt underrepresented compared to her colleagues. “The problem isn’t getting minority or marginalized journalists into newrooms; it’s investing in them once they’re there,” she says. “I’ve never been someone who has come out there to say ‘I want to be a really good journalist.’ I just wanted to be a really good journalist.”

Bare’s course of action when faced with adversity isn’t to give up, it’s to get better. Feeling the need for change once again, Bare applied to law school, not to become a lawyer, but to become a better storyteller.

“If I’m a good journalist, you have to constantly be learning,” she says. “The more you know, the more nuanced, powerful stories you’re able to tell. Because I wanted to do investigative journalism, law school makes sense. My head over, it makes sense,” she laughs.

Bare began her studies in 2018 at New York Law School on a full scholarship and will write the bar exam in early 2022. Through her research, she’s discovered a treasure trove of potential stories, such as the role race plays in intellectual property and tax laws or how rap lyrics have been used as evidence by prosecutors. After the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer on May 25, 2020, an act that sparked a wave of Black Lives Matter mobilization and protests across the continent, Bare worked as a student attorney on Carr v. De Blasio with Alvin Bragg, her criminal procedure professor and former Chief Deputy Attorney General of New York State. The case was connected to the death of Eric Garner, a Black man killed in 2014 by a white New York Police Department officer who wasn’t let go from his position until 2019.

“Reading all the documents and watching the police outwardly lie, it affects your faith in people,” she says. “You just realize you’re working with people with a completely different moral compass than you. I’ve always thought, ‘People just don’t know.’ It’s actually not that. People just don’t care sometimes. They see things very differently than you.”

As disheartening as that realization is, it’s led Bare to think strategically about her storytelling and her audience.

“Aim going to focus on the devastation of police brutality on Black communities or on how much over-policing costs taxpayers? When you realize certain communities respond more aggressively to their bottom line than the death of an innocent man, it’s jarring, but you realize you need to cater to your audience and pursue the truth.”

This coming year, Bare will keep the many plates she has in the air spinning and see where they take her. Currently ghostwriting books and speeches for celebrities, she travels to Turkey this fall to meet the women who make some of her clothes and to study for her bar exam. Whether or not Bare returns to the newsroom, her hunt for stories will continue.
She says it’s important to be out in the world in order to build community trust. That’s where good stories come from. “You build understanding and you start seeing things from a different lens and a different perspective,” she says. “You start asking different questions.”

Katie Doke Sawatzky is a freelance journalist in Regina. She is also the communications coordinator for the Mennonite Church Canada. She has written for Eagle Feather News, J-Source, Geez Magazine, and Briarpatch Magazine.

For the full story on this amazing alumnus, visit www.degreesmagazine.ca
By the time Halter was nine, the family moved about a half hour away to Luseland. “I was a huge fan of YTV and, for some reason, I had this urge to make my own movie. I thought, ‘How hard can it be? I can do that!’ So I fleshed out this story about aliens turning cows purple. The only problem was, I didn’t have a camera,” he laughs.

Undaunted, Halter knew that if he was going to make his filmmaking dreams come true, he’d have to work hard for it. So the affable young man with the toothy grin started knocking on doors and putting up flyers at the age of 11, offering his own lawn mowing service. “By the time I was 14, I had saved enough money to buy my very first video camera. I remember being driven into Saskatchewan and picking up this new JVC Super VHS camcorder — it was pretty high tech for the early 2000s. I paid $600 for it and it drained my bank account, but it was so worth it,” he recalls. “I still have it on a shelf.”

That single-minded focus and relentless determination has defined the filmmaker’s career ever since. Today, Halter is a sought-after director and producer at HalterMedia, which focuses on visually stunning and profoundly impactful documentaries, both in the corporate and independent realms. His series Flat Out Food was this year’s winner of the coveted 2021 Best of Saskatchewan Ruth Shaw Award at the Yorkton International Film Festival. The TV series, now in post-production for Season 2, celebrates unique ingredients and staple food sources grown and raised in Saskatchewan.

But Halter’s film career, and his successful collaboration with Flat Out Food host Jens Sharp, almost didn’t happen.

“After attending his first year of studies at the University of Regina, I said, ‘No — this is what I’m going to do with my life.’” While Halter shone in his small town high school as a member of the hockey team and the class valedictorian, attending his first year of studies at the University of Regina was a culture shock. “There were all these students and I didn’t make friends quickly. It was so bad that I remember packing up everything after Thanksgiving and driving back home. As I wrestled with my thoughts on the drive, I decided I should probably go back.”

Continued on page 26
Regan Shercliffe (BA(Hons)`94) completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Regina and his master’s degree and doctorate in clinical psychology at Simon Fraser University. For the past 11 years, Shercliffe has worked as a staff counsellor with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). He currently is the chief of staff counselling for the World Food Programme, which was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2020. Shercliffe lives in Rome where his love for photography is able to flourish.

"Pausing and thinking about what you are seeing before taking a photo makes you look at a country, city or town in a different way, you in essence stare a little longer and you find themes and patterns. For me, black and white photography allows you to emphasize those patterns in a way that transforms the scene and the image. In short, black and white photography allows more room for interpretation. Plus we see in colour everyday, so why not use a medium that allows for a different perspective? I have been in Italy for four years — Rome specifically. Italians only rally around the country if it relates to football, otherwise it’s all about what region or city you live in. If you like quiet and solitude, Rome is not for you. However, the pandemic changed all of that and for almost a year you could have the center of Rome all to yourself (or at least devoid of tourists). It was strange to say the least and never something I would have thought possible - very much like the pandemic. Some of these photos were taken before the pandemic, and others in the middle of the pandemic when Rome was quiet." - Regan Shercliffe
(Clockwise from top left) – The Roman Colosseum with the Arch of Constantine on the left. The Pantheon, a former Roman temple that has served as a church since 609 AD. Ancient Flavian palace, Domus Flavia, on the Palatine Hill in Rome.

It was a good decision. While Halter ended up missing about a week of school and two midterms, his return to university provided some new perspectives. “I started making friends and really got into campus life,” he smiles, noting he may have had his worst year academically, but it was a chance to learn some balance in his life after working as a boy.

“Getting into film school during my second year was so rewarding because I was with other students who felt exactly as I did about making movies. We all worked evenings and weekends crewing each other’s films.”

It was then that he met his future wife, Becky, who worked two jobs as well as attended full-time classes. “I admired her work ethic so much. She made me want to achieve even more because I wanted so badly to impress her,” he laughs.

Halter says he remembers a film class taught by Professor Sarah Abbott that really ignited his passion. “We got to pick our top three roles for this narrative film and I chose grip (lighting setup/camera support) and electrical. The script was about a young Indigenous woman and her Caucasian partner, and the moment of choice we face when the urge to be violent surfaces,” says Halter. “I was paired with Geoff Yates who was an active member of the local film industry. He was a fellow film school grad and very patient. I remember in school we used small ARRI light kits, and then we got to work with full grip/electrical trucks. I was blown away that they made lights that big. It was definitely a turning point in deciding to work in the industry once I graduated.”

One of his mentors, U of R professor and filmmaker Mark Whahak, says Halter showed promise as a student and has continued to impress throughout his career. “Halter is a really nice guy – he’s collegial and easy to get along with. In school, he always kept an open mind. He was curious and willing to try things. He’s built his own business from the ground up, and every year you can see it grow. That requires a lot of hard work, attention to detail and ambition,” Whahak says. “He also cheered for the Leafs, so he was clearly able to steel himself against difficulties and disappointments, and was ready for the long haul.”

Former university professor Will Dixon who taught Halter screenwriting, producing and production, chuckles at the Maple Leafs reference. As a long-suffering Leafs fan himself, he agrees Halter has the kind of personality that can see things through to the finish line, despite setbacks. “You simply could tell by his interest and inquisitiveness, his burgeoning talent and grasp of the TV medium, that he was going places.”

Halter says Whahak and Dixon both inspired him to be a better filmmaker. He graduated with his BFA in Film Production in 2010 and incorporated his production company, HalterMedia, the following year.

Halter made a point of keeping in touch with Dixon who, by that time, had left his teaching position to work for Rogers Media Inc. at Citytv in Regina as a program manager and production executive. Dixon explains, “Halter would call me for coffee once a year to catch up and pick my brain to try out a few TV pitches.” One of those pitches included a non-scripted reality TV series about Maritime workers relocating to the Prairies and working in oil rig camps. That series never really got off the ground, but Dixon kept encouraging Halter not to give up. “His drive and persistence definitely made a difference in the long-term when his Flat Out Food series proposal came along.”

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Halter was eager to learn from the business up and down and take advantage of every opportunity available. He worked on a number of TV shows at the Saskatchewan Soundstage during Regina's film heyday; he was a set dresser for InSecurity, a series produced by Vivit Films, the company behind Corner Gas.

“I always thought I would hone my craft here, impress the right people, then move to Toronto. That was always my trajectory, but life has a way of making other plans. The local industry changed significantly after the tax credit was axed. Then my wife Becky and I had our first son in 2014, our second son in 2017, and our daughter in 2020. Suddenly making it big in Toronto was no longer a priority. What became more important to me was making a living for my family. This is what I hope to do through my work at Flat Out Food.”

Halter decided to focus his creative energy on corporate and real estate videos, and lent his talents to a number of organizations. He served two years as vice-president on the board of SasksCulture and ran youth video workshops. One of those corporate projects was a TV commercial content for the Canadian Western Agribition.

“At the time, Jenn Sharp was doing social media at Agribition as a former Leader-Post/StarPhoenix reporter, and we started talking,” Halter explains. “I had started working on a pitch about unique foods from all over the world, but it focused primarily on the ingredients. Jenn’s book took a more holistic approach, focusing on the people who grew and sustained those ingredients, and it was based entirely in Saskatchewan. I could almost see the cinematic potential," he enthuses. Halter Media was able to access a federal loan from CBA (Canada Emergency Business Account), which I then lent to the production to get things off the ground."

Halter and Sharp proceeded to film that summer, along with cinematographer Adam Burwell, camera operator Preston Kanak, camera assistant Joe Tabak, field producer Rigel Smith, and production sound mixer Tbone. The crew worked long hours capturing the diverse culinary experiences of “the land of the living skies,” showcasing field-to-plate stories about farmers, food artisans and chefs. With unique drone shots and plenty of golden-hour light, Flat Out Food looks and feels more like a National Geographic series than a food show.

“It’s Halter’s creative vision and attention to detail to detail that’s made Flat Out Food a beautiful cinematic experience that it is,” says series host Sharp. “He not only has a creative eye, but he’s also an avid home cook and gardener who’s been watching food documentaries for years. I knew this series would be special. Halter’s always striving to put out the best quality work possible and it shows.”

Dixon couldn’t agree more. “Viewers have reacted so positively to the Saskatchewan subject matter and excellent production values. I believe it was our highest rated new home-grown original documentary series we commissioned last year, and it was great to see the program recognized by the Yorkton Film Festival.”

After a successful first season, Halter and his team spent this past summer shooting Season 2, which is now in post-production. Halter says the company will never lose its commercial and corporate work, but definitely plans to grow its capacity for documentaries. “This year, we aired four hours of docs on TV. I hope to go more than double that by 2024.”

While still haunted that movie about aliens creating purple cows from his childhood imagination, he has explored the unlimited possibilities of the delicacies Saskatchewan has to offer. “I made the right decision to build my career at home,” he smiles. Viewers of Flat Out Food couldn’t agree more.

“Flat Out Food is a thought-provoking series that brings the Saskatchewan food scene to the world. It’s a unique show with a diverse range of stories and it truly captures the essence of Saskatchewan’s food culture. This show is a must-watch for anyone interested in the local food scene, and it’s a credit to Halter’s creativity and dedication to the craft.”

Lynette Piper is an award winning writer and filmmaker who is currently on a short hiatus from film school doing corporate communications. Her second film is currently in post-production.
Chris Lane BAJ’02 thrives on challenges. The journalism school graduate was enjoying a long career at the CBC when opportunity came knocking in the form of the position of CEO of Canadian Western Agribition, the annual livestock show held in Regina. Today, Lane finds himself at the helm of the show, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

By Bill Armstrong

Chris Lane was enjoying a satisfying career with the CBC when he embarked on a new journey as CEO of one of North America’s premiere livestock shows, Agribition.

“I was impressed with the University of Regina and the feedback I received about the journalism program. I was sold on it,” says Lane.

The program had many more applicants than spaces available and a rigorous application process. His interview was in Edmonton because there were so many applicants from Alberta. “It was my first real interview, and it was more of a conversation,” Lane observes. “I realized that it wasn’t so much about having the right answers, but about having the right approach — did I have the curiosity to explore things and figure them out.”

Later, Lane recalls, his hands were shaking as he opened the envelope from the University. He was accepted! It then registered with him how far away he’d have to go to pursue his goal, 1,200 kilometres from friends and family to a city he knew almost nothing about and where he knew nobody.

“I remember the day my family moved me to Regina,” Lane recalls. “I realized I was going to have to figure things out on my own. What made the move easier, he adds, was that he fell in love with Regina immediately.

After spending a few days exploring the city and surrounding area, he was ready to go. There were some surprises at first. Some of the liberal arts classes he attended at the University of Alberta were massive in size, while the U of R’s School of Journalism brought together students from all over the country into small groups. Friendships blossomed, he notes, as did conversations among students and instructors about the concepts and principles of journalism.

“He had robust discussions about issues that might not have a right or wrong answer. Because the program combined the academic and the practical, while we were debating, we were also learning the mechanics of good journalism.” Lane explains.

In particular, he credits instructors Patricia Bell and Jill Spelliscy for leading discussions and teaching him how to be a good journalist. Bell, who taught print journalism, research and interviewing courses at the time, and headed the school for three years, describes Lane as a very engaged student. He once did a feature story on the Mausoleum Temple, Bell recalls, taking the reader into what seemed like an extraordinarily secret and sacred place. “He did it not just because he’s curious,” she adds, “but because he believes it’s the journalist’s job to find out things that other people aren’t able to find out.”

For Lane, seeing the TV studio for the first time was another significant moment. “The combination of taking the television course in his final year and the enthusiasm and passion that the instructor, Donna Feszunth, brought to the course confirmed that broadcasting was the right route for him. “I was interested in producing TV and directing a team,” he says.

In 2002, his last year, Lane landed a four-month internship at CBC Calgary, which was extended into a four-month paid position. During that time, he received a scholarship from the Gemini News Service, giving him the opportunity to fly off to London to work for the agency for more than six months. “We had robust discussions about issues that might not have a right or wrong answer, but about having the right conversation,” Lane observes. “I realized that it wasn’t so much about having the right answers, but about having the right approach — did I have the curiosity to explore things and figure them out.”

“I think people living on the Prairies feel ownership for agriculture because of their ties to the land.”

Lane headed to the University of Alberta to become a lawyer, but university opened his eyes to all of the options available. “The liberal arts program I entered showed all of the different paths you can take,” he says. Almost every course he took, from archaeology to theology, sparked an interest he thought might be worth pursuing. He even considered entering a seminary.

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After working in different roles in Calgary for five years, Lane moved to Charlottetown in 2006 to become the senior producer of CBC’s evening TV newscast for Prince Edward Island. The experience was an eye-opener.

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“PEI loves all things local,” Lane observes. “There was a story in the local newspaper about my arrival as the senior producer. There would be fans waiting in the parking lot to talk with us after the newscast. PEI is different.”

Lane led what he describes as a fantastic team that was really invested in local news. The group received a Gemini News Award (now known as the Canadian Screen Award) for one of their live news productions. While he has warm, satisfying memories of his years in the Maritimes, the experience also reinforced the fact that he’s a Westerner at heart. He knew that one of his favourite instructors at the School of Journalism, Jill Spelliscy, had become a manager at CBC Saskatchewan in Regina, his favourite instructors at the School of Journalism, Jill Spelliscy, had become a manager at CBC Saskatchewan in Regina, when a job opening came up there, he was already a different.”

“Chris is good at seeing the value of doing these projects,” Fiddler-Potter says. “CBC Saskatchewan’s 40 Under 40, a list of 40 people who the CEO position became vacant, Lane didn’t hear anything for a while, but the more he thought about it, the more he recognized that he was the right choice. He had the experience, the ideas, the network, and having fun.”

“Good stories about people come out of those projects,” Fiddler-Potter observes, “and bringing them to air, Lane changed the face of the supper-hour newscast.”

Leadership at the Canadian Western Agribition noticed his work and when the CEO position became vacant, Lane received a phone call suggesting that he think about applying. He dismissed the idea at first, but the more he thought about it, the more he recognized that journalism and Agribition had some characteristics in common.

Lane explains that, to the agricultural community, Agribition means the same thing across the province and the country. He says, “In university, you learn how to learn, to be adaptable and curious.” Lane says. “And in journalism school in particular, I developed a lifelong passion for curiosity and the problem-solving abilities that lead to success. I thought I could apply those attributes to the role of CEO for Agribition.”

Lane diligently prepared a presentation for the hiring panel, pinpointing the areas where he believed he could lead. He knew what he had to offer was likely unique for the position, and that it might not fit what the organization was looking for.

Lane didn’t hear anything for a while, so he filed the experience in the back of his mind. A follow-up call to one of the members of the hiring panel changed that abruptly. “He told me, ‘I’ve been meaning to call you, we intend to offer you the job.’”

Lane says that, at first, he was floored by the reality of stepping into a world he hadn’t been trained for, until he remembered what he had told himself earlier – that there are far more similarities than differences between the two jobs. “It was a matter of transferring the education, training and experience I’d learned along the way.”

One of Lane’s aims was to extend Agribition’s reach beyond the show week in November and make the community more aware of its impact year round. As he describes it, this includes being a cheerleader for what agriculture already does well and extending that through initiatives such as the Next Gen Agriculture Mentorship program, which enables eight young people from around Saskatchewan to be mentored for 18 months by leaders in Canada’s agriculture industry.

During his time with CBC Saskatchewan, several interns from the U of R’s School of Journalism had work placements there, a practice Lane has continued at Agribition, providing students with opportunities to practice media relations, public relations and content generation. “The internship sets them up to tell some stories about the people who attend Agribition, and especially to work with the media during Agribition.”

Agribition, like all events-based businesses, was affected in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the show has adapted. Lane says, “Agribition is built for the cattle and breeding industry, and the business in the barns doesn’t stop, so we were able to provide showcase options virtually in 2020.” The organization chose not to lay anyone off, with the goal of presenting the best possible show in 2021. With two months to go before Agribition 2021, Lane noted that 125,000 people attend the show over six days, and plans for presenting the show in a responsible and safe manner might change from day to day. “The COVID pandemic isn’t much different from TV shows on election night; the circumstances are always changing.”

With all of the challenges, Lane insists that he has the best job in Saskatchewan, in part because he believes the province is coming into another golden age of agriculture. He describes it as a coalescing of understanding and effort to make agriculture a driver of growth over the next 10 years, pointing to the investments in canola processing plants in southern Saskatchewan, the plan for a first-of-its-kind plant to convert waste wheat straw into pulp, and support for Saskatchewan-based agriculture startups through the Cultivator business incubator and the Emergent Ventures capital fund, which support the development of agricultural technologies in the province.

With our international business development program, there’s no better time for Agribition to be involved in what’s happening in agriculture, here and around the globe. “It was a reason why I say I have the best job. I’m glad that people took a chance that a journalist who trained at the U of R had the right stuff to take on the job. I’m forever grateful for everything that’s led me here.”

Bill Armstrong is a Regina freelance writer and amateur photographer with a strong interest in Saskatchewan history.
You might say that Amanda Ruller BKin’12 is a good sport. More accurately, you could say she’s good at sports. Ruller started competing in high-level sports at age six and never looked back. She was a record-breaking member of the U of R Cougars track and field team for five years. Her sprinting earned her spots in the Canadian Olympic trials in the 100- and 200-metre races and an invitation from the Canadian Olympic bobsled and skeleton teams to compete in the Canadian winter sports program. She also competed at a high level in soccer, basketball, softball and weightlifting.

Ruller played for Los Angeles and Atlanta in the Legends Football League for five years and was a running back for the silver-medal winning Team Canada football team at the 2017 Women’s World Championships. After terms as a coach with the U of R Rams, she was hired by the McMaster University Marauders to serve as running back coach and strength and conditioning coach. She’s also a prominent social media influencer with nearly 100,000 Instagram followers (@amandaruller).

To what extent has your U of R degree helped your career path?
My degree has helped me work with high-level athletes in sport. It gave me a base to be able to confidently coach strength and conditioning as well as football.

What has motivated you over the years in your sporting career?
My biggest motivation is my father. He was my biggest fan throughout my sporting career. He passed away from brain cancer. So every day, I wake up knowing that I want to live for him. That makes me push as hard as I do.

How did you first get involved in football?
I drove to Los Angeles for an open tryout for the Temptation. I was told I was too small to play and I wouldn’t make the team. I showed up at the practices anyway until I was able to practice. Then I worked my way to a starting position.

What do you consider the highlight of your athletic career so far?
Being invited by Tom Brady’s agent to coach at an NFL free agency camp. He asked me to work with the running backs and defensive backs and to run the strength and conditioning programs.

What was it like to win a car on The Price is Right as a contestant on the show in 2015?
It was very exciting. The odds of that happening to someone are very slim and I did it. It was exciting to be on the show and to go through the emotions of winning a car and meeting Drew Carey. That’s a memory I’ll keep for the rest of my life.

What is next for Amanda Ruller?
I promise, I will be the first female positional coach in the CFL.

What is your ultimate dream job?
My dream job is to be a running back coach in the CFL and beyond that I want to be an offensive coordinator in the NFL.

What words of advice would you give to aspiring athletes?
Don’t let the opinions of others get you down. Go after what you want. And don’t apologize for being great.
Dr. Sarah Plosker
BSc’08, MSc’10

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Meaning matters

In three years, Alanna Mitchell LLD’s (Honorary) took 13 journeys to destinations around the world to learn the truth about our oceans and climate change. She snorkelled the Great Barrier Reef, walked the beaches of Zanzibar and witnessed a breathtaking once-a-year coral spawning in the waters off Panama. Those travels, and others, led to her riveting book and play about the state of the world’s oceans.

By Alanna Mitchell

Photos courtesy of Alanna Mitchell unless otherwise noted.

COVID stalks us still, yet I’m in Belfast, Northern Ireland, getting ready to perform my play Sea Sick in front of a live audience. It’s the first time in more than two years. And maybe because that feels so strange now, or maybe because I’m 5,232 kilometres from home during a pandemic, I feel philosophical. I’m asking myself why I keep doing this. Why don’t I just stay home?

The play, which is based on 13 journeys I made with scientists over three years for my book Sea Sick: The Global Ocean in Crisis, is about how the carbon dioxide we put into the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels is changing the chemistry of the ocean. The ocean has become warm, breathless and sour from all that carbon.

That extra warmth is forcing marine creatures to move, breaking up their communities, shredding the ocean’s web of life. The breathless zones that lack oxygen are affecting more and more coastal waters, pushing life away or killing it.

Increasing acidity, or sourness, is making it hard for marine life to use calcium in the water to make shells, bones, teeth. It makes fish stupid. They swim toward predators instead of away. It’s particularly tough on young marine life; baby oysters and scallops are dying by the billions in the acid seas.

Together, these three chemical changes are a toxic cocktail. And they form a parallel to what happened during the biggest mass extinction in the planet’s history: the Permian extinction of 252 million years ago when about 95 per cent of species were erased from the book of life.

Except today, we’re putting carbon into the atmosphere about 100 times faster than the volcanoes that caused the Permian extinction, faster than at any other time in the planet’s history.

It adds up to an assault on the world’s life support systems. Even though we think of our planet as Earth, it could more properly be called Water. One scientist put it to me this way: if everything on land were to die tomorrow, everything in the ocean would be fine. But if everything in the ocean were to die, everything on land would die too.

The ocean contains the switch of life.

The killing mechanism is carbon. Therefore, the saving grace is cutting carbon. As it turns out, I’m preparing to perform my play in Glasgow at the international climate talks on this tour, too. This is the annual Conference of the Parties (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), during which more than 100 nations haggle over how to cut carbon.

They’ve been haggling for 26 years. Yet carbon concentrations in the atmosphere – and therefore changes to ocean chemistry – continue to rise to ever more dangerous levels. We’re already seeing the effects around the world in storms, droughts, hurricanes and floods. During those 26 years of negotiations, carbon has become a mass murderer.

My musings here in this Belfast hotel room are leading me to think about how COVID and carbon connect. First, we learned some valuable lessons from COVID. As citizens, we can collectively suspend our wants and needs if we have a good enough reason. We can work together as a single species against a common foe. Governments can make new rules when the old ones don’t work. This is the three-point blueprint for tackling carbon.

But the pandemic also showed us that, even when billions of us stayed home for months on end last year, carbon emissions only fell seven per cent. That means 93 per cent of emissions are tied to large systems our personal daily choices have little control over.

Even if we stripped all carbon out of our personal lives, the effect would only be symbolic, not numeric. The conundrum is that while we’re all implicated in the tragedy of carbon, governments alone have the power to fix the systems that control it, such as shifting to non-carbon forms of electric generation and then electrifying more of the economy. How to move forward?

Which brings me back to the play. In 2013, a few years after the book Sea Sick came out, I gave a talk about it to a group of artists. One of them, Franco Boni, who was then the artistic director of the Theatre Centre in Toronto, called me later and asked me to turn the tales of my adventures into a play and to perform it.

I agreed. I had no idea what I was getting into. I’m not an actor I have no aspirations to be one. I’m a journalist. My one condition to Franco was that I wouldn’t have to memorize a whole script. Not at all, he said. You’ll just be on stage telling your stories.

Franco asked Rast Jain, artistic director of Why Not Theatre in Toronto, to help. We taped a raft of public talks I gave over the next several months and then parsed them, trying to figure out which of the stories would work best in a play. And we talked. Franco and Ravi asked me questions. Why are you a journalist? What are journalists supposed to do? What’s their code of conduct? How do you report on science? How does carbon affect the ocean? How do you know for sure? I consider it some of the finest psychotherapy I’ve ever had.

As I talked, I would often leap up from the table and draw diagrams or write numbers on a blackboard that happened to be stored in our rehearsal room. You can’t understand this part until you understand THIS, I would say, clouds of chalk dust covering my fingers and clothes. A chalkboard became the centrepiece of the play’s set.

Eventually, we realized that the play needed an overture, by which we meant an opening section that would introduce the themes of the play. The history of scientific thought. Darwin’s ideas of evolution and extinction. Why I tell stories that few others are telling. Where I come from. What art is for and why we need it.

It’s that last part that keeps me going back to the stage to perform. I grew up in Regina. My father, George Mitchell, was a biologist who spent much of his career at the University
of Regina. My mother, Constance Mitchell, was a painter who often painted prairie landscapes. Growing up in that family taught me that science is how we find things out, but that art is how we find meaning. And it’s meaning we respond to; science can only take us so far.

I believe that meaning matters. We have all sorts of information now from scientists about how the carbon overload affects the planet. We can see the effects of carbon destabilization with our own eyes, in our own backyards. It’s not just the disasters, it’s the blooms that come earlier, the birds that leave later for the south, the pronghorn spotted so much further north than before.

The urgency to cut carbon is clear. The techniques are obvious. Why aren’t we making more progress?

I think it’s art that will carry the day. Sure, I honour the climate summits and all the policy work that goes into orchestrating systemic change. I know all that has to happen. At the same time, we need to cling tight to narratives that convince us this is possible. I’m not talking about hope so much as love – love of the planet, but also love of our species and of the messiness we’ve wrought. We can own that and still focus on what it will feel like when the planet is over its carbon addiction.

That’s where performing my play comes in, for me. I’m not going to be the one to write new policies or convert energy systems to renewables or run for a seat in the House of Commons. But what I can do is tell stories about what I’ve found out in an extremely intimate setting. I can reveal the secrets of the deeps and the mysteries of our tiny part of the universe. I can tell you that means something. I can use art to remind you that I matter and so do you. It’s why I keep doing the play. It’s why I’ll be reading it in March as part of the 29th season of the Playwrights Reading Series, organized by the University’s Centre for the Study of Script Development.

Because of the pandemic, I’ve had to take up my pen again to figure out a new way to finish the play. I’m sitting here, 24 hours away from being on stage for the first time in all these long months, trying to memorize this new writing, along with the script’s 10,000 other words, Franco!

Part of it goes like this: The great task of our generation is to be heroes, to find redemption, to bring us back from the brink, to do what we can, whatever it is. You’ll know what to do. Adapt and survive. Write a new ending. Live to tell another tale.

Alanna Mitchell is a Canadian author and journalist who writes about global science issues. She specializes in investigating changes to the earth’s life-support systems and travels the world in search of scientists at the centre of what’s going on. Her second book, Sea Sick: The Global Ocean in Crisis, has become an international bestseller and won America’s Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment.
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