



# The York University Magazine

Winter 2021

## ↳ That Funny Lady

**CBC'S  
BARONESS VON SKETCH SHOW  
STAR AURORA BROWNE  
HAS THE LAST LAUGH**



# RIGHT THE FUTURE

environmental &  
urban change

YORK 

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

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## The York University Magazine

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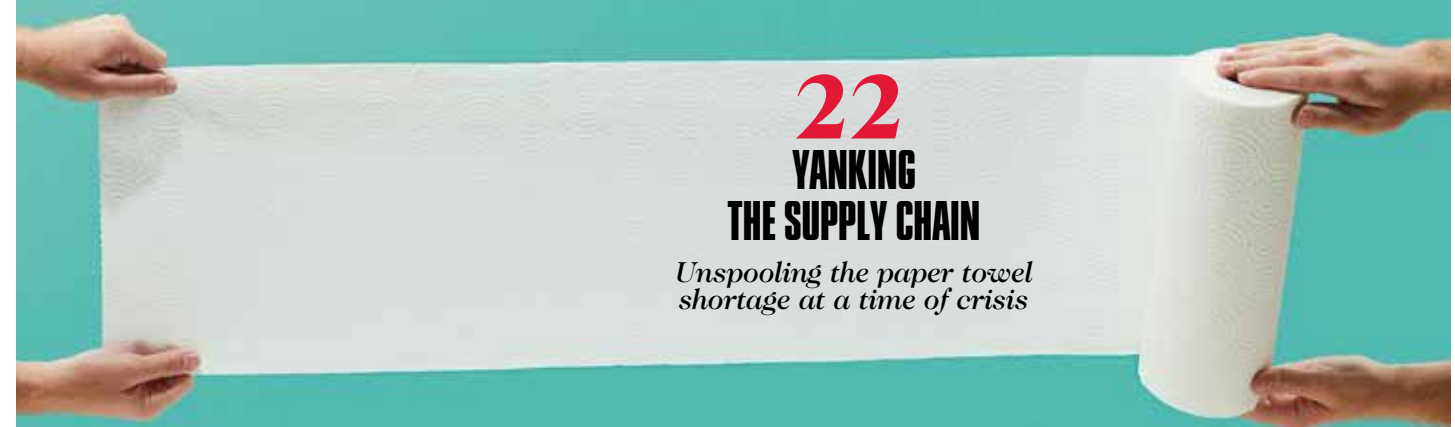
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Photography by Chris Robinson



## THE PRESIDENT



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

**OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS** – amid this second wave of the pandemic – I have increasingly been asked, “How will COVID-19 change the future of higher education?”

It is a great question, and one that I have been thinking a lot about as well. The pandemic has undoubtedly created new challenges, but it has also accelerated trends already evident as a result of automation and artificial intelligence. We know, for example, that there will be an increasing demand for upgrading and reskilling as some jobs disappear and others emerge. We will need to offer even more diverse credentials and flexible delivery to accommodate working professionals.

While most domestic and international students have made it clear that the in-person component of their university experience is irreplaceable, many students have expressed interest in hybrid programming options that make it easier to balance studies, work and family responsibilities. Since last March, we have put even more thought into what this could look like, particularly in terms of global engagement and experiential learning.

We have already experienced some early success. One great example is the ShopHERE program, launched last summer in partnership with the City of Toronto. One hundred students from our Schulich School of Business worked with local retailers to move their businesses online. In addition to benefiting local communities, it gave students a unique hands-on learning experience, building invaluable skills and workforce connections.

The imperative of strengthening our collaboration with other educational institutions, government, the private sector and not-for-profits has been amplified by COVID-19, but it has long been a priority for York. Through our new University Plan 2020–2025: Building a Better Future, we continue to seek out strategic partnerships to maximize the impact of our research on critical global issues captured in the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Our Global Strategy Lab (GSL), for example, draws upon the strengths of both York’s Faculty of Health and our Osgoode Hall Law School, where Director Steven Hoffman is jointly appointed. In November, we celebrated the one-year anniversary of the GSL’s designation as a World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Centre on Global Governance of Antimicrobial Resistance. Working with institutional partners around the world, the centre helps identify solutions to the pressing problem of antimicrobial resistance.

Over the course of 2020, we also witnessed the destructiveness of systemic racism, including anti-Black and anti-Indigenous discrimination. The University and our faculty, staff and students have recommitted to creating a more just future, including by understanding the differential impacts of the pandemic on underserved communities.

Throughout these challenges, York has remained committed to our vision to provide a broad demographic of students with access to a high-quality, research-intensive university committed to the public good. Our ability to adapt and thrive during a global pandemic is a testament to our inventiveness, resilience and compassion. As I reflect on the possibilities before us this new year, I am confident that – in true York spirit – we will continue finding ways to drive positive change in our own communities and around the world.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

## You Joke or You Cry

**HEARD ANY GOOD NEWS LATELY?** Join the club. We’re in this together, remember? All of us anxious, scared and bored out of our minds. But you know what they say about tough times: they bring out the fighter in you. So, with the gloves on, let’s go into the new year throwing a few punches.

This isn’t an incitement to insurrection in the usual sense of the word. The aim is to push back against the darkness and let in some much-needed light. Securing a vaccine is one thing. But having a winning attitude is more than half the battle. Seeing hope instead of misery, trusting that things really will turn out for the best, is how we’re going to win this one. Who needs more depressing statistics anyway? The pandemic is already bad enough. Instead of coronavirus hotspots, let’s identify the bright spots. Or, as TV’s Mister Rogers would say, let’s look for the helpers, the people who are injecting some positivity into these negative times.

At York University, you don’t have to look far. Academics and alumni alike are working on the front lines, coming up with solutions to pandemic problems like supply chain management and respiratory distress caused by the coronavirus. Others are behind the scenes, applying artificial intelligence to

disease management, for instance, or investigating the social inequities that make some communities more vulnerable than others in times of crisis.

Art also continues during the pandemic – despite the shut-downs – consoling, entertaining and reassuring us with creative acts of resistance. Comedy is its own weapon, and Aurora Browne, the York theatre grad who is the focus of our Winter 2021 cover story, wields it with lethal precision. Her brand of satiric humour, as seen on the hit Canadian comedy series *Baroness von Sketch Show*, slices acerbically through the nonsense, revealing an escape hatch through laughter. It’s the kind of relief we all crave right now, and a certifiable mood-lifter. More, please! ●  
– DEIRDRE KELLY

## EDITOR’S NOTES



## The York University Magazine

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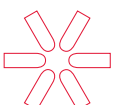
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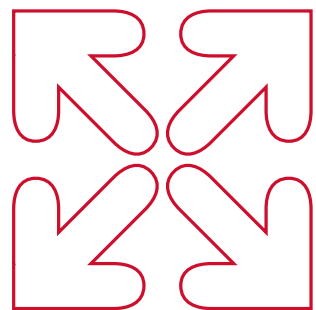
## ON THE COVER



Aurora Browne  
Photography  
by Mike Ford



**YORK**  
UNIVERSITÉ  
UNIVERSITY



## York Expands into Markham

*New campus to offer innovative programs*

**M**ARKHAM CENTRE CAMPUS, York University's highly anticipated new campus, is scheduled to open in the fall of 2023, with a first phase accommodating a projected 4,200 students. This major construction project, whose formal groundbreaking ceremony took place in the fall, is expected to generate more than 2,000 community jobs.

Diamond Schmitt Architects of Toronto designed the 10-storey bronze structure described by principal architect Don Schmitt as a new type of academic building for the 21st century.

"The 400,000-square-foot first phase of York University's new Markham Centre Campus is designed to connect a diverse academic community via multi-storey spaces of gathering and interaction," Schmitt says. "Curved form animates the built interior with fluid, collaborative crossroads supporting teaching and research within a vertical campus."

Generously supported by a one-time \$10 million donation from Toronto's Bratty family, MCC will be located near the intersection

of Enterprise Boulevard and Rivis Road in Markham. The campus will focus on what the Ontario Government, in a summer press conference announcing its approval of the new \$275.5 million project, identified as the "high-demand fields" of business and entrepreneurship. Courses will include data analytics, digital technologies and experiential education in new media.

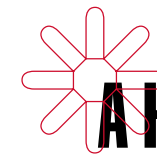
It's the latest development for the University in York Region and the City of Markham.

Innovation York, the University's research and innovation arm, is a major partner in the IBM Innovation Space-Markham Convergence Centre, and York's community innovation hub YSpace supports budding entrepreneurs in Markham.

The University introduced academic programming in Markham for the first time last fall, with classes at the IBM Canada headquarters. Erecting a new dedicated campus building will help keep talent local and be a magnet for jobs and investment, says York President and Vice-Chancellor Rhonda L. Lenton.

"Through the new Markham Centre Campus, York University will be helping to meet the future needs of York Region by offering innovative new programs, work-integrated learning and community-engaged research. By creating new opportunities for higher learning and entrepreneurship in the heart of one of Canada's fastest-growing regions, the new campus will continue York's long-standing role in building more prosperous, inclusive and resilient communities." ●

— Deirdre Kelly



## A HANDFUL OF GOLDS

York scores at national publishing competition

**Y**ORK UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE was a big winner at the 2020 Canadian Online Publishing Awards recognizing excellence in digital publications across the country.

The alumni magazine, produced in both print and digital versions, took four Golds in various categories during a virtual presentation – augmented by presenter Masthead Magazine's Twitter livestream — on February 4.

The York University Magazine went into the evening with five nominations in four categories in the highly competitive Academic division, ultimately taking top prize in three— Best Print and Digital Publication, Best Photo Journalism and Best Website Design.

The accolades were awarded to the summer 2020 issue spotlighting the high achievements of York alumni in addition to innovative research and scholarship across the University.

In a surprise victory, the York University Magazine also took Gold in the Best of Canada division for Best Publication overall, an award granted by the judge based on an accumulation of top scores for content and visual presentation.

COPA producer Martin Seto declared it an "unprecedented" win for a university-based multimedia outlet.

"York University has displayed that the publishing industry's future is in good hands. In the Best of Canada portion of the COPAs, the York University Magazine was awarded Best Publication as compared to all the other entries in the Business and Consumer divisions — that is a COPA first." ●

— Deirdre Kelly



## Stimulating Treatment

A self-adjusting brain implant to help people with Parkinson's

**BIOPHYSICIST JOEL ZYLBERBERG** runs a research lab at York University that is applying machine learning to the study of Parkinson's disease, a progressive neurodegenerative disorder of the central nervous system affecting one in every 500 Canadians. Symptoms include tremors, impaired speech, dementia, and sleep and respiratory irregularities.

To date, there is no cure for Parkinson's, though Zylberberg and his team at the University's Centre for Vision Research are developing treatments to better manage the symptoms of this disease.

Research into vision systems in animals and humans, primarily the stimuli that create visual representations in the brain, has led to the creation of artificial neural networks that can detect behavioural states in patients, in particular sleep patterns affected by the disease.

A.I. algorithms have previously been used for diagnostic purposes. But with this development, Zylberberg – a Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Computational Neuroscience and assistant professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at York – goes further by developing an implant that uses deep brain stimulation to treat motor fluctuations in people with the disease.

"Our advance here is to change the stimulation setting based on the patient's behavioural state," he says, "and we do this by installing our sleep stage detection algorithm into the controller for the brain implant."



Joel Zylberberg

It works like this: the artificial neural networks developed in Zylberberg's lab take in brain patterns recorded by electrodes inserted into the subthalamic nucleus in the basal ganglia, the part of our anatomy that regulates the body's motor system. These electrodes not only record brain activity, they stimulate the brain with a pulsed current delivered to the nerve cells responsible for relaying the messages that plan and control movement.

The patent on Zylberberg's invention is now pending.

"We found that our algorithms do a good job of predicting sleep state, which allows for a targeted stimulation of the brain beneficial to the patient. The next stage is to revise and improve on these patient algorithms using the new patient data being collected in clinical trials."

Those trials, which include patient surgeries and data collection, are being managed through Zylberberg's academic partners at Stanford, the University of Nebraska and the University of Colorado. Nebraska is the lead institution. But York (through Zylberberg) is spearheading the software side of the project promising benefits to patients.

Says Zylberberg, "We anticipate that the new implants we are developing, which adapt in real-time to the patient's state, will reduce the disease burden and improve the quality of life for those suffering from Parkinson's disease." ●  
— Deirdre Kelly

## On Thin Ice

*Lakes are losing their winter cover, threatening life as we know it*

**IF ICE FISHING IS YOUR THING**, then this bit of chilling news just might make your heart sink. Climate change is preventing many Canadian lakes from freezing over in winter, putting a damper on a favourite – and important – activity for rural lakeside communities across the nation. But cold-weather anglers aren't the only losers here.

According to a new study out of York University, a lack of winter ice can increase evaporation rates and the possibility of algal blooms, threatening local ecosystems. The threat is very real, says postdoctoral fellow and York alum Alessandro Filazzola (BSc '12, PhD '18), the study's lead.

"Lake freezing is important for maintaining the quality of fresh water that would be put at risk with the loss of winter ice."

With a team of researchers at York, Filazzola examined nearly 80 years of lake-ice data from 122 lakes across the Northern Hemisphere. After counting the ice-free years, the team determined that the average number of ice-free winters has more than tripled since 1979. The situation is

predicted to worsen with time.

"We found that warmer winters were closely related to the number of lakes going ice-free. Under current greenhouse gas emission scenarios, we expect ice-free years to triple again by the end of the century."

The study, published in *Geophysical Research Letters*, has broad ecological, cultural and economic implications, especially for lake communities where the ice supports tourist activities like winter skating, ice-carving festivals and ice-fishing derbies with large cash prizes. Because winter ice often acts as a natural bulwark against powerful seasonal waves, its absence is also said to be responsible for property damage and land erosion in cottage country.

But freeze that thought: it's not all bad news. Lower carbon emissions could significantly limit ice cover loss for many lakes in northern latitudes. This would be crucial for Canada, home to the most lakes of any country worldwide. "Ice in Canada is iconic," Filazzola says. "If not remedied, its loss will be the making of a national tragedy." ●  
— Deirdre Kelly



BY NEIL ARMSTRONG  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOFIE KIRK

# BRIGHT SPOT

*Community and University partners work  
to create change during the pandemic*



**YORK ASSISTANT PROFESSOR SHITAL DESAI:**  
Co-designed a community-based program that helps  
combat loneliness in socially isolated seniors

**The University is collaborating with groups  
in the surrounding community – The Jane Finch Community  
– to find innovative ways for them to adapt to life during the pandemic**



**O**WNING A TABLET is a godsend for Beverly Wayne, 63, who lives alone in the Jane Street and Sheppard Avenue area and had been missing her seniors' meetings at the Jane/Finch Centre since the onset of COVID-19. Now, thanks to this gift from the Centre, she gets to see her friends and has been busy in virtual painting workshops. Some of the paintings hang on her walls.

After the pandemic stopped face-to-face sessions, the Centre grappled with how to connect with its members. That is when the Jane Finch Family Centre collaborated with Dr. Shital Desai from York University to think through an innovative idea. The University is collaborating with groups in the Jane Finch Community to find innovative ways for the community to adapt to life during the pandemic, especially in northwestern Toronto, where COVID-19 infection rates are among the highest in the city.

This comes as Dr. Eileen de Villa (MBA '03), Toronto's medical officer of health, noted that COVID-19 hits hardest in economically disadvantaged places, and that racialized Toronto residents are especially vulnerable. "Current data shows that 30 per cent of people in Toronto are classified as living below the low-income threshold, but they accounted for 50 per cent of COVID-19 cases. My team determined that, over the course of the pandemic so far, northwestern Toronto stood out for having higher rates of COVID-19, lower testing rates, and higher positivity rates in comparison to other parts of our city."

Confronting this reality head-on, the York University-TD

Community Engagement Centre decided it needed to do things differently. It called for proposals for the 2020/2021 Catalyst Grants to focus on the current COVID-19 situation and to create partnerships between York University and the Jane and Finch community.

The Jane/Finch Centre–York University collaboration to help seniors access virtual programs through technology is backed by a \$5,000-funded co-designed community-based study led by Dr. Shital Desai, assistant professor in the School of the Arts, Media, Performance & Design, and Pablo Vivanco (BA '05), director of programs and community development at the Jane/Finch Centre. It seeks to help people like Beverly Wayne and 99 other area seniors impacted by COVID-19.

A second Catalyst-funded project focuses on the financial wellness of students at Emery Collegiate Institute, and is led by Jennine Rawana, associate professor in the Department of Psychology, and Mazen Hamadeh, associate professor in the School of Kinesiology and Health Science, the heads of Calumet and Stong colleges respectively.

Alongside Maria Palermo, principal of Emery Collegiate Institute; Simi Sahota, a peer leader in her fourth year; and Agata Stypka (BA '06; SPOA '07), student success co-ordinator in the Faculty of Health, Calumet and Stong colleges, they seek to improve students' transition to post-secondary education during the pandemic using participatory videos to improve their finances.

These Catalyst Grants are just one of the ways that the York University-TD Community Engagement Centre is working



**ALUM PABLO VIVANCO:** Director of programs and community development at the Jane/Finch Centre, located in a Toronto community hit hard by the pandemic





## Dr. Desai uses human-centred methods and design-thinking processes to inform her work, helping older adults to “remain socially engaged and find interventions to deal with social isolation”

to deepen university–community partnerships in Jane and Finch.

Since 2014, approximately \$100,000 has been awarded to partnership projects supporting access to post-secondary education, community-based research and experiential education opportunities for students.

**BEFORE COVID-19**, activities for seniors happened in groups, but since the outbreak, the Centre has struggled to find ways to meet their needs virtually. “The pandemic has really affected our ability to bring people together, and I think no demographic feels that more than seniors, because they were also the ones that, from early on, were identified as being most at risk,” says Vivanco, noting that seniors in that part of the city have issues of familiarity and comfort with technology, and sometimes even access to it.

Luckily, the organization received funds to buy tablets for a significant number of seniors, and for training with the technology. This allows them to do their banking, make doctor’s appointments and stay in touch with family and friends. Working with three other agency partners, they distributed the tablets in October.

Dr. Desai’s research looks at assistive technology and older adults. She also examines various aspects of aging, such as chronic pain, cognitive impairments and how technology can help seniors. Her focus is on older people who are still in their homes, rather than long-term care facilities, in the hope of delaying the shift from one to the other. She explores such questions as how seniors can live independently, and how technology can support autonomy and avoid dependence on government, family and caregivers.

Knowing that not everyone has access to modern technology, Dr. Desai seized the opportunity to work with Jane/Finch Centre to study these older adults. “I was very keen to explore the experiences of older people living in marginalized communities where access to this technology is minimal. We already know that older adults in general face a lot of barriers in terms of social isolation, and it is the primary reason they develop different kinds of impairment, cognitive as well as physical.”

Staff at the Centre had to find a way to get seniors to access the technology remotely. Dr. Desai uses human-centred methods and design-thinking processes to inform her work, helping older adults to “remain socially engaged and find interventions to deal with social isolation, which is connected to their mental and physical well-being.” She notes that the project is not only about understanding their needs, but also co-designing with the older adults and staff at Jane/Finch Centre. The Centre is confident that the research will have a real impact both for the seniors in its program and for a larger group in northwestern Toronto.

**LAST SUMMER, SIMI SAHOTA**, a fourth-year York student majoring in psychology with a business minor, read Robert Kiyosaki’s book *Rich Dad Poor Dad*. It completely changed her view of money, and she came up with the idea for an animated video project to help high school students with financial wellness.

With a supportive team of professors, a principal and a student co-ordinator, Sahota will bring together students from the University and Emery Collegiate to produce three or four videos. “I want them to feel financially competent, and

I want them to view money as a tool, instead of aspiring to spend money on things that probably won’t set them up for success.”

Palermo says Emery Collegiate is always open to whatever new resource it can put in place to support the financial health of its students and alleviate their stress, especially during the pandemic. The plan is to have 10 to 15 students in grades 11 and 12 write and film the videos, working with student mentors from York. Once done, the videos will be used in grade 10 careers classes, viewed by students in grade 11, and used at information sessions for grade 12 students and their parents. This would help to reduce their anxiety, while the students involved in creating the videos would be building leadership and technical skills, she says.

For Professor Rawana, the \$3,000-funded project adds to similar programs, such as Agents of Change, in which donors in the Faculty of Health supply funds for students to work in the community, build partnerships and try to become agents of change.

“In talking with the school, it seems possible that we can align some of the things we are doing around finances and supporting students to get to university with their curriculum,” she says, noting that these create resource materials and teaching notes that not only support Emery, but are also available on YorkSpace, a platform that allows anybody in the world to access them.

**MEANWHILE**, Cheryl Prescod, executive director at Black Creek Community Health Centre, heard from residents and knew that The Jane Finch Community would be hit hard by COVID-19, as the area has a high number of essential workers, many of them personal support workers (PSWs).

Toronto Public Health says the risk of illness is linked to how and where people live, work and play. The reasons racialized and low-income groups face elevated risk of COVID-19 are unclear, but could include existing health disparities linked to social and economic factors, stress caused by racism and other forms of discrimination, and obstacles to participating in the public health response to COVID-19 – including difficulties in limiting their exposure to COVID-19, due to being an essential worker, and in physical distancing, due to overcrowding. It also identified inequitable access to health-care and social services.

Prescod says when the alarm sounded on the outbreaks in long-term care homes, what they saw at the Heath Centre was that some of their clients – Black women from the Caribbean who are PSWs working in private or long-term care homes – were most at risk, and showed early signs and symptoms.

Acting on this anecdotal evidence and working in collaboration with Toronto Public Health, they set up the first testing site at a Christian Centre Church near Steeles Avenue and Jane Street. Approximately 150 people were able to get tested on a Saturday and in the evenings.

There are many myths about COVID-19 in the community, and this was a signal to Prescod that the Health Centre had to do community education to “get our people to understand safety measures, including getting tested if you’re sick and staying home.” She was also aware that not everyone could stay home, because some had jobs where, if they did not go to work, they would not be paid.

Between July and November, Prescod and her team held 10 community-led testing sessions at local organizations. The Health Centre advocated for data collection from the province, and Prescod says the first data they saw showed that racialized people – Black, Middle Eastern, Latin – were disproportionately impacted. Their numbers were higher even though they represented a smaller proportion of the population. There was also a higher number of cases in those with incomes under \$50,000.

“We all know this; it’s not rocket science to understand why. Poor people, racialized people, most of the reasons they don’t get the high-paying jobs, racism, all of that. These are systemic factors that cause disproportionate illness – not just COVID-19, but things like diabetes, high blood pressure and all the other illnesses that pop up in poor communities.”

She says it is not surprising that areas like Rexdale or Jane and Finch show up in the Toronto map as having higher infection rates and lower levels of testing.

The executive director has also helped to recruit Black Canadians in Ontario for antibody testing and data collection to assess COVID-19 prevalence and risk factors among Black Canadian communities. Dr. Upton Allen, division head of infectious diseases and senior associate scientist in the Child Health Evaluative Sciences Program at SickKids, is the lead investigator in partnership with Ontario universities and Black community groups. The study will examine the intersection of race and socio-economic status. ●





CBC'S BARONESS VON SKETCH SHOW STAR AURORA BROWNE HAS THE LAST LAUGH

BY DEIRDRE KELLY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD



**I**N AN EPISODE of the hit Canadian comedy series *Baroness von Sketch Show*, a mother in a bedroom lit by fairy lights tucks her young daughter under a frilly duvet before proceeding to tell her a bedtime story with a not-so-happy ending. The theme of her softly narrated tale is the future, and it looks something like this: a string of natural disasters leading to tidal waves, mass migration and sewer tribes who forage for food in piles of garbage while others around them die of an incurable disease. Amen, and goodnight.

The darkly absurdist skit is the brainchild of York theatre grad Aurora Browne (BFA '95), one of four women responsible for making *Baroness* a *cause célèbre* on both sides of the border.

Informed by feminism and a hearty (and hilarious) mistrust of political correctness, *Baroness* lays claim to a subversive brand of humour that exposes the repressed anger, absurdity and existential dread simmering just below the mannered surface of everyday life. The recipient of many accolades, including seven Canadian Screen Awards, three of them in the category of Best Comedy Sketch or Series, the writing goes where men fear to tread – the inside of the women's locker room, the gynecology clinic, the cattiness at the office.

"We lay bare some shameful truths that thousands out there can relate to," says Browne, summing up the success of a show now in its fifth and – by mutual agreement – final season. "We use gallows humour, trench humour and dark, edgy comedy to get the point across that when shit times roll around, you have to laugh. Laughter is a relief, no matter how bad things get."

With fellow comedians Meredith MacNeill, Carolyn Taylor and Jennifer Whalen (who also went to York but didn't graduate), Browne writes, acts and produces the female-driven show, which the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and IFC in the U.S. have been airing since its inception in Toronto in 2016. All in their late 40s (three are straight, one is an out lesbian), the women are close friends whose sizzling synergy was formed years ago on the hard-nut improv comedy circuit. Of the quartet, Browne's the one most likely to make a joke with a wicked twist.

"What Aurora brings to the mix is obviously a huge talent," says Whalen, who met Browne along with Taylor when all were performing with The Second City, the famed comedy club that birthed many a high-profile Canadian comic over the years, among them Catherine O'Hara, Eugene Levy, Martin Short and the late John Belushi and Gilda Radner.

"Aurora's ferociously intelligent," Whalen continues, "and I think she has an interesting and dark world view. She's really interested in talking about the truth and getting to the heart of the matter."

But it's not just her acerbic wit that's getting Browne noticed. A versatile actor, she moves nimbly from comedy to drama with a bit of song and dance in between, skills she nourished during her undergraduate years at York. In addition to *Baroness*, she's performed leading roles in the Canadian comedy series *The Writer's Block*, also on CBC, and the CTV/Comedy Network show *Comedy, Inc.* The winner of the 2008 Canadian Comedy Award for Best Female Improviser, she's also produced and acted at Toronto's Fringe Festival. In 2016, she co-created and starred in *Newborn Moms*, a web series about new motherhood on ABC Digital. The following year, with Taylor, she co-hosted *The Great Canadian Baking Show*, a reality TV series that ran three seasons.

"Aurora creates incredibly funny characters on top of writing with a razor-sharp satirist's eye and sense of structure," says the award-winning Canadian playwright Chris Earle, another Second City alum. "I've worked with her in sketch, improv, theatre and all points in between, and she can play in any style and genre: slapstick, satire, clown, musical, drama. Plus, she's a total blast to work with – funny, loose and collaborative. Her talent and humanity, plus her amazing work ethic, are why she's having such a great career."

**BROWNE GREW UP** in Thunder Bay, Ont., the youngest of five daughters. She was born in 1972 to two progressive-thinking architects who actively nourished a sense of creative resilience in their offspring. They restricted their kids' access to television, something Browne bridled against at the time but is happy for now, because it forced her to find alternative sources of entertainment – books, followed by fictions she created for dolls and a host of imaginary friends to act out within the confines of her bedroom. "We weren't a part of mainstream culture. In my family, the talk was architecture, classical music and old movies on TVOntario. In retrospect, it was the perfect upbringing for a career in comedy, where you need an outsider's perspective, that slight feeling of alienation – what Canadians come by naturally – to take a different angle on things."

Her sisters were older (up to 11 years apart in age), and this meant that Browne had plenty of mature influences to draw on while coming of age. One of her sisters had a collection of Monty Python records that Browne surreptitiously listened

to, memorizing all the hugely funny monologues. Being the baby of the family motivated her to perform these monologues, in addition to other skits she created, as an early form of attention-seeking. Not that anyone minded. On the contrary, her parents and siblings loved her antics and encouraged her to take part in their church's Christmas pageants and other amateur shows in the community, including an acting job at Fort William Historical Park, where recreations of scenes depicting Canada's fur trade are part of the tourist experience.

From there, Browne moved on to the Magnus Theatre, Thunder Bay's leading live performance venue, where, guided by former artistic director Brian Richmond, she participated at a young age in a number of professional theatrical productions. After witnessing the world premiere of *Fire* – Canadian playwright Paul Ledoux's smash musical inspired by rock and roll legend Jerry Lee Lewis, which opened at the Magnus in 1985 before embarking on several successful Canadian tours – Browne was convinced she wanted to be a performer for life. "I loved the whole theatre experience, the whole process – the smell backstage, the costumes, the makeup, the lights," she says. "I loved being onstage."

Looking to formalize her training, Browne moved to Toronto in 1991 to become a first-year student in York's Theatre department. Drawn by the University's reputation for teaching excellence in the performing arts, she studied drama and movement, not yet realizing that her destiny lay in comedy. She had glimpses of what the future might hold when she would say something in class that would inadvertently make others laugh. She liked that, and soon was immersing herself in studies of the commedia dell'arte and the theatre of the absurd – taking a cerebral route into comedy that has served her well over the years. On the other hand, it was the only option available to her at the time. "Funny wasn't really

## DISDAIN FOR COMEDY SHAPED ME. IT MOTIVATED ME TO WANT TO DO COMEDY EVEN MORE

encouraged," she says. "If you were funny, you were usually chastised by the acting teacher. I often felt like that kid in the corner. But that disdain for comedy shaped me. It motivated me to want to do comedy even more."

Still, she is grateful for her University experience. "York prepared me in a fundamental way," she says. "I use my degree every day – at Second City, on *Baroness*. It prepared me for all the work, the long hours, the stamina needed to pull it all off." It also gave her something more.

At this point in the conversation, Browne pauses to search for something in the Little Portugal home she shares with her husband, comedian and writer Kris Siddiqi, and their 10-year-old son. It's a book that was required reading for York theatre students back in the 1990s – Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*. There's a passage in it that she remembers reading for the first time as an undergraduate, and it made all the difference. It solidified for her why comedy really is the one true thing. After a couple of minutes, she finds it and begins to read aloud:

"It is always the popular theatre that saves the day. Through the ages it has taken many forms, and there is only one factor that they all have in common – a roughness. Salt, sweat, noise, smell: the theatre that's not in a theatre, the theatre on carts, on wagons, on trestles, audiences standing, drinking, sitting round tables, audiences joining in, answering back: theatre in back rooms, upstairs rooms, barns; the one-night stands, the torn sheet pinned up across the hall, the battered screen to conceal the quick changes – that one generic term, theatre, covers all this and the sparkling chandeliers too."

**THE SPARKLE DIDN'T COME EASILY.** After leaving York, Browne worked an array of jobs that, for the most part, helped her pay off her student loans. She painted signage





for restaurants and bars and sold goods at retail. She wasn't acting, so it was a bleak period for her. Then a friend told her about Second City, its improv nights, and she thought she had nothing to lose. When she stepped onto the comedy club's stage for the first time, it was like the proverbial dam breaking. Being away from theatre for so long, she had built up reserves of creative energy she didn't know she had. "It was like this explosion," she says. "Everything I had ever learned and felt about theatre came pouring out. I was stronger and even more determined. Really, nothing could stop me."

At Second City, she started taking comedy classes. It's how she ended up meeting her future *Baroness* cohorts, Carolyn Taylor and Jennifer Whalen, though not at the same time. Whalen was one tier above Browne, having already graduated from classes to performing on the Second City mainstage. Taylor, meanwhile, was already a member of the Second City touring company when Browne joined. Despite their differences in seniority and achievement, the three women were aware of each other. They liked each other's work. Soon, Browne and Taylor were collaborating on sketches together and found they had chemistry. "It was a great writing partnership right from the beginning," Browne says. "We were both interested in societal issues and we made jokes around them. It was a real crucible." Whalen saw one of their early routines. "They were onstage with the guys, and they were so strong, so tight. Women were very much in the minority there, so they had to have something extra to compete. I remember saying to myself about Aurora, 'She's a really good actor. She's magnetic and she can sing and holy moly.'"

As all this was happening in Toronto, Meredith MacNeill, a graduate of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, was back in her native Nova Scotia dreaming up an idea for an all-female Canadian comedy show modelled on *French and Saunders* and *Smack the Pony*, British television sketch comedy series spotlighting women comics. MacNeill was able to share her idea with Taylor, who had come to Halifax to work

## WE WANTED TO DO SOMETHING FILMIC WITH A CONTROLLED COMEDY-SET TONE TO GET THE JOKE RIGHT. WE DIDN'T WANT A LAUGH TRACK

as a comedy writer on CBC's parody news show *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, where MacNeill had a part. Taylor then pulled in Whalen and Browne, who helped refine the pitch. It was a perfect fit. They all wanted more or less the same thing, Browne says.

"We all admired *Smack the Pony*, which is performed using a single camera and without a live audience. We liked that because we wanted to do something filmic with a controlled comedy-set tone to get the joke right. We didn't want a laugh track and we wanted high-level hair and makeup, the way it's done on the *SCTV* sketches. We also drew inspiration from Maria Bamford – the depth she brings to her comedy web-series – and The Kids in the Hall, their characters, their silliness, and of course Monty Python, the way they film things. We also wanted to do it in Toronto, our city. Amazingly, we were allowed to do it."

Produced by Frantic Films, the final season of *Baroness* was shot on location in Toronto last fall, well before the lockdown measures were imposed in March – and Browne is grateful for that. It means that, even in a pandemic, the show's 240 episodes are airing as they should, making audiences laugh more than ever. As COVID-19 surges and people are stuck at home with their own versions of existential dread, viewership has soared. A recent Parrot Analytics report has found that audience demand for *Baroness* is three times the demand for the average TV series in Canada right now. Addicts of the show – most of them women around the same age as its creators – are also binge-watching past seasons on CBC's Gem app and YouTube, where fans keep on posting favourite sketches. The series is ending on a high note, and Browne – who is using the time away from the show to develop a wide array of projects – couldn't be happier. "We all just needed to give our creativity a bit of a break right now and work on some of our own projects," she says. "But it's definitely not the last time we'll work together. We're all developing ideas right now. But we have to see how the world shakes down to sort it all out." ●



**T**HE DISRUPTIVE IMPACT OF COVID-19 is everywhere apparent. But for many Canadians, the new pandemic reality only hit home the day they could no longer find toilet paper at the local grocery store. The shelves were empty, wiped clean by panicked buyers suddenly confronted by an unanticipated breakdown of the flow of goods in a supply chain. It was a watershed moment.

People who had never given a moment's thought to the arcane realities of purchasing, operations and logistics (a.k.a. supply chain management) were suddenly asking themselves, "How do delivery systems work anyway?" and "How can something as small as a microbe upend them in one fell swoop?" It was a little bit like that line in the Joni Mitchell song – you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone. And the toilet paper was gone, making people very nervous indeed.

Manus Rungtusanatham, who joined the Schulich School of Business at York University in July 2019, had seen it before. As a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Supply Chain Management, he has spent much of his career investigating why supply networks break down. When they do, the physical flow of goods becomes interrupted, often resulting in shortages. The reasons why are complex, having to do with a long list of events and factors that can initiate a disruption. COVID-19 is certainly one such event. So was the 2002–2003 SARS epidemic.

"Triggers that cause a supply chain disruption can often be anticipated – transportation issues or longer-than-usual inspections at the border, for instance. The probability of such risks can be determined – but how easy or challenging that might be is another matter. The point is that businesses with effective risk management systems can often plan for them," Rungtusanatham says. "But a virus is harder to anticipate. From this perspective, COVID-19 is a very low-probability event, but one with a big impact – even bigger than SARS. A black swan event."

By having established processes in place, in addition to advanced planning, we might mitigate some of the damages.

Supply chains, Rungtusanatham explains, are essentially networks made up of interdependent entities. These entities, in a perfect world, are synced to move goods forward to be consumed by you and me. When one part is out of whack – a temporary closure of a manufacturing facility for health and safety reasons, say – then the entire chain may fall apart. An interruption in the flow of goods due to work stoppages or

political interventions like trade embargoes can also lead to breakdowns in other networks developed to support economies and society as a whole.

After the first wave of COVID-19 hit Canada last winter, supply chain disruptions were especially acute for hospitals and health care-related service providers. Personal protective equipment in the form of surgical gloves, isolation gowns and N95 masks was in high demand and not readily available. In part, this was due to hoarding compounded by a sudden spike in demand. Supply was everywhere constrained as countries sought to stockpile, putting front-line health-care and emergency-response workers at risk.

This very concern spurred the City of Toronto to reach out and ask for expert advice this past summer. Answering the call, Rungtusanatham, together with David A. Johnston, Centre Director for York's new George Weston Ltd. Centre for Sustainable Supply Chains, brought together students and faculty from both the Schulich School and Ryerson University to evaluate and guide the City's pandemic response ahead of the second wave.

Having examined supply chain risk management in the time of COVID-19, Rungtusanatham offers up some key strategies. First is that businesses – as well as governments and hospitals – need to consider how they allocate their sourcing spend.

"Instead of sourcing 100 per cent overseas – for example, from China – why not pursue dual sourcing? Perhaps 80 per cent of what is needed globally and 20 per cent locally, or somewhere nearer in distance? Though costly, this dual-sourcing strategy would pay off in times of crisis, ensuring that a business is not caught short when a supply chain disruption occurs, particularly on foreign soil."

Another suggestion is to heighten visibility and transparency across supply chain systems to determine the origin of a supply and identify other possible sources should that original link in the chain break down, for whatever reason.

"No supply chain is foolproof," Rungtusanatham says. "Avoid becoming complacent. It is better to think systematically on how to minimize the severity of supply chain disruptions by assuming the worst-case scenario, and then putting in place people, processes and procedures that will detect disruptions early and mobilize resources quickly to contain the fallout and damages. By averting a problem, the goods will flow. People will get their toilet paper." ●

How to keep goods flowing in a crisis



BY DEIRDRE KELLY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON



York's new  
**Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change**  
finds innovative approaches  
to complex global challenges

**I**T'S BEEN SAID THAT UNEXPECTED CATASTROPHES – such as the year-old coronavirus pandemic – don't change us as people or as a society; they reveal who we are.

That truism sprang to mind when Ute Lehrer, an urban planner and professor in York's Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, studied a map of the new bicycle lanes installed by the City of Toronto in 2020. City staff boasted of their rapid response to COVID-19 after adding 40 kilometres of bikeways to help Torontonians get outdoors, cycle in safety and avoid potential infection on public transit – the largest one-year expansion of bike lanes in Toronto's history.

What struck Lehrer, however, was the uneven distribution of the new bike lanes. Bloor Street, University Avenue, Dundas, the Danforth, Bayview: the new lanes were overwhelming located in the city's most affluent areas. There were virtually no north-south routes to help commuters

BY RICK SPENCE PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE FORD

Think  
Again

dodge long bus rides to the subway, and certainly nothing for the Black Creek/Rexdale communities, the northwest neighbourhoods hit hardest by the virus.

Speaking on an international panel on designing safer communities, organized by Nova Scotia's St. Francis Xavier University, Lehrer pulled no punches. "It is of the utmost importance to focus on improving public amenities, especially for those who are disenfranchised and underprivileged in our society." As city planners come to grips with the challenges of pandemic life and death, she said, we have an opportunity "to collectively create spaces that are healthy and environmentally sustainable while also promoting equality and integration of all people."

Telling it like it is clearly isn't a problem for Lehrer. In fact, it's a badge of pride for the newly formed Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change (EUC), which was created Sept. 1 in a one-of-a-kind union of York's geography program and the Faculty of Environmental Studies. Since its founding in 1968, Environmental Studies has promoted an interdisciplinary approach to studying the interconnections (and disconnections) between humans and the environments in which we live. From rethinking climate-change policy to democratizing the global city, the new faculty is tailor-made to address the world's most urgent social, economic, ecological and political problems.

When COVID-19 struck, EUC's academics were among the first to respond. They're trained to analyze issues fast, identify problems and ask tough questions. While we look forward to reading their scholarly articles on these subjects a year or two from now, here are some ways that York's champions of change jumped into the fray as the pandemic began transforming today's world – for better or worse.

**Ute Lehrer:**  
**Public Spaces or Private Property?**

It wasn't just bike lanes in Toronto that concerned Lehrer, a Swiss-born art and architecture major with a PhD in urban planning from UCLA. In May, she watched in horror as west Toronto's Trinity Bellwoods Park was overrun by young adults tired of social distancing. She wondered how today's increasingly crowded cities can possibly offer enough public space for all residents, especially those in the city's high-rise communities. In a 2018 paper, Lehrer criticized the

"let's make a deal" backroom arrangements in which condo developers seek "density bonuses" from local politicians in exchange for vague "community benefits." She declared the process akin to "legalized bribery."

Lehrer's concerns also extend to sidewalks. While she understands why the city allowed restaurants and cafés to expand their premises onto sidewalks and closed-off traffic lanes last summer, she is concerned about public space becoming perceived as private. "Public spaces are created, negotiated, contested and reinvented in multiple ways," she says. In the end, public versus private space is simply a social construct, and one in which citizens must relentlessly guard their rights. "I don't think there's an easy solution," she says. "It's really about political will."

**Jennifer Hyndman:**  
**Vaccine Politics**

In the early days of the pandemic, the stinking epicentre of Canada's coronavirus nightmare was two giant meatpacking plants in southern Alberta that produce 70 per cent of the country's beef. Canada's sophisticated cities have outsourced meatpacking to small communities closer to the feedlots, so few city slickers know just how difficult and dangerous this work is – or how those dirty jobs usually end up being filled by foreign workers, resettled refugees or other marginalized people.

As a geographer with a lifelong interest in refugee and displacement issues, Jennifer Hyndman has embarked on a study of the culture, politics and working conditions of Alberta's meatpacking plants to find out what made them so vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission.

"Part of that can probably be explained by their immigration status," says Hyndman. Turnover is high in the meatpacking industry, so employers welcome temporary foreign workers, who may face language barriers and don't have access to provincial health insurance. She's also heard of employees being offered incentives to work eight days in a row, or to show up even if they're feeling ill. The two plants at issue are Cargill in High River – where more than 950 employees tested positive for COVID-19, with three deaths related to employee transmission – and JBS Canada in Brooks, where more than 1,000 cases were reported in May and nine people died.





**The best thing for organizing workers is a crisis**

Steven Tufts



Alberta Health Services later noted that “there is currently no scientific evidence that food or food packaging is a likely source or route of transmission of the virus....We’re all in this together...and no one is to blame.” But a class-action lawsuit filed against Cargill on behalf of workers’ families alleges the corporate giant threatened employees who tried to stay home sick and neglected to implement preventive measures such as masks and social distancing.

Hyndman, who grew up in Alberta, is working on the one-year research project with a post-doc in Calgary. “There are two kinds of outcomes we can hope for,” Hyndman says. “We hope to identify better working conditions for people in this work. But we’ll also examine if [workers’] workplace status puts people at risk because they don’t have access to health care. We need to create better pathways to citizenship.”

We’re not all in this together, she insists. “The fault lines are very clear: if you are low-income, it’s harder to protect yourself.”

We now live in a world of vaccine politics, Hyndman adds. “We have a global pandemic, but no global co-ordinated response.” Instead, countries are competing to obtain vaccines and making their own rules about who gets vaccinated when. “Geographers study globalization. Right now, we have globalization and balkanization happening at the same time. It’s all connected. By doing a project on meatpackers, I can bring all this together.”

**Steven Tufts:  
Opportunity to Organize**

In the first two months of the pandemic, Canada lost three million jobs. While many of those jobs later returned, COVID-19’s full impact on employment has yet to be calculated. York’s Steven Tufts (PHd ’03) is an economic geographer who focuses on labour issues. In a recent article for left-wing journal *The Bullet*, Tufts noted that labour unions have come under pressure trying to protect workers’ rights during an economic disaster, even as many locals are also dealing with downsizing. But, he says, this could be an opportunity for unions to rediscover their roots by championing not just their members, but every Canadian who needs a hand up.

“Unions are necessary to addressing the impact of the pandemic, but they are sadly insufficient,” Tufts wrote. “We

need to think through what is currently possible as unions face the mass unemployment of members and how their response can lead to stronger unionism in the future.”

To study this turning point, Tufts is collecting policies and press releases from unions all over North America. Eventually, this archive will inform a comprehensive investigation into how the union movement stepped up (or not) during the pandemic. For now, he offers a few pertinent observations:

- Downturns can be divisive. But Tufts was impressed with the way management and unions worked together at the start of the crisis. “Of course, if you’re going to the state for support, it’s good to show that labour and management are united in their demands.”

- A Toronto local in the hard-hit hospitality sector received funding to help people find new jobs in the community. By helping the unemployed with skills training and resumé-writing, Tufts believes, unions can find new ways to serve their communities and rebuild popular support.

- As members lose their jobs, many unions are fighting to survive. Tufts wouldn’t be surprised to see some public-sector unions stepping in to support their private counterparts, which could create conflicts in the future. What happens when the same union represents public health workers and industrial workers calling for an end to lockdowns? “I’m starting to see the cracks emerge,” Tufts says.

Yet he remains optimistic about the future. “The best thing for organizing workers,” Tufts concludes, “is a crisis.”

**Laura Taylor:  
The Great Land Rush**

From Toronto to New York and beyond, the first cold breath of COVID-19 sent hundreds of city-dwellers packing for the countryside. But as they burrowed into cottages, country estates and B&Bs, these migrants created waves of their own, upsetting rural ways of life and compelling some local politicians to tell them to stay home.

Professor Laura Taylor (MES ’91) studies the exurbs – the hinterland beyond the suburbs that feeds our cities and fires our imaginations – and the planning processes that shape them. She worries that this accelerated flight to the fringe will stress small communities, land use, wildlife and conservation. Ironically, she says, former city folk can also become



obstacles to progress, since they love their rural communities and no longer want them to change: “They’re like the last settlers coming in who want to pull up the drawbridge behind them.”

Such culture clash causes many complications. Newcomers drive up land prices, making it harder for agricultural properties to transition to the next generation. Higher property prices also make it tough for local acreages to be conserved as land trusts. As well, many small towns have minimal planning processes, leaving them vulnerable to affluent newcomers looking to build sprawling estates or proposing questionable economic-development projects such as resorts or casinos.

Last year’s COVID-19 summer saw unprecedented pressures on exurbia’s conservation areas and provincial parks. Taylor says there’s a shortage of recreational land, and it will worsen as more city-dwellers move out. Just try to find a parking space, she says, near Georgian Bay north of Wasaga Beach, where waterfront homeowners post “Private Beach” signs to scare outsiders away.

To be sure, Taylor believes Ontario has addressed some of these issues. The Greenbelt surrounding the Toronto–Hamilton “Golden Horseshoe” is containing sprawl, and the regional-municipality structure governing many rural communities promotes professional planning. Still, “a greater co-ordination in rural planning would be helpful,” Taylor says. “The GTA is projected to have 15 million people by 2051. Preserving parks and greenery is going to be a huge challenge. We can’t just sit back and say the Greenbelt is enough.”

### **Deborah Barndt:** **Earth to Tables**

During the first wave of COVID-19 lockdowns, grocery stores became not just essential services, but a source of creativity for Canadians rediscovering the joys of cooking and baking. By year’s end, the pandemic had produced an agricultural reawakening, opening our eyes to local food production, the importance of farmers’ markets, community gardening and the development of mutual aid networks that cross borders, cultures and generations.

What more can we learn from each other about our most fundamental industry? Retired York environmental studies

professor Deborah Barndt is working on one last educational project before she retires again for good. “Earth to Tables” is collaborative multimedia content that explores honouring, raising and preparing food in communities around the planet.

Barndt and her colleagues hope to sell the program – which includes videos, web stories, photo essays, a book and hopefully a television series – to schools, universities and community organizations to communicate such vital concepts as our fragile ecosystems, long and costly supply chains, food-related health issues and the overhanging threat of climate change.

Growing up in the civil-rights ’60s, Barndt devoted her career to food, culture and development issues, and to working with marginalized and Indigenous communities in Canada and Latin America. Why “Earth to Tables”? As Barndt explains, “Food is the entry point to understanding our world and how we engage with it.”

You can read about the project and meet Barndt’s collaborators at [earthtotables.org](http://earthtotables.org). There’s Dianne, a farmer in rocky Muskoka (“I don’t own this land, it owns me”); Chandra from the Six Nations of the Grand River, founder of Real People Eat Real Food; Fulvio, a bio-organic farmer in Mexico; market gardeners Anna and Adam from Quebec’s Gaspé Peninsula; Leticia from Ghana, now director of Toronto’s Black Creek Community Farm; and a dozen more. Users of the site choose their own path in learning about these people, their struggles and their discoveries.

Leveraging all her skills as an activist, academic and artist, Barndt’s last teaching project is about sharing food, knowledge and stories to build strong bodies and healthier communities around the planet. Building bridges through collaboration, finding the interconnectedness between people and their ecosystems, is a unifying principle at EUC and it’s animating a diversity of research across the faculty.

“What makes York’s approach to environmental studies so unique is that it combines the sciences, social sciences and humanities. It’s a way of thinking. If you only understand the environment in terms of science and water and testing, that’s part of the problem,” Barndt says. “That sort of thinking is the root of the climate crisis: it suggests that humans are not part of the environment, that we only modify it and change it. It’s all about relations – with each other, and with the earth. We need this shift in our thinking to save the planet.” ●

## **Preserving parks and greenery is going to be a huge challenge. We can’t just sit back and say the Greenbelt is enough**

Professor Laura Taylor





# Giving

FRIENDS & PHILANTHROPY

## Ignat Kaneff: A Lifetime of Creating Opportunity for Others

"This is my way  
of giving back"



*"People were very good to me when I came to Canada. I didn't have an education, so this is my way of giving back." — Ignat Kaneff*

The embodiment of the Canadian immigrant success story, Ignat Kaneff came to this country from his native Bulgaria with only a fiver in his pocket and little grasp of the English language. It was 1951 and he was 24 years old. He worked hard, lifting bricks and bags of cement heavier than his then-lean 135-pound frame, before founding his own construction company that built homes for immigrants with dreams as big as his. From there, "Iggy," as he liked to be called, launched a real estate business that he based in Mississauga, Ont., the location of his

first job. Kaneff Corporation made him a certified billionaire, and over the years he lavished his riches on others. As a philanthropist, Kaneff gave generously to many causes: education, health, the arts and social services, in his home communities of Brampton and Mississauga and beyond. York University benefited greatly from his largesse. The Ignat Kaneff Charitable Foundation, which his wife Dimitrina ("Didi") established in 1986 in recognition of his 60th birthday, supported building campaigns at Osgoode Law School and the Lassonde School of Engineering, as well as the Kaneff Tower on the Keele Campus, which bears his name. In recognition of his philanthropic efforts, York bestowed on him an honorary doctorate of

laws degree. He is also the recipient of the Order of Canada, the Order of Ontario, Businessman of the Year for the Cities of Mississauga and Brampton, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal, and the Order of Stara Planina First Degree (Bulgaria's highest civilian honour), among other commendations. An avid golfer, Kaneff opened courses in communities across southern Ontario, sponsoring tournaments and young players of the game. His heart was bigger than a 9-hole resort. His passing on July 12, 2020, at the age of 93, brought condolences from the Brampton and Mississauga mayors and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Ottawa.

*York honours Iggy's legacy and strong ties to the University below.*

**T**HE LATE DR. IGNAT KANEFF truly lived his deeply held values. He expressed his commitment to others through extraordinary generosity – with his time, resources and spirit. His start as a proud immigrant to Canada who went on to build a real estate empire was "a quintessential Canadian immigrant success story," said his family.

Mrs. Kaneff and daughters Kristina and Anna-Maria agree that what motivated his investments in education most was "seeing his hard-working student beneficiaries thrive and have a chance to experience the learning spaces that were created for them." The deep impact he left will be long felt by future generations of students.

To recognize his vast legacy of philanthropy in building Canadian communities, his support of access to education and, in particular, his tremendous influence on the future of legal education in Ontario and Canada, York awarded him an honorary doctorate of laws from Osgoode Hall Law School in 2010.

In appreciation of Dr. Kaneff and his family's generous support of the University, Kaneff Tower was named in their honour in 2013. At that time, then-York University President and Vice-Chancellor Mamdouh Shoukri said, "Dr. Kaneff's commitment to education that meets the future needs of our students and our society is consistent with his outstanding contributions over decades as one of Canada's great builders and philanthropists."

And there is much more.

A long-respected and beloved friend of York University, "Iggy" Kaneff was always an active supporter.

His leadership gift toward the development of York's Lassonde School of Engineering is building new opportunities for the next generation of engineers with the Kaneff Research Chair in the Department of Mechanical Engineering.

The elegantly renovated and expanded Ignat Kaneff Building at Osgoode Hall Law School was an over-\$50 million project; without leadership and seed money from Dr. Kaneff, the building campaign would not have happened. His support



# Giving



**APRIL 2012:** Dean Lorne Sossin, Didi Kaneff, Jack Diamond (architect), the Hon. Jim Flaherty (Federal Minister of Finance; LLB '73), Ignat Kaneff, York President Mamdouh Shoukri and Greg Sorbara (Ontario Minister of Finance; LLB '81) cut the ribbon at the official opening of the Ignat Kaneff Building.

unlocked matching funds from the federal and provincial governments, and contributions from other donors.

As well, Dr. Kaneff contributed to Osgoode Hall Law School's Winkler Institute for Dispute Resolution, and he provided financial aid for law students through the Ignat Kaneff Scholarship for Academic Excellence, which was matched by the Government of Ontario.

In honour of all of these and many, many more achievements, Dr. Kaneff received the Order of Ontario in 2010. In 2017, he received the Order of Canada, a prestigious honour that recognizes "outstanding achievement, dedication to the community and service to the nation."

In addition, he received numerous awards and distinctions in Canada and Bulgaria during his lifetime. These included Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee Medal and the Order of Stara Planina, Bulgaria's highest civilian honour.

Rick Drennan, writing in online Brampton publication

*The Pointer*, said, "He impacted a multitude of people and associations during his long life, and the tributes in the wake of his death ran the gamut from friends and family, political leaders, academics, those in the building trades, charities, former employees, and the golf world to the men and women on the streets."

Kaneff's great legacy is an extraordinary example of a deep social conscience and thoughtful generosity that addresses the needs of today while building a brighter future for everyone.

"Dr. Kaneff is a big part of the York family," says York University President and Vice-Chancellor Rhonda Lenton. "He was always deeply interested in the success of our students, and his inspirational personal story spoke to the positive impact made possible by a lifetime of hard work." President Lenton continues, "His memory will live on in the many opportunities he created, and in the many people he loved and supported." ●

# Alumni



Respiratory therapists are saving  
more lives than ever before

# BREATHE EASY

BY DEIRDRE KELLY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD



**WHEN THE PANDEMIC FIRST STRUCK** – what seems like a million years ago now – governments were in a mad rush to get their hands on ventilators, the machines that help keep people alive by assisting their breathing. This shortage during the first wave of COVID-19 last spring has been more than compensated for by the additional machines Canada purchased for the second, which started in the fall. But what has been missing from the story are the people trained to operate the equipment.

The unsung heroes of the pandemic, respiratory therapists are the specialists whose job it is to keep patients breathing, assisted or unassisted, during a health emergency. Typically, they can be found behind the scenes, helping patients with pulmonary disease or those with underdeveloped lungs, like preemies in a hospital neonatal unit. There are an estimated 12,000 RTs in Canada, but until now, their presence has largely gone unappreciated by the public.

“I wouldn’t say it’s an invisible profession by any means, but unless you have a respiratory condition, you’re not likely to encounter one. But certainly the pandemic, like SARS before it, has raised awareness,” says Kevin Taylor (MBA ’10), chief executive officer of the College of Respiratory Therapists of Ontario, a regulatory and licensing body for respiratory therapy based in Toronto. “When you get a ventilator, you also get an RT. You now can’t help but notice them.”

Farzad Refahi (BSc ’08) is one.

A York student of kinesiology whose original goal was to become a physiotherapist, Refahi ended up taking a three-year advanced diploma in respiratory therapy at the Michener Institute after witnessing an RT at work on a friend with ALS, a disease causing weakness of the lung muscles. Respiratory therapy is a regulated profession and the instruction was rigorous, geared to patients requiring cardio-respiratory support.

As a licensed RT, Refahi can administer respiratory medications and assist patients in breathing using ventilators in intensive care units and emergency departments. He can work in operating rooms to ensure a patient’s airway is protected and breathing is optimized, and in diagnostic laboratories to assess the presence and severity of respiratory disorders. Lab work especially interests him, which in 2017 led Refahi to join Markham Stouffville Hospital as the

organization’s first full-time RT in its Pulmonary Function Lab. Having risen through the ranks, Refahi, at age 35, is today the lab’s lead technical specialist.

He’d remain there if it weren’t for COVID-19. But when infection numbers surge, Refahi, like many of his colleagues in the medical profession, need to be ready to answer the call. During the first wave of the pandemic, Refahi was deployed to the Acute Care side of the hospital, where he worked for one long five-month stretch. “This is what we signed up for as clinicians,” he says. “As RTs, we run in when things go south, but this virus has had us running off our feet. The news of back-ordered filters and supplies, compounded by rumours of ventilators being held at the border, has tested our resilience more than anything.”

Standing inches from a patient’s face, gingerly threading a tube down the trachea – a process known as intubation, a scary word that has become part of most people’s vocabulary during the pandemic – the work of an RT is inherently risky. To stay safe and not get infected himself, Refahi wears personal protective equipment (PPE) while working long days at the hospital. His workload has increased exponentially since the coronavirus came to Ontario last year. But he’s not complaining.

“I’m genuinely passionate about my job,” he says. “The hardest thing about it is not the hours. It’s seeing whole families affected by the virus – multiple family members hospitalized at the same time, not knowing about each other’s conditions, as they were all in medically induced comas. And then when patients pass, which is always hard, they pass alone, due to the necessary restrictions placed on visitors to the hospital brought on by the pandemic.” It gives new meaning to the words “unprecedented times.”

But if ever he feels overwhelmed – or even just plain scared – Refahi thinks back on his years at York, drawing on what he learned, not only in the classroom but also as a lifeguard at the Tait McKenzie Centre on the Keele campus, where he worked part-time as an undergraduate. As part of his training, he had to learn CPR and swim laps to build up his stores of strength and stamina. Refahi has travelled greater distances since then, but what he learned then still holds up today: “Take a deep breath, then rely on your training to keep you afloat,” he says. “It’s an approach that’s seen me through some difficult days.” ●



## Harshmeet Rakhra

HELPING PATIENTS WITH COVID-19

BY AVA BACCARI

**A** **CLINICAL RESEARCH** analyst with the University Health Network at Toronto General Hospital, Harshmeet Rakhra (BA ’15) has collaborated with Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre to help conduct research on monitoring and detecting early deterioration of people with COVID-19.

“The research goal is to use real-time remote home-based patient monitoring to detect which patients with COVID-19 are at risk of deterioration

that may require hospitalization, while simultaneously providing reassurance to worried patients as they continue to self-isolate.”

The anticipated real-world outcome? Get more clinicians on their phones to provide virtual care to patients diagnosed with COVID-19. Rakhra’s research aims to help health-care professionals to develop a better understanding of the progression of COVID-19, and to reassure patients who show no concerning signs and pre-

vent them from going to the emergency department.

She is currently working on a clinical trial in Ontario, COVIDFree@Home, which uses a mobile app to enable patients diagnosed with COVID-19 but not in need of medical attention to record their symptoms and stay in touch with their physicians from the comfort of their home. “This service has successfully followed hundreds of patients from diagnosis to symptom resolution,” she says. ●



# Classes



VANESSA FARNSWORTH (BA English '99)

## 1970



**OLAH, JOHN A.**  
(BA Glendon, LLB Osgoode '73)  
John is the recipient of the 2020 Ontario Bar Association Award for Excellence in Insurance Law. The award recognizes his exceptional achievement, distinguished service and contributions in the area of law. John focuses his practice on cases involving product liability, recreational liability, environmental law and private international law.

Insurance Law. The award recognizes his exceptional achievement, distinguished service and contributions in the area of law. John focuses his practice on cases involving product liability, recreational liability, environmental law and private international law.

## 1980

**SCUGLIA, DOMENIC**  
(BA Health)

After 34 years in education in York Region with the York Catholic District School Board, Domenic took a position in Regina, Sask., as Director of Education, a role he has held for the past four years. The Regina Catholic School Division encompasses 12,000 students in 32 schools and 1,300 staff.

## 1994

**TSIAKOPOULOS, TED**  
(BA '94, MA Economics '96)

Ted is a professional economist at Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation with over 25 years of experience analyzing housing and financial markets. He currently serves on the board of directors of the Canadian Association for Business and Economics. As a

housing authority, he has given expert commentary to the likes of *Money* magazine, BNN, CTV and CBC. In June 2020, he co-authored *Property Trendsetters*, a bestseller in both Canada and the U.S.

## 1999

**FARNSWORTH, VANESSA**  
(BA English)

As a science reporter based in British Columbia, Vanessa was awarded the TJ Allen Memorial Award for journalism. Her articles on nature, the environment and agriculture have appeared in magazines across Canada. A fiction writer as well, Vanessa has published work in literary journals in Canada and the U.S. Her books include *The Haweaters*, *The Things She'll Be Leaving Behind*, and *Rain on a Distant Roof: A Personal Journey Through Lyme Disease in Canada*.

**JONATAN AND RYAN FUENTES**

(BA History '14, BEd Education/History '15; BSW Social Work '17)



## 2001

**LAWRIE, PAUL** (BA History)

Dr. Paul Lawrie was recently appointed Associate Dean of Arts at the University of Winnipeg. An associate professor of history, he teaches and researches the social and cultural history of modern America. Before joining the University of Winnipeg, he was an Ontario Post-doctoral Fellow of the Provincial Ministry of Economic Innovation and Development at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Dr. Lawrie's research has been published in the *Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, *Disability Histories* and *Truth in the Public Sphere*. He is a past senior research fellow at the IUS (Institute of Urban Studies) and is current chair of the Axworthy Distinguished Lecture Series on Social Justice and the Public Good.

## 2011



**GERVAIS, OGOU D.**  
(BA Political Science)  
While attending York University, Ogou

conducted field research in the war zone of Abidjan, Ivory Coast. When the country's failed presidential election of 2010 saw more than 25,000 people killed, Ogou was inspired to run for office himself, "to bring about economic prosperity, innovation, positive dialogue, peace and sustainable development in the Ivory Coast," he writes.

## 2014

**FUENTES, JONATAN**

(BA History '14, BEd Education/History '15)

**FUENTES, RYAN**

(BSW Social Work '17)  
Brothers Jonatan and Ryan Fuentes founded Education On Trial, an anti-racism consulting group that aims to challenge anti-Black racism in schools by providing professional development services to front-line staff, youth, parents and the broader community.

## 2016

**DWYER, RODALE**

(BA Human Rights & Equity)  
A paralegal by profession, Rodale founded Delivering Hope, an Ontario

charity committed to feeding the homeless and those in need. In 2015, she founded Grace Unlimited Charity to give back to the community through fundraising. In 2017, she founded the Young, Educated & Talented (Y.E.T.) movement in support of young aspiring female entrepreneurs in business.

## 2017

**ZANGIABADI, YOUNES**

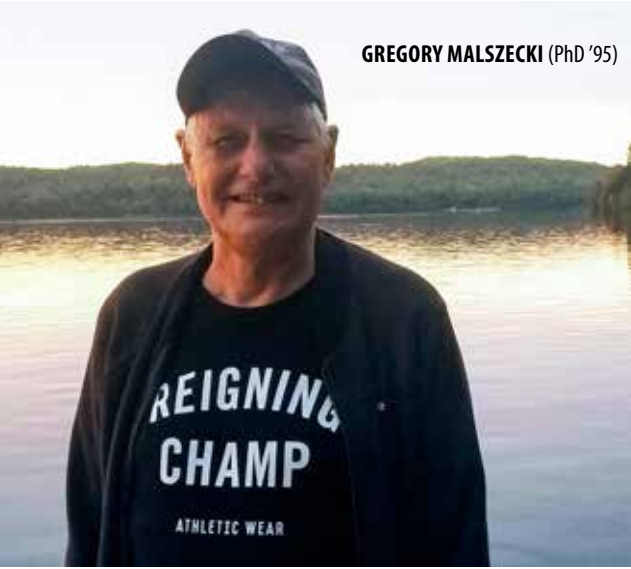
(BA Science)  
Younes co-founded a non-profit and non-partisan Canadian foreign policy think tank called the Institute for Peace & Diplomacy (IPD). Today, through publications, conferences, policy briefings and recommendations, IPD has expanded its influence through active engagement with policymakers and leaders in government, civil society and the business community.

## 2018



**BANH, ANTHONY**  
(BBA Schulich)  
Anthony is a marketing and business development manager at

Yorkville Partners; in this role, he donated over 2,500 N95 and handmade face masks to hospitals across North America during the pandemic. He also raised funds to support LGBTQI2S+ organizations. As founder of Kuva Creative Agency, he has overseen projects for Fred VanVleet of the Toronto Raptors, record producer Murda Beatz and the Toronto Argonauts.



**GREGORY MALSZECKI** (PhD '95)

## 2020

**RAKKAR, JASVIR**

(BEd Education)  
While attending York University, Jasvir was selected by Canada's national baseball team to participate in the 2019 Pan Am Games in Lima, Peru. The team took home the Silver Pan Am Medal that year, which added to a Gold Medal win in 2015.

**KENNEDY, JAMIE**

(BSc '12, MScN '18)

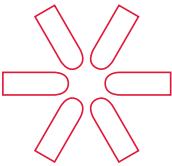
Jamie graduated from the Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioner program at York University. She went on to practise as a Nurse Practitioner at the Carea Community Health Centre in Oshawa, and most recently at the Belleville and Quinte West Community Health Centre in Belleville. She passed away on August 28, 2020.

## IN MEMORIAM

**MALSZECKI, GREGORY**

(PhD '95)

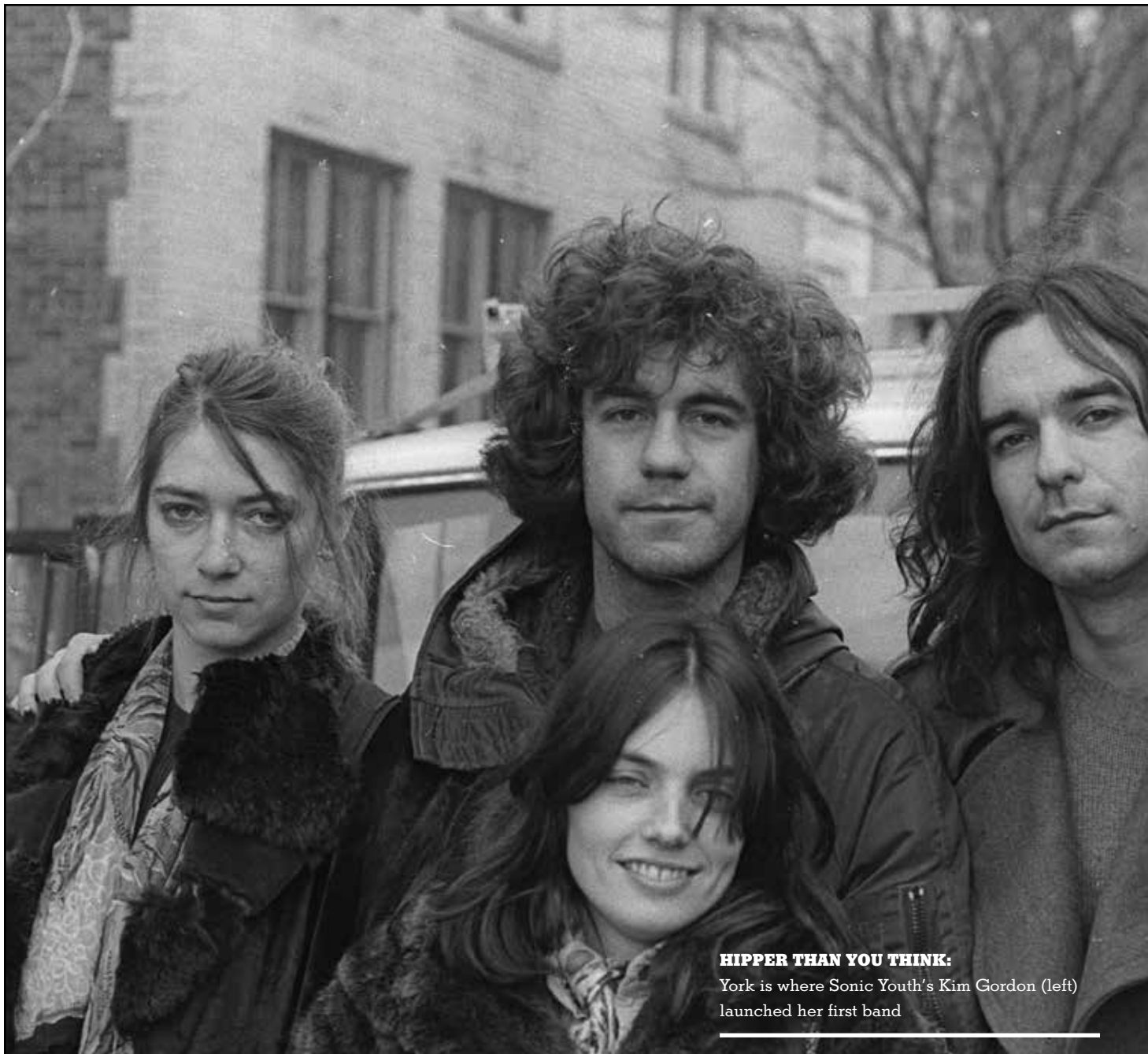
Gregory was a member of the School of Kinesiology and Health Science at the University, where he taught for 40 years. He will be remembered as a mentor to thousands of students, and as the creator of "Destination: Graduation" – an induction motto (or battle chant) for entering students. Gregory died on July 6, 2020.



**WANT TO BE IN CLASSES?**

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**HIPPER THAN YOU THINK:**  
York is where Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon (left)  
launched her first band

## Flashback

**Have a great  
photo from  
your days at  
York?**

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

**KIM GORDON**, the visual artist, writer and style icon best known for her star turn as bassist and lead singer of the alt-punk band Sonic Youth, has a new book with a black-and-white centrefold snapshot of her as a student at York University in the 1970s.

A memoir as scrapbook, *No Icon* uses personal images in addition to newspaper clippings, song lyrics, artworks, advertising campaigns and fashion editorials (including a favourite showing Gordon in a Marc Jacobs dress, shot by Juergen Teller) to trace a journey of creative exploration.

York figures prominently in the narrative. At the University, Gordon (who grew up in Los Angeles) made “minimalist, gooey, unstretched paintings, with no instructor,” and a “silent surrealist film about Patty Hearst” under the guidance of Fluxus filmmaker George Manupelli, then a York professor and the main reason Gordon wanted to come to Canada. It’s also where she started her first band, Below the Belt, a class project that engendered Sonic Youth and all the noise that followed.

York is hipper than you may think. ●

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