Western Alumni Magazine

Spring/Summer 2025

THE ISSUE OF AGING

Western

Story by Rachel Condie
Photo by Claus Andersen

Western's opera students ditched wigs and castles for sneakers and cityscapes in a bold, contemporary take on *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)*, one of two full-scale operas staged each year by more than 150 student singers, instrumentalists and crew members in the Don Wright Faculty of Music.

Opera at Western brought new life to Mozart's final masterpiece in March, reimagining the classic through a modern lens. Award-winning guest director Jennifer Tarver transformed the Paul Davenport Theatre into an urban schoolyard with concrete stairs, skateboard ramps and a basketball hoop replacing the traditional whimsy of forests, palaces and spirits.

In the scene depicted here, soprano Amy Godin, BMus'24, appears as Pamina alongside tenor Andrew Wolf as the flute-playing hero Tamino in a dramatic moment from the final dress rehearsal. Both are currently pursuing their master of music degrees.

In the pivotal scene, Tamino and Pamina face a symbolic trial by water—a test of courage and virtue—guided by the magic flute, with cell phones casting waves of light across the stage to evoke water.

Conducted and directed by professor Simone Luti, the production featured the original score of *The Magic Flute* and played to sold-out audiences. ●

ILLUSTRATION BY JEANNIE PHAN

Collaboration builds bridges and drives change

In a world of political divides, social tensions and information overload, finding common ground can seem more challenging than ever.

But at Western, connection remains at the heart of what we do, and it's happening constantly in every corner of our campus.

Some of these connections are more formal—faculty and students teaming up in labs, guest speakers sharing their expertise, research groups tackling big challenges. Others are in the moment—a debate over coffee at The Spoke, a chat between students from different countries before a workout, a thought-provoking question in class.

Whether planned or spontaneous, these exchanges build understanding and spark new ideas.

Our new Ronald D. Schmeichel Building for Entrepreneurship and Innovation was designed with this in mind. It's a space built for collaboration, where students work with experts to take on pressing challenges, from improving health care to advancing sustainability.

This spirit of connection extends beyond campus, too.

We're committed to ensuring every Western student has the opportunity to apply their learning in real-world settings, whether it's studying abroad, entrepreneurship, research, collaborating with industry and community partners on project-based learning, or internships, co-ops and practicums.

We also partner with industry leaders, organizations and other universities around the world. For example, our Western Academy for Advanced Research brings international, interdisciplinary teams of scholars together to address critical issues facing humanity, from fostering global peace to building smart cities.

This issue of *Western Alumni Magazine* highlights the many ways the Western community connects to create change, from undergraduates gaining hands-on research experience, to experts reimagining how to best support an aging population, to an annual event that brings our student-athletes together with local Indigenous youth.

As our global network of over 370,000 alumni continues to grow, so too do our connections and our collective impact.

Thank you for being part of it.

Alan Shepard
President & Vice-Chancellor

Western Alumni Magazine

Spring/Summer 2025

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Western University is located on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Attawandaron peoples, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum.

This land continues to be home to diverse Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) whom we recognize as contemporary stewards of the land and vital contributors of our society. Their distinct rights are an important part of our institutional responsibility to Reconciliation, and they are essential partners as we continue our commitment to increasing Indigenous voices and presence across all levels of community life, work, study and research.

↑

The mural *Firekeeper* by Indigenous Studies student **Mike Cywink** depicts a part of the Ojibway creation story where the turtle offers his back to the Creator to begin life when the world was just water. The muskrat resurfaced with dirt and spread it across the turtle's back, bringing life—symbolized by fish, birds and trees. Featured at the East Lions Community Centre in London, Ont., *Firekeeper* is the first mural in the London Art Council's Songlines Project and one of the inaugural works in London's Permanent Indigenous Artwork Collection, unveiled June 27, 2024.

Printed in Canada

Western Alumni Magazine is printed in a carbon-neutral facility on Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®)-certified materials using clean, renewable, emissions-free electricity provided by Bullfrog Power®, reducing traditional power usage and greenhouse gas emissions. Remaining emissions were offset with Carbonzero™-certified credits.

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Western Alumni Magazine is published twice a year by Western Communications in partnership with University Advancement.

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bullfrogpowered
Printing by Lowe-Martin is bullfrogpowered

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper from responsible sources FSC® C016931

carbonzero CERTIFIED
CZC-2628-2710-2023
Printing by Lowe-Martin is offset by Carbonzero.

ISSN 2817-8327 PRINT
ISSN 2817-8335 ONLINE

FONTS USED: ABC MONUMENT GROTESK & ABC GRAVITY (DINAMO), TIEMPOS (KLIM), SOFTCORE (TEKIO), ANIMO (HEAVYWEIGHT TYPE)

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IN EVERY ISSUE

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↗ Jordann Harman

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↖ Dr. Jennifer Gunter

NORTHERN TORNADOES PROJECT

$20M investment establishes Canadian Severe Storms Lab

A global leader in wind engineering and climate resiliency, Western has launched the Canadian Severe Storms Laboratory (CSSL) with a $20-million investment from longtime partner ImpactWX.

"This extraordinary gift is truly one-of-kind in Canada when it comes to supporting exploration and scientific discovery and will serve as the catalyst for everything we want to do at the Canadian Severe Storms Laboratory," says Greg Kopp, ImpactWX Chair in Severe Storms Engineering and CSSL founding director. "The CSSL will greatly improve severe and extreme weather detection and documentation across the country while mitigating harm to Canadians and their properties."

The CSSL builds on the work of Western's Northern Tornadoes Project and Northern Hail Project and aligns Canada with severe storm researchers at the U.S. National Severe Storms Laboratory and the European Severe Storms Laboratory. ●

↖ Drone image of EF4-rated tornado destruction in Alonsa, Man. in 2018.

More on these stories: magazine.westernu.ca

Out-of-this-world win

A team of Western physics and astronomy graduate students triumphed in the NASA Space Apps Challenge, winning the prestigious Best Use of Science Award.

Competing against 15,444 teams from 163 countries, Dakota Cecil, Ian Chow, Simon Van Schuylenbergh and Maximilian Vovk developed SkyShield, a 3D app that tracks near-Earth objects, asteroids and meteoroids to prevent collisions with human life or space equipment—all in under 30 hours.

The Space Apps Challenge is intended to engage a global community in developing solutions for the challenges humanity faces on Earth and in space. ●

ILLUSTRATION BY DALBERT B. VILARINO

Excellence on and off the field

PHOTO BY STEVEN ANDERSON

Athletics and academics go hand in hand for Western Mustangs football captain and fourth-year medical sciences student Jackson Findlay.

Recently named one of Canada's Top 8 Academic All-Canadians, recognizing student-athletes excelling in sport, academics and community service, Findlay has dual aspirations: becoming a paediatric oncologist and a professional football player.

Named 2024 Ontario University Athletics Outstanding Stand-Up Defensive Player of the Year and team MVP in 2023 and 2024, he led the Mustangs to multiple championships, including a 2021 Vanier Cup victory, before being picked up by the B.C. Lions in the second round of the 2025 CFL draft. A three-time Academic All-Canadian, he received Western's 2025 G. Howard Ferguson Award for excellence in athletics, academics and campus life.

"Jackson is an outstanding football player; but what really makes him exceptional and what makes us most proud is how much he cares about his teammates and about making the world a better place," says Christine Stapleton, Western's director of sports and recreation.

Off the field, Findlay mentors young athletes, coaches women's football and volunteers with organizations such as the Boys & Girls Club.

"Sport is an amazing thing that brings people together—all ages, all backgrounds. Through my volunteering, I want to show young kids they can do anything they put their minds to," says Findlay. ●

Green goals, gold results

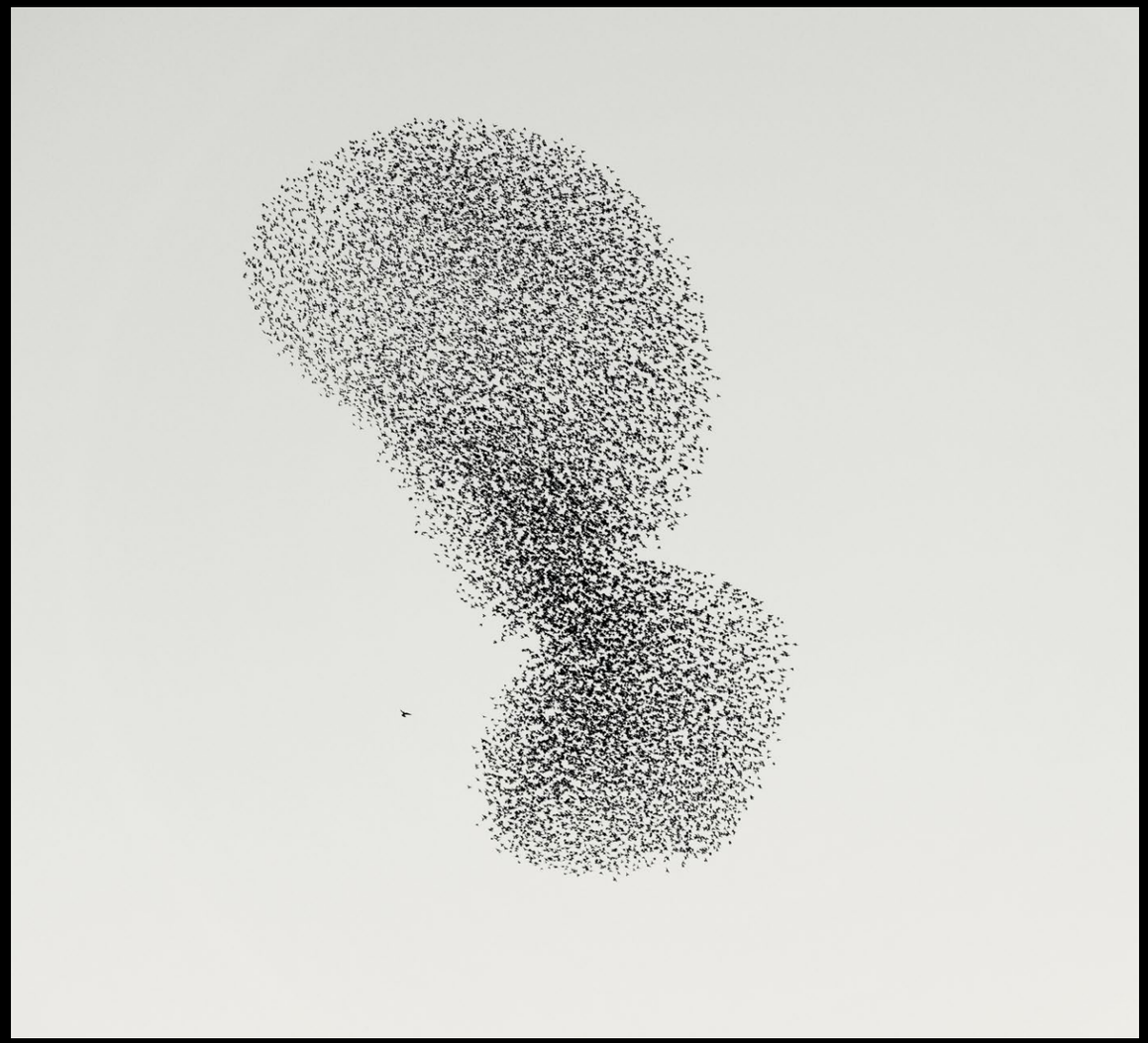
Illustration by Dalbert B. Vilarino

Western has earned a gold STARS rating and its highest score yet under the most rigorous standards for its work advancing sustainability on campus.

Administered by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) is a global standard for higher education, tracking progress towards sustainability in academics, engagement, operations and administration.

As of press time, Western is one of only 15 institutions worldwide and among just three in Canada to receive gold-level status under STARS version 3.0. This is the university's fourth consecutive gold rating in the triennial report since 2014, with the latest submission achieving the highest score to date.

Earning gold at the STARS 3.0 level comes just months after Western placed in the top two per cent globally and tied for fourth in Canada in the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2025. ●



PHOTOGRAPHER: DANIEL DENCESCU

Taking flight
Advancing justice in the digital age

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Photographer Daniel Dencescu captured this large flock of starlings against a cloudless sky in Rome, Italy. The birds are gathered in a murmuration—a unique flight formation he describes as a mesmerizing dance.

Gathering from all directions, a flock of starlings will take complex shapes, moving and weaving in different formations across the sky, all for the protection and collective good of the birds.

Inspired by this phenomenon, Western's Faculty of Information and Media Studies has launched its first-ever research centre, the Starling Centre for Just Technologies and Just Societies.

Co-directed by professors Alissa Centivany, Alison Hearn, Joanna Redden and Luke Stark, the centre aims to explore the social, political and ethical impacts of digital technologies like AI and their use in data collection.

"Our mission is to research the impacts of digital technologies on everyday users and find ways to make these technologies and their effects more transparent and accountable," says Hearn. ●

ILLUSTRATION BY DALBERT B. VILARINO

Where math minds meet

Mathematicians like to put their heads together to solve tricky problems. It's exactly what Western's dean of science Matt Davison hopes will happen at the Fields-Western Collaboration Centre, created in partnership with one of Canada's most prestigious mathematics organizations.

Western and the Fields Institute for Research in Mathematical Sciences have signed a new agreement to create the Fields-Western Collaboration Centre, a space for workshops, conferences, international researchers, summer schools and a new research hub on campus called the Centre for Network Science.

Davison says the centre is designed to bring researchers together from around the world.

"Math isn't just about numbers—it's a creative process where asking the right questions leads to new insights," he says. "By bringing our students and researchers together with leading mathematicians, we're excited to put Western on the map and give people from different fields the chance to use math tools in their own work." ●

(IN) DETAIL

Western alumni by the numbers

↑

69°39'6"N 18°57'20"E

TROMSØ, NORWAY

Northernmost location with a Western alum

375,058

Number of Western alumni

101

Oldest Western alum on record

49.3

Western alumni average age

5

Most Western degrees/ certificates by a single alum

46°05'57"S 168°56'47"E

GORE, NEW ZEALAND

Southernmost location with a Western alum

↓

Summer break(throughs)

For many students, summer is about stocking savings accounts or taking extra courses. But for some, it's a magic mix: meaningful work that applies what they're learning in the classroom to real-world challenges through Western's undergraduate summer research internships. These full-time, paid, 16-week positions are available across a range of disciplines.

Karen Hu
Voice Performance

MY PROJECT:
I co-created *The Choral Collection*, a free online resource for choral leaders and educators that highlights works and provides teaching resources from historically underrepresented communities, such as music by 2SLGBTQ+ composers.

WHY IT MATTERS:
The music we choose shapes how we teach and whose voices are heard. As diversity and inclusion principles become more important, *The Choral Collection* helps conductor-educators expand their practice and bring a wider range of music to their choirs with context, respect and authenticity.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED:
This has been an invaluable opportunity to learn and grow. I've expanded my music research, connected with choral leaders and deepened my curiosity about creating positive change through music education.

NEXT STEPS:
I hope my research inspires educators to challenge biases, uplift singers and broaden their view of choral music.

Megan Sutton
Kinesiology

MY PROJECT:
I explored how Ozempic is portrayed on TikTok, tracking its growing use for weight loss and how its messaging has evolved.

WHY IT MATTERS:
Ozempic as a weight loss tool is becoming more widely accepted, reflecting society's focus on thinness and its deeply ingrained anti-fat attitudes.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED:
I gained hands-on experience in research—reviewing literature, collecting and analyzing data and writing manuscripts. More importantly, I learned from experts, worked in a lab environment and built the foundation for my academic journey.

NEXT STEPS:
I want to keep exploring beauty standards, weight stigma and how social media reinforces harmful norms.

Joshua Givans
Engineering

MY PROJECT:
I worked with African partners to test low-cost light therapy boxes for treating newborn jaundice.

WHY IT MATTERS:
Jaundice is easily treatable in wealthy countries but claims over 100,000 newborn lives worldwide each year. By developing open-source, low-cost technology, we're helping partners in Kenya to 3D print and deploy life-saving treatments where they're needed most.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED:
Through this experience, I've seen firsthand how technology can truly transform lives. I've also gained the skills to analyze and write a research paper, all while working on a project that has real, immediate impact.

NEXT STEPS:
I'm developing advanced reasoning AI models to make it easier for people with mobility issues to use computers.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MELINDA JOSIE

Political stress

Political stress refers to the anxiety, frustration and emotional exhaustion people experience due to political events, news and debates. Research shows it can lead to loss of sleep, post-traumatic stress disorder and even suicidal thoughts in some individuals.

While general anxiety stems from personal concerns like work, relationships or health, political stress comes from ongoing uncertainty, conflict and a sense of powerlessness over large-scale events.

Our cognitive and emotional systems aren't designed to handle a constant influx of political threats, yet we're exposed to them daily. The more we tune in, the more our mental and emotional health deteriorates.

Part of the problem is how our brains are wired. Psychologists call it negativity bias—our tendency to focus on negative events because they signal potential threats. While positive stories may be uplifting, they don't pose immediate danger, so we pay less attention to them. Many also feel pressure to stay constantly informed, believing that missing an update makes them apathetic or uninformed. But consuming news in moderation is essential for our mental well-being.

The key is setting boundaries. If you find yourself doom-scrolling, limit screen time by setting a timer. Choose a few trusted news sources that offer daily or weekly summaries instead of constantly refreshing your feeds. Being intentional about news consumption can make a huge difference.

Another strategy is to focus your attention. Instead of worrying about everything, pick two or three issues that matter most to you. Pay attention to local politics—municipal and provincial decisions often impact your life more than federal or international ones. Getting involved with an advocacy group, donating or contacting elected officials can provide a sense of control and purpose.

Moderation is essential when it comes to politics. Shutting everything out isn't the answer, but neither is letting it consume you. By engaging thoughtfully, we can protect ourselves while staying informed. ● **Amanda Friesen**

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POLITICAL (ADJECTIVE)
relating to the government or public affairs of a country

STRESS (NOUN)
a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances

↗

Amanda Friesen is the Canada Research Chair in Political Psychology and a professor of political science and psychology at Western. As director and founder of the Body Politics Lab, she investigates how political environments impact physical responses, the role of gender in political conversations and how appearance shapes political opinions.

From competitor to coach—finding purpose beyond the pit

Story by Caroline Ehrhardt
Photos by Brandon VandeCaveye and Mark Dewan

The moment I landed in the sand I knew, unequivocally, that I had done it—I had just broken the Canadian record in women's triple jump.

The competition official had barely finished reading out the number from the measuring tape when my longtime coach and the student-athletes I coached at Western tackled me in celebration.

PHOTO BY BRANDON VANDECAVEYE

↖

Caroline Ehrhardt, BHSc'15 (right) and Kalista Elliott, a second-year family studies and human development student and Mustangs triple jump athlete, after the Ontario University Athletics track and field championships in Windsor, Ont., on Feb. 22, 2025.

Kneeling at the bottom of that support squad pile-up in Western's Alumni Stadium, on a humid Sunday evening in May 2023, I thought about the turbulent road I journeyed to arrive at this long-awaited moment; a road paved by brave, persistent versions of my past self.

I had no idea how rocky my path was about to get.

Three months after breaking the record with that 14.03-metre jump at the Bob Vigars Classic, I was playing in an annual family baseball tournament when I sprained my ankle. Turns out world-class speed isn't that helpful in baseball if you can't also stop on a dime. I brought a little too much velocity into third base and when I tried to stop, the rest of my body continued the forward momentum and I went all the way over my ankle.

The sprain was so severe the doctor said I would've been better off breaking my ankle. Weeks turned into months of rehab. When even surgery proved to be largely unhelpful in restoring regular function, it became clear I'd likely never walk down the stairs normally again, let alone run full speed and launch myself onto one leg to compete in the sport I loved.

I couldn't picture my future without it. I was scared to imagine a life without track.

In the end, it was the student-athletes I coached—passing on the wisdom and support from my own mentors—who saved me. Early on in my career, I convinced myself that to be an elite athlete, I had to be selfish with my time and energy, limiting my passion to one domain. But once I met these young men and women, I couldn't help but give them my all.

Coaching at Western, on the same track where I once trained, opened a whole new world for me.

Athletics had been a part of my life—*a part of me*—since I was a little kid.

I grew up in Espanola—a rural town of about 5,000 people near Sudbury, Ont. My foray into sport began when my parents signed me up for a track and field club an hour away when I was 11 years old. I was only a couple of weeks into practices when my mom's battle with breast cancer came to a devastating end.

I learned many years later from a family friend that my parents purposely registered me when they did because they wanted me to have a hobby, a distraction, to pursue while navigating the loss of my mom at such a formative age. Track would go on to fulfill their intended purpose and then some. I enjoyed the perpetual pursuit of trying to run a little faster, jump a little farther. I especially loved triple jump; the contradictory combination of grace and aggression it required felt like a fun puzzle.

Pretty quickly, I decided I'd devote myself to being the very best triple-jumper in the country. My dad and I built a jumping pit in our backyard, and it became my oasis, a place to hone my craft throughout my teenage years.

When I was in Grade 12, I signed a full-ride scholarship to the University of Oklahoma. Just a few weeks before embarking on my next chapter, the coach—a major factor in my decision—left. I knew instantly I needed a new plan.

Western's track and field coach Vickie Croley helped me find my next home. I look back with gratitude that the universe forced my hand, as coming to Western was the best twist of fate I could've asked for. As a Mustang, I won multiple national titles, set the Canadian university record in triple jump in 2015 and most importantly, met the coaches who would see me through the rest of my athletic career.

In my final year at Western, 2015, I was named athlete of the year. I was hungry for more and knew I would keep jumping after university. I had Olympic dreams and that national record to catch.

I wasn't jumping far enough to earn funding from Canada's national sport agency, so I worked part-time and did odd jobs—blogging for a local events website, working at a corndog stand at the Western Fair, transcribing a handwritten novel about wizards.

My now-husband Taylor Ehrhardt and I lived in a 600-square-foot apartment, both chasing our track and field goals.

Looking back, it was a grueling and stressful chapter of our lives, but also incredibly thrilling. Not long after, my otherwise healthy, marathon-running dad unexpectedly passed away—a heart attack. Being orphaned at 25 is a strange space to exist in—you're old enough to survive on your own but also ... not really. Maybe you never feel old enough to live in a world without your parents.

There I was, once again, throwing myself into sport as a way of coping with overwhelming grief and what felt like a tsunami of unfairness. But this time, I was getting older, and injuries began to plague my performance. There was a stretch, several years in a row, where I was actually trending backwards—getting further from the Canadian record instead of closer. At times, I wondered what on earth I was still doing chasing that goal, but not once did I seriously consider quitting. I had always believed with deep conviction that it was only a matter of time. The word inevitable became my mantra. The thing about inevitability is it removes the question of if and replaces it with when.

During those years of plateaued performance, I started as the volunteer horizontal jumps coach with Western's track and field team, while continuing to compete myself. I was hesitant at first—thinking I needed single-minded focus to reach my goals—but it was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Becoming a coach served as a turning point in my own athletic career. It brought many of my best traits to the surface. The very qualities I was quick to offer my student-athletes—compassion, patience, optimism—I wasn't generous enough to offer myself. It felt good to be their voice of reason, their soft place to land in trying times, to inspire confidence in them when their doubts were all-consuming. The closer I grew to them, the more they inspired me to be a better person and the more determined I became to show them, through my own journey, all the things I had been preaching. I wanted so badly to do right by them.

On May 28, 2023, with many of those student-athletes cheering me on, I jumped 14.03 metres and broke the 16-year-old Canadian record. It was equal parts unbelievable and totally familiar—after all, I had spent over half my life visualizing it.

I felt immense pride knowing I had become the determined woman 11-year-old me would not only have looked up to but would've been so proud to become. I was patient enough to stay the course, evolving until I reached that moment. Years prior, I had even gone so far as to photoshop a fake CBC Sports article detailing my hypothetical feat. That fake article, littered with creases from many moments of frustration when I had crumpled it up, now hangs adjacent to the real article in my office. It still feels surreal, and I don't know if that sense of awe will ever wane.

Ehrhardt set the Canadian women's triple jump record of 14.03 metres at the Bob Vigars Classic in London, Ont. on May 28, 2023.

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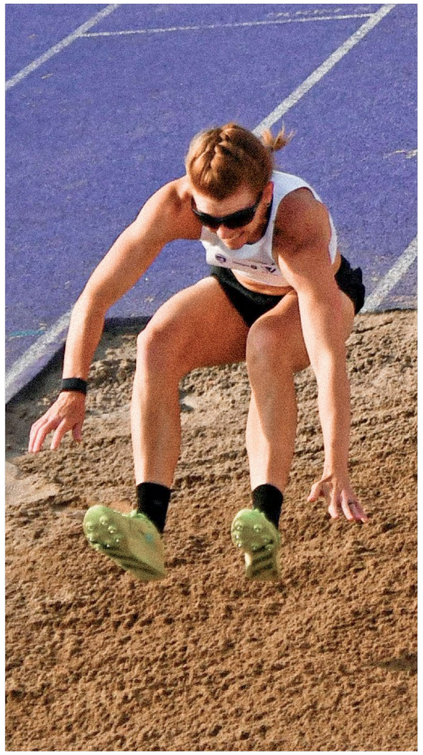


PHOTOS BY MARK DEWAN

But the highs don't last forever. The sprained ankle that ended my professional career would test me to my limit.

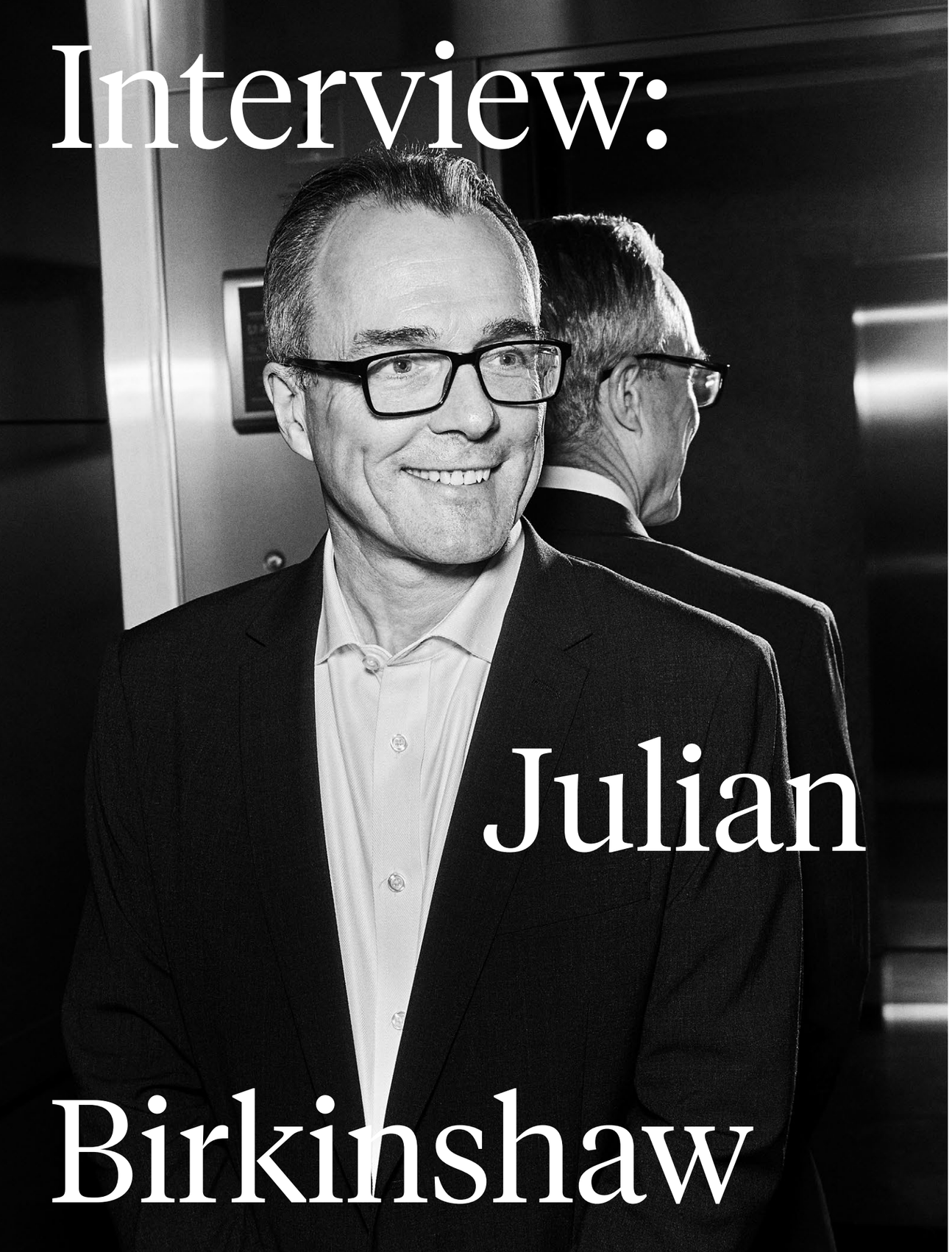
Retirement from sport proved to be my most horrific encounter with the beast that is grief. It was a compounded loss with many complicated layers: my childhood, my connection to my parents, and most of all, a sizeable chunk of my identity.

Grieving something that isn't human is awkward and confusing, and my healing reflected it. I struggled tremendously, but after a few months, I knew I needed to return to coaching and try to figure out my new relationship with track and field. I realized it would be vastly different, but I never considered it could eventually feel even more fulfilling.

It's special to reach the goals you set for yourself, but being the first person someone runs to when they reach the target they've been striving for is indescribable. On my darkest days, I remind myself that my impact on the sport as a coach has far greater reach than my years as an athlete.

That road I devoted my life to paving? I once believed it ended on the podium or in the pit, with the realization of my ambitious goals, knowing I had become the athlete I always dreamed of being. But when I zoom out now, I can see it was just a stop along the way—and there's still an endless road ahead for me to travel in this sport. ●

Caroline Ehrhardt is the Western Mustangs track and field assistant coach for horizontal jumps. As a student-athlete, she was recognized as a U Sports Top 8 Academic All-Canadian, an honour shared by just nine Mustangs (including Jackson Findlay, page 12) since it was established in 2013.



Interview: Julian Birkinshaw

Interview by Patchen Barss
Photo by Luis Mora

Julian Birkinshaw, MBA'91, PhD'95, has come full circle. After 25 years at London Business School in the U.K.—most recently as vice dean—the internationally respected scholar and author is back at Western as dean of Ivey Business School, officially stepping into the role on Aug. 1, 2024.

A sought-after thought leader in innovation, organizational resilience, strategic agility and digital transformation, Birkinshaw has advised some of the world's top companies on how to adapt and thrive. His latest book, *Resurgent: How Established Companies Can Fight Back and Thrive in an Age of Digital Transformation,* comes out this July, offering fresh insights into the rapidly evolving business landscape.

Patchen Barss sat down with Birkinshaw to talk about how his research and experience play into his vision for the school.

It was a big move for you to come to Ivey from England. Why now and why here?

The "why here" is easy. I'm an Ivey graduate, not just once, but twice. Even when I was at London Business School, my values and beliefs about what makes a good business school were rooted in what I learned at Ivey. I get this place.

The "why now" is also very simple. We've got three kids, and the youngest just went off to university. For the first time in 25 years, my wife and I were free to imagine what we wanted to do next. She grew up in Etobicoke, Ont., and her father still lives there. I am also excited about the opportunity to make a difference—to shape Ivey's future and to help it realize its potential on the world stage. So there were personal and professional reasons why this made sense.

Tell me more about the values and beliefs you absorbed at Ivey as a student.

There are thousands of business schools in the world and hundreds of good ones. Ivey is one of a small handful that deeply believes in the case method as the best way to build expertise, insight and reflection amongst students. It puzzles me why more schools don't believe in that demonstrably successful model. When I came back after 30 years away, I was delighted to see that the focus on top-notch teaching and the case method is still going strong.

What's special about the case-method approach?

The traditional teaching model at universities is a professor standing at the front of the class, lecturing to students and assigning readings. The case method flips that on its head. You assign the readings and a case study in advance. The case study might be about a company, CEO, financial officer or a line manager with an operational issue. The study provides a wealth of detail and data for a situation requiring a business decision. The instructor encourages students to discuss how what they learned before class can be applied to the case, drawing out their ideas through conversation. That's just a much richer way of learning than reading an example in a textbook.

Of course, you do need some lectures. But in the vast majority of classes at Ivey, students put themselves in someone else's shoes and consider how they would solve a problem.

You were quoted recently in the *Financial Times* about the opportunity and responsibility business schools have given the current political situation in the United States. Can you talk about that?

In a world where Donald Trump is president, the U.S. is now both more inward focused and more uncertain and unstable. That opens the door for other countries to attract investment, people and opportunities.

Large numbers of students from Asia—China and India, foremost—are craving higher education in English. While the Canadian government has set clear limits on overall international student intake, we still have room to attract top-tier talent—students who can thrive academically and contribute meaningfully to Canada.

Given these shifts, Ivey has a unique opportunity to strengthen its global reputation by expanding its international reach and impact.

What might that look like? How do you build the Ivey profile?

We start with what we've already got. Obviously, anyone who's an Ivey grad or people who've hired Ivey grads have a pretty positive view. Beyond those small pockets, Ivey is best known in the business world for its case studies. After Harvard, we're the second-biggest publisher of case studies in the world.

I want Ivey to become the most accessible provider of experiential business education in the world. To achieve that goal, we're focusing on several key areas. First, we want to continue to grow Ivey Publishing's global presence. We also want to expand on the business education initiatives we already have in Hong Kong, the Middle East and Europe while strengthening our partnerships with other schools around the world. We're already part of a network of 33 of the world's top business schools, where we have exchange agreements and plan to do joint case publishing. Another priority is attracting more international students to our master's programs and get them placed outside Canada.

This may sound grandiose but bear with me. I want to take Ivey to the world. We already have initiatives where we send students to emerging economies in Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia as part of their education. We also provide Ivey case studies at no cost to business schools in the poorest 39 countries in the world, including Kenya, Bangladesh and Nigeria.

Our greatest contribution isn't bringing students to Ivey; it's actually bringing Ivey to the world through our leadership in case-method teaching methodology.

How might emerging technologies affect the Ivey approach to experiential learning?

People get very nervous when you start talking about how AI is going to change the style of learning that we know and love. I don't want us to go down the route of Coursera or the Khan Academy and just say all learning will be asynchronous, pre-packaged videos. Online content must create entry points to give people anywhere in the world exposure to the Ivey learning experience. It's a way of building our exposure around the world so people make the investment to come here. We just hired someone to lead the development of Ivey Online—to help us take our offerings to the world.

We're also actively exploring new AI-based technologies to complement case-based learning, to help our students get up to speed before they come to class and give high-quality feedback after class.

We've already touched on two major disruptions: U.S. politics and artificial intelligence. Do these kinds of shifts prompt you to rethink concepts like resilience and adaptation?

It feels like external threats are increasing in speed and magnitude. Certainly, since the pandemic, I've been more acutely aware of the challenges. These things play out over very different timelines: COVID-19 hit us in a matter of weeks; a digital revolution takes place over years; climate change is measured in decades. You've always got to keep in mind that you're adapting in the moment but also laying the groundwork for changes that unfold over time.

I'm now trying to apply the advice I've given to others here at Ivey. Be hyper-vigilant about change, but don't overreact. First movers don't always have the advantage. Google was not the first search engine. Facebook was not the first social media platform. I want us to experiment, but also be cautious before we jump in.

Second, make sure you have a clear sense of overall direction, but be flexible about how you get there. There can be many pathways you might follow to achieve your goals.

Third, diversify on supply and demand sides, and avoid putting all our eggs in a single basket. For instance, we've got to diversify the sources of our students. Like many business schools, we're overly reliant on certain markets, and any geopolitical shift could have a huge impact.

Fourth, run a tight ship. This is nothing clever—it just means making sure your costs are under control, and you have a robust balance sheet or war chest.

Many people have a perception of what a business school is and who it's for. Do you have to work on that perception to broaden and diversify Ivey's appeal?

Your point is well taken that business schools have traditionally trained up people who have certain levels of—I'm going to use a word I'm cautious about—privilege. I want to turn that the other way around. Is accessibility the opposite of privilege? Not exactly, but roughly. Business schools around the world still cater to a very small slice of people at the top of the pyramid. A business degree is expensive—over $100,000 is the norm for a top-level MBA. Lots of scholarships are available, but you've still got to fill out the application form—you've got to believe it's something that could be for you. We have to continue to work on finding students on the basis of potential, not privilege—to help us raise the quality of the student body year after year. That means reaching people who might not otherwise have applied.

Birkinshaw (centre, wearing a white T-shirt) with his Ivey MBA classmates in 1991.

Ivey is embedded within a university. What value do you think it has for Western students in other faculties?

We have many dual degrees with other faculties. On the order of 385 students graduate each year with a joint "Ivey Plus" degree. Ivey-Plus-Engineering, Ivey-Plus-Medicine and so on. Those students get great jobs. (Western President) Alan Shepard also created an initiative to launch certificate programs for students from across programs. A music or sociology student can now get certificates in entrepreneurship or leadership, "powered by Ivey." That's good for Ivey and good for Western and good for graduates across many disciplines who take that robust education and experience into their careers.

When you look at the evolution of business schools, do you see this as the start of a transformation, or as a culmination of factors that have been building for a while?

Business schools are adapting to a world where addressing grand challenges or wicked problems requires a level of cross-disciplinary collaboration that hasn't been needed before. Sustainable development, reducing poverty, tackling climate change—you can't start on any of those without bringing together people from across the university.

We're in the thick of it. We're far from the finish line when it comes to finding ways to integrate business thinking more deeply into how NGOs, governments and higher education institutions approach solving complex problems. That's why it's crucial to equip future business leaders with the skills to navigate and drive solutions. And for Ivey, it's important to strengthen collaborations with faculties across the university, bringing different perspectives together to make a bigger impact.

We've been talking about global events and major trends. But as you've just taken the helm at Ivey, what are your personal goals for what you hope to accomplish as dean?

I'm clear on the measure of success for Ivey five or 10 years from now: continue to be the best business school in Canada and be recognized as one of the top business schools in the world.

There are a bunch of ways to bring that to life, but the simplest is to be a brand that people—faculty, students, alumni, recruiters and other business schools—want to be associated with. Everything I'm doing, everything we're doing, is in service of building Ivey's brand.

We look at rankings as one piece of data. Equally important: Do faculty from other business schools want to work here? Are high-quality students from around the world eager to study here? Do leading organizations and businesses want to hire our students? These are the types of measures we're focusing on.

What's something people might not realize about Ivey?

The biggest positive surprise coming here was the engaged, enthusiastic alumni base. This might sound self-serving, but there's something really unique and special about Ivey alumni. Maybe it's because they spend two or four years here in London, very close to each other, doing very intensive learning. I often meet alumni who still go on holiday with the people they sat next to in class when they were 19 years old. I recently met a group of five alumni who were in the same class in 1987, and their surnames all began with S, so they literally sat next to each other. They are still best friends 40 years later.

Ivey has a really strong alumni community made up of individuals who have a true passion for the Ivey experience. I'm so impressed with the many ways our alumni stay connected and give back to the school—whether financially, supporting students and curriculum and, most importantly, supporting each other. ●

Interview has been edited for length and clarity.

A parking lot chat changed Jordann Harman's life

Story by Paul Fraumeni
Photo by Frank Neufeld

Being outdoors, surrounded by nature, has always called to Jordann Harman, BScN'16, MES'24. She's never tried to explain why—it's simply where she feels at home, where everything makes sense. All that goes with nature—birds, fish in a stream, wildflowers and quiet forests—have always brought her joy and comfort.

Still, she never thought nature would offer her a career until a moment of enlightenment in 2023.

It was after a night shift when Harman was a registered nurse (RN) in the emergency room at London Health Sciences Centre's University Hospital (UH).

She stood in the parking lot chatting with her friend, Scott Hunter, also an RN.

Harman had been a nurse for six years at Ontario hospitals in St. Marys and Ingersoll before joining UH. She first got the spark to pursue nursing when she was in Grade 10 at Regina Mundi Catholic Secondary in London, Ont. As she was job-shadowing her cousin, a physiotherapist at UH, Harman also saw the nurses in action. The variety of their work appealed to her.

When it came time to think about university, she thought of that day, considered she was good at science and applied for nursing at Western.

"I liked the science of it. And once I got into it, I liked doing things a lot of people didn't like doing, like administering meds, starting IVs and catheters, things that give the patient immediate relief." The ER proved to be the perfect milieu for her. "I liked the chaos. It was busy and fast and that worked for me."

Until it didn't.

She knew she wasn't happy with her career. She couldn't pinpoint exactly why, but she was aware each new work experience would start off on a high note and eventually devolve into a dislike of the job. She later realized she had tried to solve her vague unhappiness by moving often.

"I wasn't happy on the inpatient floor, so I moved to emerg. Then I wasn't happy in a small town, so I moved to the big hospital. I was even planning to move to the ICU, thinking maybe that would be the right fit." That chat in the parking lot with Hunter, however, proved to be cathartic. She laughed and she cried with him for an hour as she expressed what was nagging at her.

"We do a lot of good for people in the hospital, but there's a lot of stress. We see people on their worst days. It started to eat away at me."

That night in the parking lot, Hunter offered an opinion that changed everything.

"The issues you have in the emerg are going to still exist in the ICU," he said. "Maybe it's not the department, maybe it's the career."

That was the nudge she needed. "It was almost like he gave me permission to start over."

Harman dove into researching alternative careers. She came upon Western's master of environment and sustainability program. It was a lightbulb moment.

"When I was a kid, I was immersed in nature, either at our family cottage or on camping trips my dad organized. It still has that power for me. And thinking about my next steps, I realized if there was going to be something else for me, it would be nature-related."

Harman particularly liked the co-op portion of the program, where she was an assistant environmental planner with Ontario's Ministry of Transportation. In fact, she stayed on there in a contract position after she graduated.

In January she took a big step up—as an environmental planner with AECOM, a global engineering firm. She is based in London, Ont., where she manages projects all over the province. The company's major focus is related to road building and infrastructure, such as bridge repair and highway improvements.

"Our overall job on the environmental team is to work with provincial and federal regulations and determine how the building project can have the least possible impact on the natural environment and the community." Harman plays a central role in coordinating environmental assessments, working with experts—in areas such as water and archaeology, and monitoring potential environmental impacts—such as endangered species or Indigenous considerations—of infrastructure projects.

"I'm just new at this, but it's a great start. I really enjoy it and I believe I'm going in the right direction." ●

THE ISSUE OF AGING

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At 93, Western alum and retired computer programmer Larry Minshall, BSc'53, is proof an active mind is a powerful tool for aging well. He still codes for fun, takes lifelong learning classes and participates in the SuperAging Research Initiative—an international project that explores why some adults 80+ retain exceptional memory and cognitive abilities. Western leads SuperAging work in Canada, with support from the University of Chicago, the initiative's global hub.

PHOTO BY GOTHAM STUDIOS

The statistics are irrefutable: most of us will live longer—in many cases, *much longer*—than our ancestors did a century ago. Advances in health care, changing attitudes toward aging, healthier lifestyles and improved pharmaceuticals have all contributed to this so-called 'grey tsunami.'

But here's the challenge: How do we, as a global society, adapt to this demographic shift? And how can individuals boost their chances of staying healthy as they age? How can we rise to meet the needs of a rapidly aging population—and what steps can individuals take to thrive in later life?

The Issue of Aging explores the questions we now face—and the opportunities that come with them.

AGING ISN'T A DISEASE

By Jeff Renaud
Illustrations by Sam Island

Like a real-life Benjamin Button—only by design—the curious case of Bryan Johnson is a story for the ages. But not for the aged. In his Netflix documentary, *Don't Die: The Man Who Wants to Live Forever,* the tech billionaire tells of how he spends $2 million a year to reverse the effects of aging.

From injecting his own face with body fat from a donor for a wrinkle-free, smoother facade to shocking his penis three times a week to thwart erectile dysfunction, the longevity-obsessed influencer appears not to be afraid of anything—except growing old. He says aging is a disease, and he's determined to find a cure. But aging isn't a disease. It's a process.

ANGELA ROBERTS, Western's Canada Research Chair in Data Analytics and Digital Health in Cognitive Aging and Dementia, says when aging is described as a disease, it implies that growing old is something to be managed and treated. And that's not how she sees it. At all.

"We have to think about aging as a process. It's something that unfolds over time that we can optimize. And it's a natural part of our lives," says Roberts, a principal investigator at Western's Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging. "We start aging from the time we are born. And with modern medicine and modern science, there are many, many ways we can step in to optimize what that journey looks like and what that trajectory looks like. That's how I prefer to define it."

Words like journey, even trajectory, are far more optimistic and frankly, constructive than describing aging as a disease. By the early 2030s, Canada is expected to join the ranks of "super aged" countries, a title already held by Germany and Japan, where 20 per cent of the population (one in five) are 65 and older. And by 2050, more than 2.5 million Canadians will be on the plus-side of 85 years, more than double the number in the 2021 census.

"For the next two or three decades, Canada's older population—65 years and older—will continue to increase and we are not prepared to meet the needs of this changing demographic. One response is to increase the amount of long-term care, but this doesn't make sense policy wise," says Jane Rylett, scientific director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Institute of Aging, based at Western. "Long-term care is needed and critical, but we should also be investing in promoting and researching better health span, better brain health, better bone health and support for other forms of housing and mobility for older persons in the community."

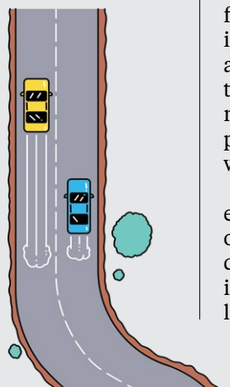
Rylett prefers the term 'health span' to lifespan, as it places the emphasis on a healthy life versus just a life. The end goal shouldn't be just to live longer, but to optimize and increase the years you spend in good health, both mentally and physically, and how to make lifestyle choices to increase your health span.

"One of the important issues to consider about how we age and increase our health span is how we relate to the world and the environment around us and how that impacts the way we age. The way we do that can alter the trajectory of aging," says Rylett, a physiology and pharmacology professor at Western's Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry. "Maintaining social connectedness, how we eat, how we sleep, how we are physically active, all impact our physical health, our mental health and also the way in which we age."

By 2050, the number of Canadians 85+ will be over 2.5 million—more than double the number in 2021.

Long-term care is needed and critical, but we should also be investing in promoting and researching better health span, better brain health, better bone health and support for other forms of housing and mobility for older persons in the community.

JANE RYLETT, SCIENTIFIC DIRECTOR, THE CIHR INSTITUTE OF AGING



Life in the slow lane

JAY STOCK, by his own admission, is not an aging expert. A professor and bioarchaeologist in Western's department of anthropology, his research is focused on human adaptability and skeletal biology throughout the lifespan. Now, we know lifespan's an ugly word, but analyzing health span is trickier when examining neolithic remains from the Stone Age.

"When discussing healthy aging, I want to mention something which leans to the dark side. And you may not want to print this in a story about aging, but death comes for us all," says Stock. "All sexually reproducing organisms age and die but what's unique about humans is that we have a life history that is stretched, compared to other primates and animals, with a very long post-reproductive lifespan, and so, in a sense, our whole life is in the slow lane."

Whether it's treating aging like an extreme sport, in the case of Bryan Johnson, or maximizing the health span with exercise, diet and mental wellness, there is a natural, inevitable consequence of stretching human life longer, compared to other species. It's an unfortunate by-product of how bodies work, how cells work and how DNA works. It's unfortunate, but also unique.

"If we think about stretching the health span, as an evolutionary biologist, I will say it starts with an extended childhood. We have an extended period before we become an adult compared to any other species. We have a long adult life, and then a long post-reproductive life, and all of those stages, if we look at human evolution, are crucial to what makes us human," says Stock.

So yes, childhood—including the oft-lionized first 1,000 days—is crucial for the development of one's body, brain, metabolism and immune system. If we didn't have that extended time, we likely wouldn't be human—at least as we know it. But the other end of the spectrum is also critical. And for the issue of aging, maybe more so.

"We know in many hunter-gatherer and farming societies, grandmothers often contribute more calories to the group than fathers, and grandparents, in general, were essential for human evolution by teaching us how to be cooperative members of our communities," says Stock. "The standard life course for a human is to be active from birth to death, and to be an integrated part of a community, to always be contributing."

> We have to think about aging as a process. It's something that unfolds over time that we can optimize. And it's a natural part of our lives.
>
> **ANGELA ROBERTS**, CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR IN DATA ANALYTICS AND DIGITAL HEALTH IN COGNITIVE AGING AND DEMENTIA

A person is a person because of other people

POPULATION studies show adults over 80 are the world's fastest growing demographic and in Canada, they are quickly outpacing other age groups. Yet, despite this trend, society is woefully unprepared in terms of health care, housing, accessibility and social programming.

Roberts and her collaborators in the international SuperAging Research

> The standard life course for a human is to be active from birth to death, and to be an integrated part of a community, to always be contributing.
>
> **JAY STOCK,** PROFESSOR AND BIOARCHAEOLOGIST, DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Initiative are studying a growing number of the 80-plus set who have memory abilities at least as good as those in their 50s and 60s and at least average cognition in other areas such as problem-solving and managing multiple tasks.

"Older people serve a valuable role in society. SuperAgers are important teachers, reminding us how to live and the mistakes to avoid," says Roberts. "SuperAgers are a reflection of our history and society, and we need that reflection today more than ever."

Studying SuperAgers was never about showcasing exceptionality or even finding the fountain of youth. (Though that would make for a superb secondary finding.) Roberts and her fellow researchers wanted to understand what happens in the body and the brain of people living with neurodegenerative conditions. Not in younger adults, which is so often the case in clinical trials, or animal models, but actual people with lived experience.

"The SuperAging Research Initiative is about finding people old enough, meaning 80 and older, who may have a brain disease, but have not yet developed any of the clinical implications yet," says Roberts. "Now we have a legitimate control group for healthy aging, not a biased dataset based on perceived results from younger participants."

Beyond great data, Roberts has also encountered great people. And that's where the real learning happens when studying SuperAgers.

"One of the things they all share in common is that every one of them is always looking forward. SuperAgers are children of pre-Second World War. They've known adversity, they've known hardship, yet they persevere," says Roberts. "That said, you have to dig to get stories from the past. Every conversation with a SuperAger starts with what they're doing today, or next week or next year. That's a very specific and optimistic mindset and I believe that's the real secret of SuperAgers—this sense of optimism, which stems from actively pursuing relevancy and ongoing social connectedness."

A few years into the SuperAging Research Initiative, a key takeaway so far is the discovery that SuperAgers possess a higher density of autonomic neurons, which drive the heart and gut and connect the brain and the rest of the body, in the anterior cingulate cortex. (This is a region in the frontal lobe of the brain that governs attention, reward processing and error detection.) Next, the researchers want to determine whether SuperAgers have a predisposition to have a higher density of these neurons, or if these neurons pre-exist, and are flicked into action throughout the health span, fueled by social activity and behaviour.

Rylett, who studies cellular and molecular neurobiology of the aging brain and age-related neurodegenerative diseases, has found similar findings in her work with older adults tied to social connectiveness and synaptic plasticity. Her primary research is investigating cholinergic neurons, nerve cells that send messages in the brain, and how their dysfunction and loss impact the onset of neurodegenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's.

Synaptic plasticity is the human brain's superpower, allowing it to change its structure and function in real-time to adapt to various situations and environments. Critical to development, learning and memory, brain plasticity can falter if a person is fighting neurodegenerative conditions.

"When looking at plasticity in the brain, it is really driven by activities and social interactions," says Rylett. "Physical activity, including regular exercise, can also drive generation of more adult stem cells in the hippocampus and other areas of the brain, so I think it's really important to consider the impact of social connectiveness and activity on healthy aging."

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TREE RINGS
Jessica Kaulback, *Sivri*. Ink on paper. Relief print created from the stump of a fir tree.

The axe forgets but the tree remembers

THERE IS A growing body of evidence that our experiences early in life shape our health span. In 2022, Stock and his collaborators published a study that showed bone development very early in life is closely linked to the development of the brain.

Stock is now studying 'altriciality,' or humans being born helpless, research which helps us understand how living much of our early life swaddled and carried in a Baby-Björn can be tied to skeletal fragility and fractures later in life. While swaddling and carrying a baby doesn't directly cause bone deterioration, any act delaying an infant's ability to muck about and get moving does.

"We build bone in utero that starts deteriorating the second we're born. And the ultimate cause of early bone loss is the dramatic pause of neuromuscular development in the first six to 12 months of life," says Stock. "We're the only species whose skeletons regularly collapse under our own body weight, but understanding why some people are more susceptible depends on research that spans the entire life course."

Studies show bone tissue development runs on an entirely different time scale than other physiological systems. It takes about 20 years to build human skeletons and then they go about rebuilding themselves during maintenance and repair periods on eight-year cycles.

Stock, who teaches *Evolution, Ecology, and Human Health* as well as a course titled *The Anthropology of Cyborgs*, isn't proposing we outfit our newborns in designer sneakers and unleash them into the wild or implant bionic body modifications. But this predilection for nurture over nature gives him pause.

"As a species, we are predisposed to osteoporosis from infancy," says Stock. "And because of our early life helplessness, humans start out behind the 8-ball compared to other species. In fact, in the first year of life, we lose bone at a rate roughly five times faster than astronauts in space, who experience rapid bone loss due to the lack of gravity. But the deterioration stops around the time we learn to walk."

Stock is collaborating with health sciences professor and physiotherapist Tina Ziebart and Dr. Jenny Thain, a geriatric medicine professor in the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, to build an interdisciplinary team in Western's Bone and Joint Institute to advance understanding and promote bone health throughout the health span.

"Coming back to increasing lifespan, the Bryan Johnsons of the world have lost the plot," says Rylett. "Frankly, it's an ageist perspective. There are some high-profile wealthy persons who want to live to 120 or beyond, but it does not make sense to only extend their lifespan. There is no thought about the impact on their health."

Rylett says we need to further explore the Blue Zones—regions of the world, like Okinawa, Japan, where people live longer and healthier lives than average—and foster opportunities for aging in place, like naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs), for older adults to thrive and survive. Unlike retirement homes, assisted living facilities and long-term care homes, NORCs are not purpose-built to care for people as they age. Rather, they boast a variety of housing types that mirror the ever-changing population dynamics of older adults. (Ontario has 1,941 NORCs where at least 30 per cent of residents are over 65, according to a report from the National Institute on Ageing and NORC Innovation Centre, part of the University Health Network.)

"There is so much more we can do as a society beyond only adding beds to long-term care facilities. This is just another form of ageism and older adults internalize all of them," says Rylett. "They stop themselves from engaging in activities. But we don't want them to stop. We have to encourage them and put things in place, from our health-care system to our housing infrastructure, to allow older persons to remain active and contributing members of our society.

"Again, this is not about increasing the lifespan. If it happens, that's a bonus, but it's the health span that's critical. We're not trying to add more years to life. It's about adding years of active participation in life." ●

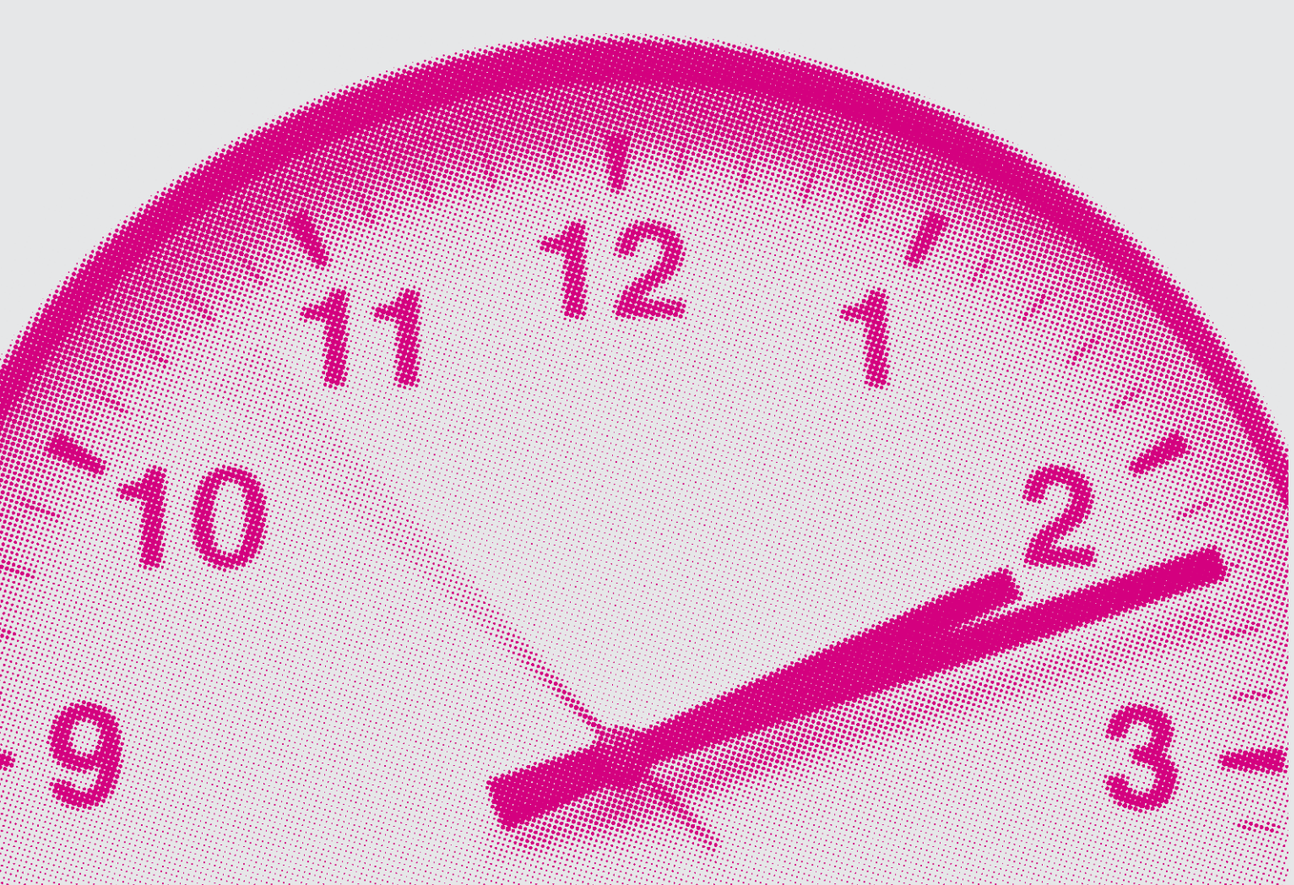
SUPERAGING
Western is studying "SuperAgers"—people 80+ with memory and cognitive skills of those much younger. The study explores what sets these individuals apart, from brain structure to lifestyle habits, aiming to uncover clues for healthy aging.

SUPERAGINGCANADA.UWO.CA

OPPOSITE TOP: ©JESSICA KAULBACK HEARTWOODINK.COM

AGING WELL

You may be older, but you're still very much alive. What are some smart, practical ways to make the most of your later years?



OPPOSITE: STAS KNOP

Ask them if they'd like to do more activities, and as many as 40 per cent will say 'yes.'

CARRI HAND,
WESTERN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PROFESSOR

THE COMPANY WE KEEP

By Keri Ferguson

Staying social is as important as staying active in later life

AT 75, SHIRLEY LITTLE has found purpose in bringing people together.

She's the driving force behind a growing circle of older adults who meet regularly for conversation, coffee and connection.

"It's so important to stay active, for your physical and mental health," says Little, who helped organize a bimonthly Coffee Talk for older adults at local cafés in Old East Village in London, Ont., with the support of Western researcher Carri Hand and postdoctoral scholar Priscila Goncalves.

An occupational therapy professor, Hand explores ways neighbourhoods can support social connectedness and age-inclusive communities, by collaborating with local organizations and engaging older adults like Little as co-researchers. Together, they look for opportunities to develop innovative, sustainable strategies that enhance daily life for older adults.

Connecting with others brings meaning and a sense of belonging. It also fends off loneliness—one of the greatest threats to aging well, ahead of obesity and physical inactivity. Some studies show lacking social connections can increase the risk of premature death as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. But the stigma of loneliness makes it difficult to address. "Ask people if they're lonely and they may not admit it," Hand says. "Ask them if they'd like to do more activities, and as many as 40 per cent will say 'yes.'"

By supporting older adults to take the lead, Hand's team is seeing signs of success. "The majority of us never knew each other before Coffee Talk," Little says. "People have become good friends."

Through a partnership with the City of London and the London Intercommunity Health Centre, Coffee Talk has expanded to include guest speakers, outings to local museums, exercise and pottery classes. Hand hopes the success of the program will inspire other communities and organizations to identify similar opportunities for social connection. An informal social network has also grown, promoting an exchange of information and improved well-being.

"One lady lived in a damp basement apartment until she learned about a better apartment through the group," Little says. "Another woman, who never used to get out, is now fixing her hair and dressing up for coffee. Her son says she has a busier social life than he does."

Across town, in London's Cherryhill neighbourhood, Pauline Salisbury recalls how she was once reticent to take the city bus. "I'm a country girl," Salisbury says, "I didn't know where to get on, get off or how to put the ticket in."

A 'bus training' exercise led by Hand's team gave Salisbury, 75, the confidence to venture out with a friend to the market downtown or to the mall. "If you don't know where to get off, you just have to ask," she says.

Empowering older adults to create change that enhances their lives and communities "is one thing I love seeing in my work," Hand says.

Aging well often means aging in place, in a familiar environment. But what of those aging out of place, in a foreign land? That's one question driving Sachindri Wijekoon's research. Wijekoon, a Western professor of occupational therapy, studies the intricate relationship between aging, social marginalization and participation.

→

Shirley Little, 75 (pictured right), helped organize bimonthly Coffee Talks for older adults in London, Ont., with support from Western researchers.

One woman who never used to get out is now fixing her hair and dressing up for coffee. Her son says she has a busier social life than he does.

SHIRLEY LITTLE

PHOTO BY GEOFF ROBINS

"Imagine a challenge like accessing transportation and not knowing the language, the culture," she says.

Wijekoon first witnessed the struggles later-life immigrants face when her grandparents left their homeland of Sri Lanka to join her family in Canada. Far from their lifelong neighbours and friends, they became isolated. "My parents and I would head to work and school each morning, leaving them sitting at the kitchen table. When we returned in the evening, they were rooted in the same spot."

When her grandparents chose to return home to Sri Lanka and their close-knit community, their experience inspired Wijekoon's life's work.

For communities to be truly inclusive and set the foundation for connections, Wijekoon says we must rethink the current "one-size-fits-all" approach.

"We tend to treat older adults as homogenous groups, when we should be taking an intersectional approach that ensures everyone has access to activities and services that are meaningful to them."

Like Hand, Wijekoon conducts participatory action research, collaborating with marginalized older adults, using their insights, needs, experiences and priorities to guide her research questions and advance change.

She's currently working with members of Toronto's South Asian community to identify barriers and understand their needs.

"They're so happy to be asked and eager to participate. They want to improve conditions and give back to their communities."

By learning about their challenges, Wijekoon aims to help create equitable opportunities and equal access to services.

"If we address the needs of the most vulnerable, we make communities better and more inclusive for everyone." ●

THE WEIGHT WE CARRY

By Colleen MacDonald

Building muscle might be the best medicine for our bodies and brains as we age

WHAT IF medical science discovered a single treatment that's safe and effective for more than 30 chronic diseases? Millions of lives would be transformed if conditions like heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer and even dementia could be prevented or their severity reduced.

They can be—all of them. The treatment is here, now. "Physical activity is the one thing we know absolutely everybody will benefit from, no matter what," says Tina Ziebart, a Western physical therapy professor who studies ways to support healthy aging and independence into later life. But exercising doesn't necessarily mean running or aerobics classes.

"Do whatever activity you enjoy. It's never too late to start exercising," says Western kinesiology professor Lindsay Nagamatsu, Canada Research Chair in Activity for Brain Health and Aging. "Even a moderate amount of consistent physical activity, at any age, can prolong quality of life and maintain your independence."

Research from Nagamatsu and Ziebart reveals resistance training with weight is a critical part of aging well that improves not only our bodies, but our brains, too. Nagamatsu's recent research on the link between weight training and cognition in older adults differs from many previous studies focused on aerobic exercise, such as running. Participants in her study exclusively lifted weights for six months. Nagamatsu's team measured structural changes in their brains and functioning with neuroimaging and behavioral tests.

"We found really promising results that resistance exercise multiple times a week can change how the brain processes information, leading to improved cognitive abilities, particularly those involving executive functions like planning, organizing and decision making," Nagamatsu says. Weightlifting is both treatment and preventative medicine, experts have found.

It offers hope to people living with mild cognitive impairment, a possible precursor to dementia, whose memory and thinking deficits don't yet significantly interfere with everyday life. Nagamatsu's work showed weight training can stabilize or even improve cognitive function in that population—preventing the progression to dementia and sometimes returning mental abilities all the way to normal levels. "We have a critical window of opportunity to intervene right now to stem the tide of dementia as our population ages," Nagamatsu says.

The implications of more people doing weight-bearing exercise are immense. Not only could it allow older Canadians to live independently for longer, it could also keep thousands more out of hospital.

Physical activity, particularly weight-bearing exercise, helps increase bone density in youth and maintain it in adulthood—a critical intervention to help prevent osteoporosis or minimize the risk of fractures in people who have the degenerative disease. It's a silent thief, depleting bone mass without symptoms until a fracture occurs. The condition can lead to disfigurement, loss of mobility and frailty.

"Osteoporosis is considered a child's disease with adult consequences," Ziebart says. "Both men and women who haven't built up high bone mass while they're young have a greater risk, because bone mineral density starts declining after age 30."

One in five men and one in three women in Canada suffer a broken bone at least once due to osteoporosis, according to Osteoporosis Canada. Sue Murphy was one of them. She was an avid golfer who "morosely" contemplated quitting golf after suffering three fractures in five years.

Resistance exercise multiple times a week can change how the brain processes information, leading to improved cognitive abilities.

LINDSAY NAGAMATSU, CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR IN ACTIVITY FOR BRAIN HEALTH AND AGING

FRACTURE RISKS
One in five men and one in three women in Canada suffer a broken bone at least once due to osteoporosis.

I don't feel frail now because I've learned what I can do safely while building strength. That is life-changing.

SUE MURPHY,
BONE FITNESS CLASS PARTICIPANT

An unexpected osteoporosis diagnosis in her late 50s was devastating enough, leaving her feeling confined by inescapable susceptibility to injury. "I had to rethink my every move. Even bending the wrong way to tie my shoes risked a fracture," Murphy says.

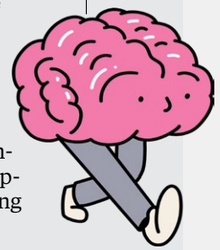
The never-ending worry about breaking a bone with a simple misstep upended Murphy's normal routine and sapped her enthusiasm for activities she loved. It also rattled her confidence. Her vulnerability and growing sense of frailty all changed when a physiotherapist referred her to the bone fitness class led by Ziebart at Reactive Physiotherapy in London, Ont. "The class is so empowering," Murphy says. "Tina shows us the right way to move while we build up to lifting heavier weights."

The class runs four times a year and is open to people diagnosed with osteoporosis or shown to be at risk in a bone density test. Ziebart first assesses people interested to ensure they can participate safely. The evidence-informed instruction teaches them how to exercise with proper form to maintain bone strength, improve balance and rehabilitate fractures. "The body mechanics I learned eventually became automatic—that gave me the confidence to resume everyday activities without constant fear of getting hurt," Murphy says.

Ziebart says everyone—with or without osteoporosis—should prioritize strength and balance training, especially after age 50. "It is the prevention. Exercise is one of the best prescriptions. It's universal," Ziebart says, noting people in her class also see improvement with secondary health conditions such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and high blood pressure after regular exercise. "I love helping people reclaim their vitality through activity."

Making regular exercise a way of life helps Murphy persevere with optimism while living with osteoporosis. Better still was discovering she didn't have to give up her favourite sport.

"Tina didn't tell me I should never golf again. She showed me how to modify my swing to prevent a possible fracture," Murphy says. "I don't feel frail now because I've learned what I can do safely while building strength. That is life-changing." ●



THE
A.B.C.D.S *of Brain Health*

A. **ACTIVITY:** Walking 3,000 steps daily lowers early mortality risk. Walking with a buddy doubles your chances of sticking with it, while walking in nature can lower anxiety and blood pressure.

B. **BLOOD PRESSURE CONTROL:** 8/10 people will have hypertension. Decreasing systolic blood pressure, the top number in the reading, can help lower stroke and dementia risks. Avoiding high-sodium foods and staying active are key.

C. **CONNECTION:** Studies show loneliness raises the risk of early death by 25%, heart disease by 29%, stroke by 32% and dementia by 50%. Socialize with friends and family or join activities to meet new people.

D. **DIET:** Even eating healthy two or three days a week can lower cognitive decline risk. Prepare meals in advance to make healthier choices throughout the week.

S. **SLEEP:** Quality sleep matters. Consistent sleep patterns, deep breathing and aligning bedtime with the day-night cycle can help.

THE BRAIN WE BUILD

Taking care of your mind is a lifelong journey

By Cynthia Fazio

KEEPING your brain healthy starts earlier than you'd think. Way earlier. It's a lifelong mission, beginning in utero and the crucial first 1,000 days after birth, extending all the way to later life.

And there's no magic elixir, no brain-boosting vegetable or memory-protecting daily puzzle to ensure you stay sharp. But experts say there are broader tools—physical, social and environmental—to maintain or improve brain health as you age.

"Brain health is not just about avoiding disease. It's about promoting healthy brains for a better world where people can thrive and enjoy life," says Dr. Vladimir Hachinski, a world-renowned neuroscientist and Distinguished University Professor at Western's Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry.

In 2023, he developed a new definition of brain health—"When thinking, feeling and connecting with others is at its best in a safe, healthy and supportive environment"—and an index to quantify it.

Developing healthy brains begins early in life, before a person is born, Hachinski says. Research shows factors like prenatal care and genetics can shape how well our brains function later in life. Though there's no way to go back in time and adjust those early-life circumstances, Hachinski and his multidisciplinary team are studying the factors that can affect brain health many decades later. The 'ABCDS of brain health'—activity, blood pressure, connection, diet and sleep—are where we should direct our attention, they say.

Researchers are investigating "what's the least that gives the most," to reflect the simplest, most accessible changes that drive the biggest brain health results. For instance, even walking 3,000 steps daily—well short of the popular '10,000 steps per day' advice—reduces the risk of early death, Hachinski says.

Simple habits can pay big dividends. But Hachinski, who was instrumental in launching World Brain Day (now recognized annually on July 22), also wants to elevate brain health beyond personal decisions, to become a unifying priority for G7 countries because of its role in health, wealth and well-being. "We need better brains for a better world," he says.

It's also why Hachinski advocates for a more holistic view of brain health. "When people think of brain health, they typically think about it in a physical sense. But mental health also involves behaviours that may not seem directly related to the brain," he says. "We know they are connected—and isolation and solitude are connected to both. But nobody's put them under one umbrella. We're the first ones to bring it all together."

Clinical psychologist Marnin Heisel, a professor in the departments of psychiatry and epidemiology and biostatistics at Schulich Medicine & Dentistry, sees those connections and their ripple effects in the men's groups he leads.

His work helps middle-aged and older people find meaning in life and promote mental health and psychological well-being in order to prevent despair and reduce their risk for suicide.

Finding meaning can help build resilience to adversity, Heisel says. "Resiliency is a positive characteristic we take into the world with us. It can help change our experience of life," he says. "Somebody who's got a more positive outlook, who's more optimistic, can find meaning despite challenges and more easily overcome them. It's a sense of that elasticity or bouncing back."

But it's not always easy to stretch that resilience muscle, especially when mental health is poor and the challenges of aging are mounting.

Depression can negatively impact brain health and increase the risk of death from any cause. Heisel's groups focus on helping those facing losses and life transitions to find meaning in life, even in the face of adversity, and in doing so, they tap into stores of psychological resiliency. "We need to focus farther upstream, and work to promote mental health and well-being so people don't get to the point of having an illness or disorder or disability," Heisel says.

Both Hachinski and Heisel emphasize that daily choices—including how we interact with others, respond to change and derive meaning in life—can have profound effects on overall health. "Really thinking about health more holistically is important. It's not just about the absence of illness or the absence of pain. Being healthy has such an impact," Heisel says.

"The more proactive we are in focusing on psychological health and well-being, the healthier we'll be and the more enjoyable our lives will be." ●

← Professor Vladimir Hachinski and expert colleagues are developing the ABCDS of brain health, an easy-to-remember, actionable framework to help prevent stroke and dementia.

THE CAREGIVER'S JOURNEY

There comes a time when most aging adults can't care for themselves anymore. With a strained long-term care system, what are families supposed to do?

By Megan Stacey

↖ Beth Fitzmaurice with her mother in October 2023

PHOTO COURTESY OF BETH FITZMAURICE

Beth Fitzmaurice spent more than four years caring for her mom, from the day she was diagnosed with dementia to the moment she died at 91, cradled in her daughter's arms.

FITZMAURICE, BSc'86, Dip'89, calls it a "journey only love can navigate." She used humour and optimism to persevere as she responded to countless challenges as a caregiver—her mom's memory lapses, kitchen mishaps, incontinence, a stroke. Despite the tough circumstances, Fitzmaurice knew she wanted to return the love and care her mother had provided all through her childhood and into adult life. "It was difficult. There is no textbook, no perfect routine. Every day is different, but I wouldn't change the experience. I know my mom was happy," Fitzmaurice says. "She knew me to the very end. That's the greatest gift I could ask for."

Fitzmaurice is far from alone in navigating that difficult journey. Caregiving is an "everybody problem," Western health studies professor Marie Savundranayagam says. As Canada's population ages, almost everyone will either care for a loved one or need care themselves. We're already at a crisis point.

Families can't do everything, but with an overburdened health-care system and a lack of community support as older adults grow sicker and needier, their spouses, children and other loved ones are left to step up in a huge way.

For many, it's unexpected. Almost always, it's overwhelming. "It's not just about the individual. It's a societal issue," says Savundranayagam. "It can also impact productivity in the workforce. We all have to pay attention."

The problem? Most caregivers have no experience and little idea where to start. That's where Savundranayagam comes in. She runs the Caregiving Research Lab within the Sam Katz Community Health and Aging Research Unit at Western.

Using digital tools and unique programs—think virtual reality and at-home education series—her focus is on improving communication between formal or family caregivers and those they support.

Strong communication doesn't just equip caregivers with tools they need to better help their loved one. It also strengthens relationships—an important foundation for more compassionate and meaningful care. "Caregiving is all about relationships, and communication is at the heart of both," Savundranayagam says. "In our research, communication is care." She wants everyone to be supported as individuals with unique needs and rich life histories, not just people who are "sick."

It's one reason Savundranayagam developed Be EPIC-VR, a virtual reality training program on "person-centred communication" for health-care professionals like personal support workers to build trust with their clients. She hopes it may one day be available for family caregivers, too.

They're in desperate need of training and support to stay healthy and maintain strong relationships with their loved ones amid the challenges of caregiving—often while working full-time and raising their own families.

Fitzmaurice, who survived a thyroid cancer diagnosis in her 20s thanks to the support and advocacy of her mom, says she learned through her caregiving journey, "you have to put your own oxygen mask on first."

"Caregivers can only manage in the long term if they're supported and can care for themselves. If they fail, everything falls apart," says Anna Garnett, a Western nursing professor who specializes in the care of older adults with chronic disease.

Community supports are crucial for caregivers, she says. Day programs engage older adults with various conditions and offer built-in opportunities for their caregivers to find peer support and professional advice. "Education is big. When you're thrust into the caregiving role, you don't know where to go or what to do," Garnett says.

Fitzmaurice found the connection and education she needed at McCormick Dementia Services, a London, Ont., organization supporting families and people with dementia. There, she attended caregiver support groups—eventually serving on the charity's caregiver council—and classes to learn about dementia and how to support a loved one. "I found caregiving can be very lonely. The stigma of dementia made it more difficult. No one really wants to talk about caregiving. Having access to McCormick social workers for advice and counselling gave me a space to talk, vent and even laugh." She counted on friends, extended family and her church, which she called her "angel squad" for showing up in the darkest times.

From her mother's refusal to accept her diagnosis to the family challenges that erupted along the way, Fitzmaurice had to navigate complex emotions—including her own.

The realities of dementia made that hard. She taught herself to think of her reality and her mother's reality as two different, but valid, perspectives. "Sometimes you feel guilty telling lies to your loved one—instead, think of it like reading a book of fiction that brings them comfort," she said. "You have to be their liaison to the other reality." Fitzmaurice also took her mom to the McCormick

day program, though initially it demanded some creative convincing, since her mom didn't want to engage in social activities. "I would tell her, 'You're going to physical therapy because of your stroke. I'm going to physical therapy too, just down the road.' For me, physical therapy was down the street at a good bakery," Fitzmaurice chuckles. "I would run errands. Some days I would just go home and have a nice, hot shower. The key for me was knowing McCormick is a safe, trusted environment with the people and resources to help mom." Fitzmaurice, who moved in with her mother to care for her full-time, knows those precious hours to herself were part of what kept her going.

Still, it wasn't easy. Some days, the challenges and the loneliness boiled over. "You're going to feel alone, have those days when you want to pull out your hair," she says. "I'm haunted by one particularly bad day when I was frustrated. I went outside to get my emotions in check. I remember mom coming to the back door, crying out 'Beth, please come back.' I had to stay upbeat, because if mom sensed I was upset, it made her upset.'"

Fitzmaurice tried to always keep one of her main lessons at the forefront of her mind: Dementia is a disease. Be mad at the disease, not the person. "I tried to remember, mom's behaviours and reactions weren't a reflection of her personality. My mom is still there—this is the disease."

But dementia brought intense challenges, like the "stranger danger" that made her mom fearful of having workers enter the home.

Fitzmaurice really needed the help. When she finally convinced her mother to accept some support—the stroke she suffered had forced her hand—Fitzmaurice tried to lessen the time personal support workers or other homecare services were in their home, taking on some of the workload by preparing the supplies and clothing they'd need to complete their tasks. "I worked to make it as painless as possible for everyone, it just took more effort on my part," Fitzmaurice says. "I tried to make use of as many tools as I could to keep my mom at home, maintain her dignity and respect her wishes."

Garnett and Savundranayagam want to expand community support to help others do the same. Along with a team at McCormick and the input of caregivers, they designed an innovative pilot program called McCormick Mobile.

It brought six weeks of in-home training and education to people caring for loved ones with dementia, giving the caregivers access to a social worker, recreation specialist, personal support worker and registered practical nurse. The positive response and results of the pilot—now in an expansion phase—highlight the importance of community care, including at-home support services, day programs and groups where caregivers can connect.

Caregiving is already hard. Not having any support makes it nearly impossible. The risk of not getting it right—not adequately supporting caregivers—looms large. Increased hospital stays are one consequence, a ripple effect that's both expensive and logistically challenging. As more people wait in hospital beds for transfers to long-term care, healthcare capacity is compromised and patients often decline.

A drastic deterioration in caregiver health is another outcome. "They jeopardize their own health to stay in a caring role," Garnett says. "If something catastrophic happens, that places both people in a precarious situation." She's spoken to caregivers who have ignored their own symptoms or waited too long to seek help. "Cancer doesn't work like that."

It's understandable, though. Caregivers are just trying to keep up, often without preparation or places to turn for support. Both trust and access are factors, says Garnett, who studies equity issues around services for vulnerable older adults and their families. A rural caregiver may lack reliable internet access to search for community programs online. An urban caregiver may not know where to seek out respite.

Garnett and Savundranayagam are determined to move the needle. "Change is difficult. Movement can be small. But there are promising initiatives," Garnett says.

Though it's anything but simple, at its core, caregiving is about safety and security. Savundranayagam bases her work on relationships because it echoes how she wants to be supported in her later years. "Put yourself in those shoes. I just want someone to love me and take care of me gently." ●

> Caregivers can only manage in the long term if they're supported and can care for themselves. If they fail, everything falls apart.
>
> **ANNA GARNETT,** WESTERN NURSING PROFESSOR

Tips for Caregivers

Professor Marie Savundranayagam shares advice for family caregivers:

1. See the person. Everyone receiving care has a personality and life story beyond their health condition. Honour their story and support their autonomy by involving them in care decisions.

2. Trust your insight. Family caregivers have an advantage: You know your loved one best. Share that knowledge with care providers—what you have to say matters.

3. Seek support. Connect early with community organizations and day programs. They will benefit your loved one physically and mentally and give you space to recharge and connect with other caregivers.

SAM ISLAND

Stories from our community: Convocation

TREASURED MOMENT

Caden (left) and his father, Jose Antonio, with a photo of Jose Antonio's family. "Even though they couldn't be at my convocation, they were with me every step of the way."

Growing up, I always knew I'd be the first in my family to go to university. My mom had gone to college, but my dad barely finished high school before immigrating to Canada. His parents hadn't even made it that far—growing up as impoverished Hispanics in South Texas, they had to put work before school.

The moment I visited Western, I knew it was the place where I would not only attend university but also graduate. That journey wasn't easy. Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the stress of figuring out university life without a family roadmap made for some difficult moments. But I found support in my professors, peers and—most of all—the friends I made at Western.

When I finally walked across the stage at Alumni Hall last June, it was one of the most powerful moments of my life. I remember telling myself not to trip on my gown and hearing my dad shout with pride from the crowd. It was the best payoff I could have imagined. Now, as I begin law school, I look back at my time at Western as one of the most defining chapters of my life. And convocation was the perfect final page.

Caden Reyes
BA'24

Do you have a "**Western Moment**" about residence move-in or your first day of classes? Send it to us at magazine@uwo.ca by August 1, we'll be in touch if it's being considered for publication in the next issue.

When I crossed the stage to receive my PhD in astronomy, I didn't just want to celebrate my academic journey—I wanted to wear it. It took six months to plan my space-themed outfit, a tribute to my research on young, massive stars and my lifelong love of the night sky.

For my traditional Indian dress, I asked Rekha Dwivedi, an artist and my mother's art teacher in India, to paint the 'Pillars of Creation'—the star-forming region captured by the Hubble Space Telescope—onto a long scarf (dupatta). My shoes had a nebula print, my nails sparkled like the night sky, and since I couldn't find the perfect brooch, I designed a shooting star one and my mother had it crafted by a jeweller in India.

My PhD supervisors were speechless when they saw the space-themed scarf draped around my shoulders. Emira, one of the caretakers in the Physics and Astronomy building, gave me the biggest smile and told me how beautiful my outfit was. Peers kept stopping me with excited 'OMGs' and 'Is that a spacey scarf?!' But the best moment? A friend suggested I wear the scarf outside my regalia as I crossed the stage so the cosmos painted on my back would be visible to everyone. It was a stellar way to honour the years I had spent studying the stars.

Parshati Patel
MSc'12, PhD'16

LEFT: PHOTO COURTESY OF CADEN REYES; RIGHT: PHOTO COURTESY OF PARSHATI PATEL

GOOD MEDICINE

Story and photo
by Colleen MacDonald

For hundreds of Indigenous youth, a Western outreach program offers an atmosphere of mentorship and encouragement

↖ Western students Aidan Cowell-Miller, Morgan Reevie and Ian Dafoe instruct Clifford Elijah on proper pole-vaulting technique.

Alicia Kewageshig watches kids racing, leaping, vaulting and shot-putting at the Western Indigenous Track and Field Day and she smiles.

"I never got to experience anything like this, so it makes me really happy to see Indigenous youth here," says Kewageshig, a fourth-year student in kinesiology and Indigenous studies and a volunteer at the event. "Some kids looked a bit shy or nervous about trying new sports, but after they did, I could see how excited they were. It's a real confidence builder."

Indigenous Track and Field Day began 20 years ago as an outreach program that offers students from First Nations in Southwestern Ontario a unique opportunity to test and develop their athletic skills. The annual collaboration between the Indigenous Student Centre and the Western Mustangs varsity track and field team introduces the elementary students to pole vaulting, high jump and other events.

Support and encouragement is at the heart of all the athletic activities, says Kelly Nicholas, a staff member in Western's Indigenous Student Centre who's been involved with the event since its inception.

"Track and Field Day has built a wide bridge of awareness between Indigenous communities and Western," she says. "As Indigenous people, we say that this type of energy—the atmosphere of cooperation, mentorship and encouragement—is good medicine. When there's conversation and connection between the athletes and the kids, it creates positive feelings, and that's good medicine, too."

Varsity student-athletes help youth participants feel at ease by demonstrating proper techniques for each event and supervising to ensure safe participation. They also motivate students to embrace the challenge, sometimes even engaging them in friendly competition. Nicholas says the supportive environment fosters camaraderie among all participants. Hundreds of Indigenous students in Grades 6, 7 and 8 have participated since 2005.

Toni Sands, BA'00, a teacher at Standing Stone School in Oneida Nation of the Thames, has attended with his students every year since Indigenous Track and Field Day began.

"The warm welcome from staff at the Indigenous Student Centre and campus partners, coupled with the high energy of the Mustangs track athletes, creates an exhilarating atmosphere for our youth," he says.

The programming opens doors of opportunity. "For a lot of these students, Western is a world away. Creating these early vital connections can make it their reality one day," Sands says.

Outreach events can make a big difference for young First Nations students exploring possibilities for their future paths.

Holly Peters from Walpole Island First Nation attended Indigenous Track and Field Day in 2016. Now in her third year at Western, she's pursuing a double major in Indigenous studies and gender and women's studies. "At first, I was uncomfortable doing sports I hadn't tried before in front of everyone there. The experience made me realize that when I challenge my own anxieties, I don't have to stay uncomfortable," she says.

Nicholas has seen how the young participants grow as they learn. "Many of these students are facing their fears. They may not have ever tried jumping over a high bar or pole-vaulting onto a landing mat, but they support their classmates and friends together in a no-pressure environment. I love seeing the smiles on their faces."

The idea for Indigenous Track and Field Day originated with the late Craig Boydell, a Western professor and Mustangs men's basketball coach, and Vivian Cywink-Peters, former coordinator of Indigenous services. The inaugural event in 2005 drew 13 students. This year, a record 172 students registered.

Peters says these outreach programs take meaningful steps toward reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, while also supporting the aspirations of young people.

"Our youth can do anything, especially with the right encouragement and support systems. Creating opportunities for them to get involved with post-secondary education at such a young age plants that seed within them to achieve great things." ●

Interview by Alice Taylor
Illustration by Melinda Josie based on a photograph by Talia Herman

Setting the record straight on women's health, one truth at a time

A practicing physician, bestselling author, blogger and podcaster, Dr. Jennifer Gunter has built a reputation—and massive following—as the internet's go-to OB/GYN.

Known for her fact-based, no-nonsense approach, she's setting the record straight on menstruation, menopause and everything in between. Alice Taylor spoke with Gunter, who completed her residency training at Western's Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry (1990 to 1995), about her journey, the urgent need for better women's health care and why we should pay attention to the growing threats to reproductive freedom.

What inspired you to become a doctor?

My interest in medicine really stemmed from my own experiences with the health-care system as a child. When I was 11, I ruptured my spleen skateboarding. While running tests, doctors discovered I also had a kidney disease. This was before ultrasound and CT scans, so the testing was invasive and meant a lot of hospital visits. Eventually, I had a kidney removed and spent about five months in and out of the hospital. That experience definitely put me on the path to becoming a doctor.

Why did you decide to specialize in women's health?

When I got into medical school, I had no idea what being an OB/GYN involved—or what surgeons or paediatricians did either, for that matter. It all felt nebulous. But I'd always been interested in women's health. When I was in high school, abortion was heavily restricted in Canada, requiring a three-member panel to approve it. I was deeply affected when Dr. Henry Morgentaler opened a clinic in Winnipeg. It was all over the news, and I felt strongly that women should have autonomy over their own bodies. My parents—despite being conservative—were pro-choice and encouraged me to get involved. I participated in protests, and those experiences made me realize that taking a stand matters. Seeing like-minded people around me fostered a sense of community, which is so important when fighting for a cause. That passion stayed with me into medical school, so specializing in women's health felt like the natural path.

What inspired you to become such a vocal advocate for evidence-based health care, particularly for women?

While I was doing my residency at Western, people would come in and ask me questions about things they had read in *People* magazine or *Reader's Digest*—social media didn't exist back then. One common concern was whether tampons contain asbestos—they don't, by the way. I was curious and started looking through magazines in the waiting room and encountered this type of misinformation firsthand. It's fascinating—and troubling—that some of the same myths from back then still circulate today, three decades later.

Much later, I was writing a book inspired by my own experiences with complicated pregnancies that resulted in my children being born prematurely. That made me even more aware of the gap in accessible, easy-to-understand health information. By the time my book, *The Preemie Primer*, was published in 2010, the internet had become a powerful tool. A friend suggested I join what was then called Twitter, which led me to start a blog, and it snowballed from there.

The best way to push back is to focus on improving health literacy and blocking sources of misinformation.

Has access to accurate health information improved or worsened since that time?

Both—it's a mixed bag. In the early days of the internet, vaccine misinformation was the main medical online conspiracy. There were other fringe ideas, but nothing widespread until Goop—a wellness and lifestyle brand founded by actress Gwyneth Paltrow—launched in 2008 and took even the most outrageous health claims mainstream. Suddenly, myths like "bras cause breast cancer" were getting media attention, which only served to legitimize them. Social media then amplified the problem, making sensational claims go viral while evidence-based ones were ignored. Today, thanks to influencers and short-form video content, misinformation spreads faster than ever. Consumers often can't tell the difference between credible experts and influencers pushing questionable products. Without clear disclosures, people absorb misinformation without questioning it.

How can we effectively push back against health misinformation?

It's tough. The truth isn't as flashy as misinformation. Saying, "You need 25 grams of fibre a day" isn't nearly as Instagram-friendly as "Buy my life-changing fibre supplements." Algorithms favour sensational content, which makes it harder to get evidence-based information out there. Also, health influencers—whether they're doctors, dietitians or physical therapists—often mix accurate advice with misinformation. For example, they might recommend eating enough protein, which is true, while in the same breath falsely claim menopause hormone therapy (MHT) solves every problem. The truth gets overshadowed, making it difficult to separate fact from fiction. The best way to push back is to focus on improving health literacy and blocking sources of misinformation. Continuing to follow them only fuels confusion—misinformation is sticky, and propaganda works.

Menopause really seems to be having a moment thanks in large part to your books and your blog. Why do you think there is so much interest now?

I've been writing and speaking about menopause for years, and I think my book *The Menopause Manifesto* that came out in 2021 has contributed to taking this topic mainstream. But, of course, it's a combination of factors. The growing media visibility of menopause-related products is sparking more conversations, and Gen X women—who are generally more open about sharing their experiences online—have played a key role in breaking the silence and normalizing these discussions.

At the same time, there's renewed interest in MHT. The Women's Health Initiative—a series of clinical studies initiated in 1991 by the National Institutes of Health—linked MHT to increased risk of blood clots, stroke and breast cancer. This initially caused a lot of fear around hormone therapy, leading to a sharp decline in its use. Today, people are revisiting MHT with a more balanced perspective. It's a viable option for those experiencing symptoms, but it's not for everyone—some sail through menopause without any issues. Like any medication, MHT comes with risks, but given the right information adults can weigh their options and make informed decisions.

What do you think needs to change to better support women experiencing menopause?

Education is key. When people don't understand their bodies, they suffer—whether it's as simple as an ingrown toenail or more significant issues like hot flashes and osteoporosis risk. Too many women have no idea what to expect, which leaves them vulnerable to misinformation and fear. Without access to evidence-based care, women may turn to unproven alternatives, which can be harmful. Governments could do a lot by introducing simple, cost-effective solutions—such as online educational resources in multiple languages—to bridge this knowledge gap. We have public campaigns for smoking and drinking and driving—why not menopause?

Are we moving backward in terms of women's access to health care and support?

In many ways, yes. Progress has often been performative—offering small wins that distract from deeper systemic issues. Women's health care is frequently deprioritized, with gynaecological surgeries among the first to be postponed during hospital backlogs. Meanwhile, the lack of scientific research into conditions like endometriosis leaves doctors with limited treatment options.

Funding structures further hinder progress. Gynaecology is typically underfunded and undervalued relative to other specialities, making it more difficult to sustain research careers in women's health, which stalls advancements and delays better treatment options for women. And, of course, reproductive freedom is also increasingly under threat. Many Canadians mistakenly assume their rights are secure, but that's a dangerous misconception. Abortion care is not guaranteed. It must be actively defended. A single election could change everything. Voter apathy poses a serious threat—staying informed and showing up at the polls is critical to protecting these rights. ●

Interview has been edited for length and clarity.

PHOTO: JACKIE NOBLE

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Black Fly Beverage Company, co-founded by Rob Kelly, BA'87, and Cathy Siskind-Kelly. The London, Ont., company made history by securing Ontario's first distillery license in over a century and has since grown into a national leader in the ready-to-drink industry, both as a brand and co-manufacturer of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. The Kelly family's Western connection runs deep—children Isaiah, BA'18, Maya, BA'20, and Owen, BA'24, are all Western alumni, with Isaiah and Owen working in the family business.

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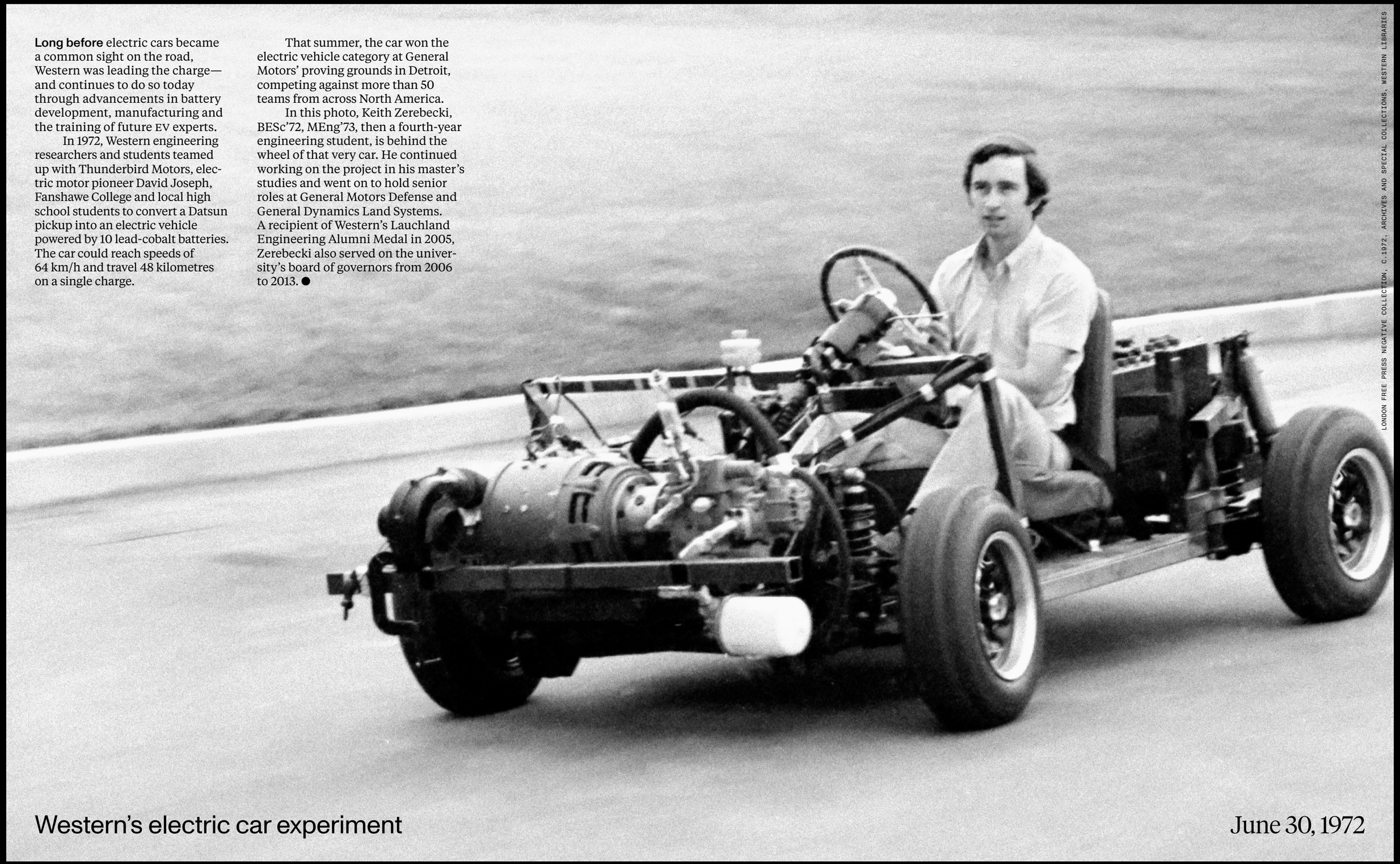
Long before electric cars became a common sight on the road, Western was leading the charge—and continues to do so today through advancements in battery development, manufacturing and the training of future EV experts.

In 1972, Western engineering researchers and students teamed up with Thunderbird Motors, electric motor pioneer David Joseph, Fanshawe College and local high school students to convert a Datsun pickup into an electric vehicle powered by 10 lead-cobalt batteries. The car could reach speeds of 64 km/h and travel 48 kilometres on a single charge.

That summer, the car won the electric vehicle category at General Motors' proving grounds in Detroit, competing against more than 50 teams from across North America.

In this photo, Keith Zerebecki, BESc'72, MEng'73, then a fourth-year engineering student, is behind the wheel of that very car. He continued working on the project in his master's studies and went on to hold senior roles at General Motors Defense and General Dynamics Land Systems. A recipient of Western's Lauchland Engineering Alumni Medal in 2005, Zerebecki also served on the university's board of governors from 2006 to 2013. ●



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Western's electric car experiment

June 30, 1972

Western Alumni Magazine

Spring/Summer 2025

We start aging from the time we are born. Thanks to modern medicine and science, there are many ways we can step in to optimize that journey.

Angela Roberts
Canada Research Chair in Data Analytics and Digital Health in Cognitive Aging and Dementia

From **The Issue of Aging**, starting on page 28

Western

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PUBLICATION MAIL AGREEMENT #40069342