



The York University Magazine

Fall 2020

Chaos Control

Exploring solutions in health, equity, economics and education

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THE PRESIDENT



RHONDA L. LENTON
PRESIDENT AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

IN MY PREVIOUS MESSAGE to the readers of this magazine, I expressed my hope that things would be returning to some semblance of normalcy as we began the 2020-21 academic year. Despite some encouraging progress, it appears the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects will be with us for some time to come. But as we have always done in uncertain times, the York community continues to respond with compassion, resilience and innovation.

The health and well-being of our community remains paramount. Most courses for the 2020-21 fall and winter terms will be delivered through online and remote formats. However, we are working closely with public health authorities and government to assess opportunities for on-campus activities and the gradual reopening of our campuses.

We have also not lost sight of the University's larger role as a driver of positive change. We have continued advancing important initiatives that benefit students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the local and global communities we serve.

In July, we announced that we will be moving ahead with the construction of the new Markham Centre Campus (MCC). We have a bold vision for this new campus in York Region: an opportunity to keep our brightest and best in Ontario by offering academic programs in high-demand areas while partnering with the community to address pressing societal challenges.

The number of 18- to 22-year-olds in York Region is projected to grow by 34 per cent by 2041, the highest growth rate in Ontario. As we spoke to employers, we heard their desire for graduates skilled in digital media, engineering and technology, entrepreneurship, new media and communications. When the doors to the MCC open in 2023, thousands of students will study closer to home and fulfill the talent needs of the region's burgeoning high-tech sector.

Today, lifelong learning is more important than ever. Careers have been disrupted by technological change and the pandemic. We recently (and virtually) celebrated the groundbreaking of a state-of-the-art building that will house our School of Continuing Studies' innovative programs – in people analytics, blockchain development and cybersecurity, among many others – that keep professionals competitive in a global knowledge economy.

We have also continued important discussions and actions around our commitment to fighting anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. Professor Carl E. James was appointed the inaugural senior advisor on equity and representation to the University. Professor James will advance equity, diversity and inclusion by providing strategic advice and supporting the development of a University Equity Plan led by Vice-President, Equity, People and Culture Sheila Cote-Meek.

In true York fashion, our community has navigated the challenges created by COVID-19 with courage, adapting to create meaningful opportunities for new programs and modes of learning, and research that advances shared priorities. We are also learning important lessons that will inform how York can better serve our students and our society in the months, years and decades to come.

Thank you for your continued support of York and our mission to drive positive change through higher education. I hope you and your loved ones stay healthy and safe during these challenging times.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

Staying Strong

ADAPTING TO CHANGE is as old as life itself. If our prehistoric ancestors had not flowed with the ice age, well, you wouldn't even be reading this and wondering at the point of it all. So, to spare everyone the suspense, the point is this: at a time of great upheaval, survival depends not just on the strongest and the biggest. It depends on the most agile, the ones flexible enough to quickly deal with uncertain and rapidly changing conditions.

Being able to move with the times allows us to keep pace and, hopefully, come out ahead – the winner of the race. Admittedly, it is difficult these days even to put one sure foot ahead of the other. The ground is shifting all the time. Just when we were acclimating ourselves to the global health crisis – bam! – the riots and protests began, and for a variety of reasons: anti-Black racism, police brutality, a government's mishandling of the pandemic, and the refusal to wear masks and heed the physical distancing measures recommended by health officials. Chaos has emerged as a prevailing mood. But as any educated York grad can tell you, chaos is not an end point. It is, in fact, a necessary precursor to significant and lasting change. Out of disorder comes order. This is a major tenet of chaos theory. We are now living that theory in real time.

Our world is wavering, no doubt about that. But there is some good coming out of it – a heightened awareness of global inequalities, for instance, and the recognition, now shared around the world, that we need to advance and become more self-sufficient to better deal with emergencies yet to come.

We've already shown that we're up for the challenge. Since the start of the pandemic, we've seen advances in digitization, in medical research and development, and in online learning and work-from-home strategies. We are already adapting by being resilient and open to change. The struggle is not over yet. The pandemic looks to be protracted – and racism, while presently at the forefront of everyone's consciousness, won't be done away with overnight.

But still there is much to inspire hope. Our past is now firmly in the past. Our future is all that matters now, and the majority of us have it as a fixed goal. We can do this. We've faced troubles before – plagues, fires, pogroms and wars. And we have survived, not by shying away from adversity but by meeting it head-on with endurance and a strong belief system. The African-American writer James Baldwin once said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." And we are facing it. The hope is that we will emerge stronger from the effort.

– DEIRDRE KELLY

EDITOR'S NOTES



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ON THE COVER



Masks
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View

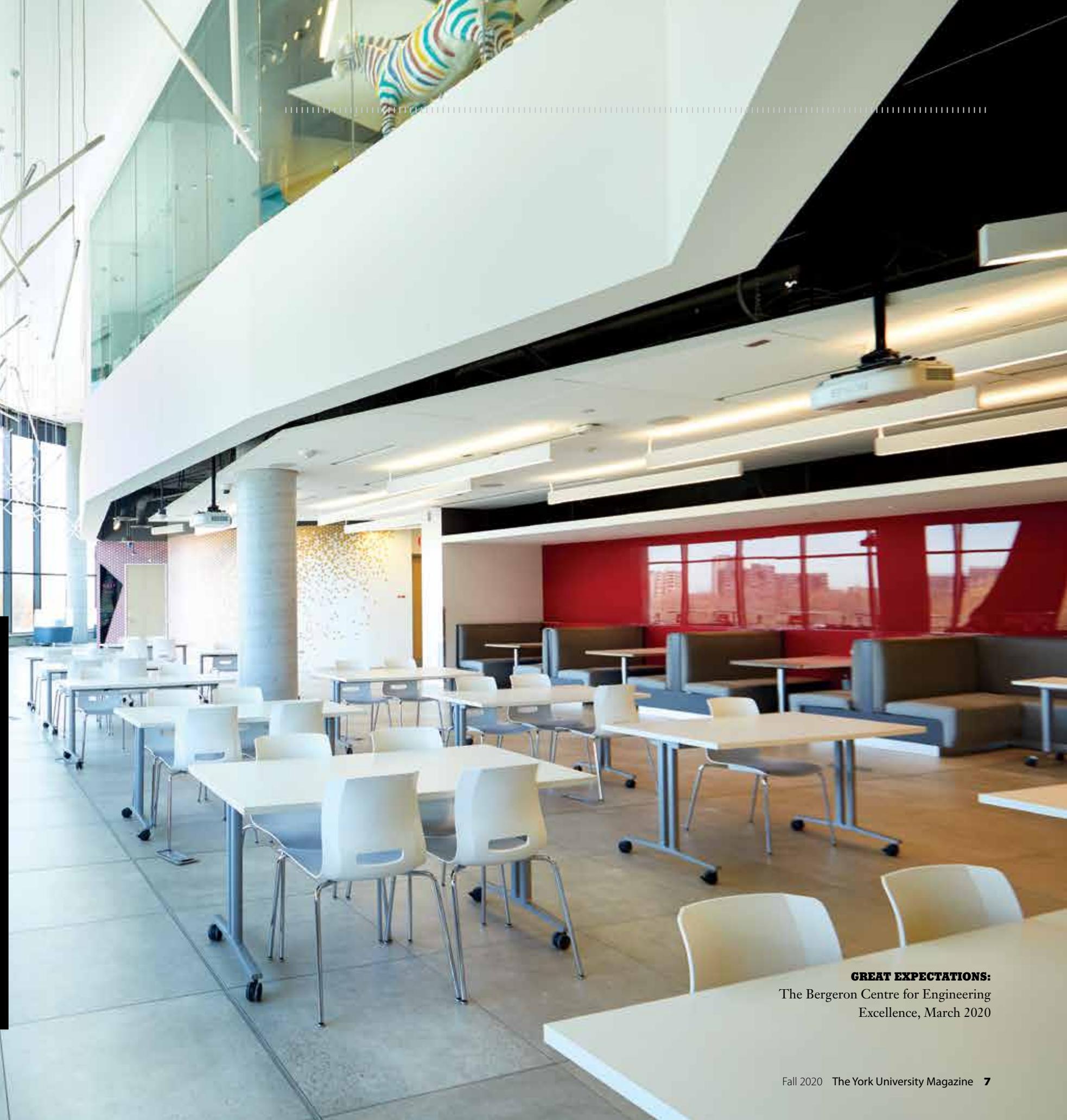
OUTLOOK & IDEAS

Adaptation

Moving with the times

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

AT JUST OVER 60 YEARS YOUNG, York University has agility on its side – an especially vital attribute in a time of crisis. The University's resilience was tested earlier this year with the shuttering of classrooms, the suspension of all sport and live performance activities, and the deferment of commencement ceremonies. But what could have been a setback has become an opportunity for reinvention. York's rapid pivot to online learning, its ability to keep on giving students an impactful education while nourishing leading research projects focused on building a better world, shows York not only holding the course, but forging ahead during a prolonged period of unpredictable change. Adaptation is key. ●



GREAT EXPECTATIONS:

The Bergeron Centre for Engineering Excellence, March 2020



Washed Away

Winning the COVID-19 battle with soap and water

BY DEIRDRE KELLY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON

WASH YOUR HANDS, physical distance, wash your hands. And then wash your hands again. In the fight against COVID-19, basic hygiene has become the drill. Everyone now knows this. But

what people might not know is whom to thank for giving us all a fighting chance against the pandemic, and by using only the simplest of methods.

Fittingly, she's a germ expert, as the journalists across the land who've been seeking out her counsel for their COVID-19 coverage have taken to calling her. But Dasantila Golemi-Kotra, a professor in the Department of Biology at York University, is much more than this. A biochemist through her advanced academic training at Wayne State and Yale Universities in the U.S., Golemi-Kotra switched to microbiology soon after coming to York in 2004, where her research on antibiotic resistance has made her an international authority on infectious disease. She is – if this is not putting too high a gloss on it – something of a pandemic-era celebrity right now.

Ever since the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a global health crisis in March of this year, her knowledge about how pathogens spread – and, conversely, how they can be stopped dead in their tracks – has become much sought-after by governments, public health officials, the media and, now, the public, all of them regarding her as a scientist whose trusted expertise they can readily follow. And that's mainly because her lucid advice about how to weather the pandemic is so straightforward. "Washing your hands is key," she says. "It's an old method that our overdependence on wonder drugs has tended to sideline. But its effectiveness cannot be denied. Hand hygiene alone can curb the spread of the virus, and other diseases as well."

Golemi-Kotra practises what she preaches. She is scrupulous about washing her hands, a habit she learned early on as the daughter of a dentist in Albania. She does other things to mitigate her chances of contracting the virus as well, like the wearing of masks in populous places and being careful not to touch her face – common-sense practices she helped make widespread by frequently emphasizing their importance as a form of disease control in several dozen media reports published during the pandemic. Another safety measure she both follows and recommends is to change out of clothes worn outdoors into a fresh (or, let's say, uncontaminated)

set reserved for indoor use only. Microorganisms do cling to surfaces, and that includes our clothes. Golemi-Kotra discovered this first-hand while studying the spread of bacterial infections in hospital settings.

To her amazement, she often witnessed doctors and nurses on their breaks in communal cafeteria or outdoor spaces wearing the clothes in which they saw patients. Any passing encounter with an airborne pathogen had the potential to become embedded on their clothes. But some of the health professionals she encountered, clearly not thinking through the consequences of their actions, continued to wear easily contaminated clothing on their hospital rounds, unwittingly spreading illnesses they were tasked to treat.

"I was in Germany once, doing research at a hospital there, and one of the doctors wore his white lab coat into the staff lunchroom, and I couldn't believe it," says Golemi-Kotra, her normally calm and confident voice rising with indignation at the memory. "He saw that I was agitated and asked if I had a problem with him. I firmly pointed out, 'You can't be wearing these clothes in here and then return to your patients! You could harm them!' But, like everyone else, he thought that if there were an infection, an antibiotic would fix it."

But a funny thing happened on the way to the pharmacy. Bacteria, already smart, grew smarter as a result of the many antibiotics tossed at them over the years. They evolved to become more adept at eluding their vanquishing by meds. Today's superbugs pose a real threat to our health-care systems, and to people's lives. "Even a common skin infection can become life-threatening," Golemi-Kotra says. "Our drugs no longer work as well as they once did." Which brings us back to hand-washing.

In the absence of a cure-all, prevention remains the best medicine. This is as true for bacterial infections as it is for a viral contagion – presently the bane of everyone's existence. "Wearing pathogen-blocking masks, changing out of your outdoor clothes once home, avoiding touching your face and diligently washing your hands are all accessible strategies that can truly make a difference in keeping us well and alive," Golemi-Kotra says. "The only really good thing about this virus is that soap and water will do it a lot of damage. Definitely, as we all go back indoors and kids return to school, hygiene becomes critical." ●

BY DEIRDRE KELLY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

DURING THE FIRST FEW MONTHS of the pandemic, after putting in place strict controls aimed at protecting the health and well-being of its citizens, Canada seemed to have had a handle on curbing the spread of COVID-19. But in June, after more than a thousand migrant farm workers tested positive for the virus and three died while living in cramped quarters on Ontario farms, those protective measures were quickly deemed inadequate. As the health crisis has cruelly revealed, temporary migrant workers who annually enter Canada to toil in the country's multibillion-dollar agri-food industry don't enjoy the same rights and job protections as Canadians, despite performing an essential service from which all Canadians benefit.

Leah Vosko (PhD '99) is a political science professor at York University and Tier 1 Canada Research Chair who has conducted two decades of research on precarious employment, focusing more recently on the status of temporary migrant agricultural workers. She knows from experience that their tenuous residency status and precarious conditions of employment are long-standing problems.

For over 60 years, Canada has allowed farmers to recruit workers from countries in the Caribbean, as well as from Mexico, Guatemala and the Philippines. According to a recent federal government report, between 50,000 and 60,000 foreign agricultural, food and fish-processing workers come to Canada to work each year, a figure accounting for more than 60 percent of all foreign workers to enter the country under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Canada exports around \$56 billion of agricultural farm products to the U.S. annually, or \$62 billion when you factor in the fishing industry. A domestic labour shortage coupled with growing exports has made migrant workers an essential part of the Canadian economy. And yet, subjected to unregulated living conditions and restricted access to health care, their value is often undermined. Vosko wants to change that.

Her latest book, *Disrupting Deportability: Transnational Workers Organize*, examines the legal and political struggles of a group of Mexican nationals who came to British Columbia as part of the country's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. In an attempt to improve their working conditions, the seasonal agricultural workers tried to unionize, yet some were barred

and ultimately denied, or offered limited and highly precarious future employment opportunities in Canada. Vosko's exposé shines a light on an unsavoury side of Canada's food industry during the global health crisis, when migrant farm workers are facing a whole new set of challenges. As an executive member of the newly formed Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group, she is using her expertise to influence the creation of new policies aimed at protecting migrant workers' rights and their very lives.

"We need action now – including inspections of farms that engage migrant workers to ensure adherence to occupational health and safety requirements and to provincial and territorial labour standards," wrote Vosko in a June letter to the federal government, which was co-signed by a consortium of Canadian infectious disease and health and safety experts. "This action must include in-person and unannounced inspections on farms, without supervisor/employer involvement," she continued. Her clarion call also identified a need for more comprehensive protections and treatment options for workers who fall ill while in Canada. Her impassioned words and the advocacy efforts of the working group hit their mark.

In late July, Justin Trudeau announced that Canada would invest \$58.6 million to protect migrant workers from COVID-19 and check the spread of the virus on Canadian farms. The Prime Minister also pledged to review the country's Temporary Foreign Worker Program. "In some cases, we have let those communities down," Trudeau said. "There are lots of changes we need to make, and we need to continue to work on supporting these people and these families as they support us."

But in order to go forward, more still needs to be done than just handing out government money during the pandemic. To protect the rights and dignity of temporary agricultural workers in the future, Vosko recommends that all migrant workers who come to Canada be offered permanent residency status. Redefining their status in this country would give the migrant workers standing and recognition as essential workers meriting fair compensation and full access to occupational health and safety protections, and to health-care services of the same order as citizens: "It's the least we could do." ●



SEEDING SOLUTIONS:

Migrant worker advocate Leah Vosko

damage control



BY RICK SPENCE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROBINSON

CAN BUSINESS RESCUE THE ECONOMY AT A TIME OF CRISIS?

A FEW YEARS AGO, writing a grant application to support research into law and public health, York law professor Steven Hoffman included a World Bank forecast that the next pandemic could cause a trillion dollars in economic damage. “People laughed,” Hoffman recalls. Even health experts thought the figure wildly overblown.

Today, Hoffman marvels at how wrong he was. A research team at Boston University recently estimated that the COVID pandemic will cost the world between \$8 trillion and \$15.8 trillion – an order of magnitude beyond Hoffman’s warning. Taxpayers will be settling the costs of pandemic-related business loans, subsidies and income-support payments for decades.

Beyond the economic damage, the coronavirus’s impact on people’s lives has been monumental. Families locked in, schools and businesses shut, careers on hold, borders closed and neighbours arguing over masks and the right way to physically distance. And these were the lucky ones – not the more than 30 million who tested positive for COVID-19, or the roughly one million who succumbed to the virus. (By comparison, during the 2003 SARS epidemic, 8,096 people came down with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome globally, and only 774 died – 44 in Canada.)

Who knew society and the economy could be hit so hard, so fast?

“We knew,” says Hoffman, speaking as a professor of global health, law and political science. “No country was ready for the pandemic, even though we knew it was coming.” The problem? “We have lots of competing priorities.” Politicians and policymakers “know there are costs to being prepared, so they leave it to the next government to worry about.”

Amid the chaos, however, Canadians caught glimpses of a world worth fighting for. Front-line workers, from health-care professionals to grocery clerks, overcame their own fear to serve those in need. Businesses pivoted to produce hand sanitizer and protective equipment. Performers, speakers and teachers put their work on the Web. And governments of all stripes created innovative packages to spread financial aid, even to those who didn't qualify for conventional programs such as employment insurance.

And then a Minneapolis police officer set his knee on George Floyd's neck. Millions of people around the world left the safety of their homes to demonstrate that, even in hard times, Black Lives Matter – and that inequality has no place in the world we're rebuilding.

We asked five prominent York faculty and alumni – experts in pandemics, disruption and adaptation – for their thoughts on where we're headed and how individuals can move beyond doubt and confusion to renewed hope, resilience and purpose.

WAITING FOR THE VACCINE

Amin Mawani (LLM '05) shares Hoffman's interest in pandemics. "I've always been interested in the connection between health and money," says the economist and associate professor of taxation at the Schulich School of Business, who also heads up the school's Health Industry Management Program. On Jan. 31 – when Canada had only three cases of COVID-19 – he published an article in the *Globe and Mail* with the title "How businesses can plan for a coronavirus disruption."

Based on Canada's experience with SARS, Mawani urged business leaders to prepare for a significant outbreak. By securing their supply chains, cross-training employees to reduce the impact of absenteeism, updating sick-leave policies and stockpiling masks and gowns, he said, business managers could ensure business continuity – and potentially gain market share. But he hedged about the virus's impact, noting that well-prepared businesses might enjoy a comparative advantage "even if an outbreak never occurs."

Mawani admits he was taken aback by the pandemic's intensity – and its abruptness. Most economists foresaw a short V-shaped plunge reflecting a sudden downturn and

equally rapid rebound. Instead, Canadian economic activity collapsed by 25 per cent – and later clawed its way back to only 90 per cent of pre-COVID levels. (While that may seem healthy, a standard recession is defined as at least two successive quarters of economic decline – which could mean a less-than-one-per-cent hit.)

"The recovery may be gradual," says Mawani. "We could remain at 90 per cent for a year or so until a vaccine is developed. When 60 per cent of us get vaccinated, that's what it will take me to be confident about the economy. Until then, I don't want to travel or go inside a store."

Mawani's other big surprise was the downturn's two-sided nature. In its first few months, "the pandemic was both a supply and a demand problem," Mawani notes. "No one wanted to go shopping, and the stores weren't even open." That hasn't happened since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19.

Looking ahead, Mawani has two major concerns. Businesses adapted quickly to pandemic reality, learning to make the most of locked-down workforces and disrupted consumption patterns. But as the pandemic reshapes consumer and business behaviours, will Canadian companies be able to innovate quickly enough to meet changing customer preferences? Just as importantly, can businesses and governments meet the public's demands for action to ensure greater diversity and social equality?

THE GRAND REVEALER

"We've always known there's a social determinant to health," says Mawani. "Low income leads to health-care issues, such as a diet of fatty foods or stress-related health problems. But COVID has exposed all our vulnerabilities" – like the fact that the virus hits the least affluent the hardest. Maps of COVID's distribution in Toronto, for instance, show cases concentrated in the city's poorer communities.

In late July, we learned that people of colour make up 83 per cent of Toronto's COVID cases. "Black Lives Matter" assumed even greater meaning when Toronto announced that Black people, who make up nine per cent of the city's population, account for 21 per cent of its reported cases. Concludes Mawani: "Racism and poverty are the pre-existing conditions of COVID-19."

"COVID is the 'grand revealer' of infrastructure problems in the world," adds Hoffman. "It has exposed some very structural failures that we've never fully accounted for, and I think this highlights the costs of inequity in a society." Among the key issues he wants to see addressed is the precariousness of employment in long-term care facilities, where staffers often work in several centres to earn one full-time paycheque. That makes them potential super-spreaders of infection. And since many health-care workers don't have sick leave, when they fall ill, they face a terrible choice. "No one should be in a job where they have to decide between protecting their clients and co-workers, and putting food on the table."

But Hoffman hopes COVID will have a silver lining. "Just as it's the grand revealer, it could also be the catalyst for solving some of these problems. This could be an opportunity to build back more equitably and sustainably for the future."

A TIME FOR LEADERS

In fact, there are many reasons to be optimistic. The virus has exposed fault lines in both the economy and society. Without minimizing its miseries, the pandemic is also creating opportunities for individuals and organizations to change.

"Leadership matters, and this is an incredible time to prove it," says Deborah Jann, a consultant who teaches leadership and resilience at Schulich's Executive Education Centre (SEEC). "We're all dealing with very profound concepts now. We're questioning our identity and mortality, and we're asking ourselves, 'What is productive work?'" This is a time, she says, when true leaders will step up and help their people and organizations find more humanity and meaning in their work and more joy in their lives. "One could call it the age of reckoning."

COVID could turn out to be a time of new starts and new opportunities. Wissam AlHussaini, who runs the Custom Mini-MBA program at the SEEC, notes that it often takes tragedies to move society forward. In the mid-14th century, for instance, the Black Death took such a toll on European agricultural workers that the survivors achieved higher social standing and something approaching a living wage. "It was the beginning of the middle class," says AlHussaini. "Crises are usually the triggers for innovation. That's when people go back to the drawing board and say, 'How can we do something better?'"

WAVE OF INNOVATION

COVID has already sparked an innovation wave. AlHussaini points to the companies, schools and governments that quickly embraced Zoom and other communications technologies to hold remote meetings. He cites the microbreweries that, as bars closed, began producing alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Bigger companies such as GM and Magna similarly pivoted to producing medical respirators. The difficulties of importing medical supplies during a pandemic also convinced Magna and other companies that there are limits to global supply chains – and encouraged them to look into ways to displace Asian imports and head off strategic shortages in the future.

"It all comes down to leaders – the people who see opportunities that others don't," says AlHussaini. He sees growth in industries that cater to people's need for "contactless" services, from courier delivery to hospitals to teaching. He's also intrigued by the growing needs of home-based workers (many knowledge-economy workers still sheltering in place will be happy never to return to the office, but they'll need more professional tools) and by new ideas like apps that produce "office background sounds" to help home workers find their productive groove.

Process innovation – finding better ways to achieve outcomes – should also be on every leader's agenda. AlHussaini, who holds a PhD in strategic management, admires a recent pivot by drug companies such as Sanofi, Pfizer and BioNTech to share knowledge and resources as they develop and test COVID vaccines. The companies will own and market their own vaccines – but in the meantime, says Pfizer's chief scientific officer, Mikael Dolsten, "battling the COVID-19 pandemic is far too great a challenge for any one company or institution to solve alone."

Innovation comes in many forms, notes Hala Beisha (MBA '13), a Schulich grad, strategist and futurist who helps organizations deal with disruption through her Toronto consulting firm, Resilience Factor. "When you have declining margins, and layoffs like we've been seeing, you have to try something new – possibly something that sounded crazy before. I'm seeing companies becoming more open to experimenting with new ideas: new products, new value propositions and new ways for teams to work together."

She suggests starting from a position of introspection.

RESILIENCE IS EMBRACING CHANGE AND GAINING ENERGY FROM THE CHANGES. RESILIENCE IS A MUSCLE. IT'S SOMETHING YOU CAN DEVELOP



"Companies are staying close to their customers and asking, 'Is there something you want that we don't offer?' Or, 'What's the value of our products, and how can we make them more attractive?'"

Beisha offers a tip for would-be innovators: seize the trend toward "essentialism." Today's stressed consumers, who bought out all the bicycles last spring and the kayaks this summer, want to get back to the simple things. "People are asking, 'What do we really want, what do we really need, how do we simplify? How can we have simpler meals, simpler clothes, natural fabrics and colours?'"

But Jann warns that innovation isn't easy. Companies need robust processes for performing needs analyses, identifying customer problems, developing rapid prototypes, testing and commercialization. Successful innovators also make sure they have the full support of leadership at the top and reward programs that ensure employees are inspired to do great things.

Indeed, the very act of looking for new niches will strengthen any business. Successful innovation processes bring employees together, create stronger relationships with customers and suppliers, and improve companies' analytical capacities and speed to market. Plus, mastering these disciplines will make companies sector leaders; AlHussaini estimates that just 20 per cent of companies in any market are adept at innovation. A full 80 per cent of companies, he says, are "imitators, not innovators."

CAINING ENERGY FROM CHANGE

Above all, constant change requires firms to be aligned, agile and flexible. The best way to sum this up may be resilience: the ability to prepare for what's coming next, and to stay calm and composed – as individuals or teams – when shift happens.

"Resilience is embracing change and gaining energy from the changes," says Jann. "Resilience is a muscle. It's something you can develop."

Like many things, it starts with company culture. To promote resilience, organizations have to create and maintain work environments committed to trust and respect. This starts with leaders who ask themselves tough questions every day. What can I do better? How can I make our next meeting more effective? How can I be more articulate? How

can we get better results without putting more pressure on people?

Self-belief is a cornerstone of resilience, says Jann. When you obsess over past events and what you should have done, she says, you're undermining your own confidence or that of your colleagues. "Don't 'should' on yourself, and don't 'should' on others," Jann says. "Catch each other when you're doing something right. Create a culture of forgiveness and respect."

And this is where it all comes together. Optimism, service, inclusion, empathy and innovation are all related – essential tools for surviving the pandemic. Be aware of people's emotions and needs, communicate and collaborate, and good things happen. Despite its trials, the pandemic is creating opportunities for good.

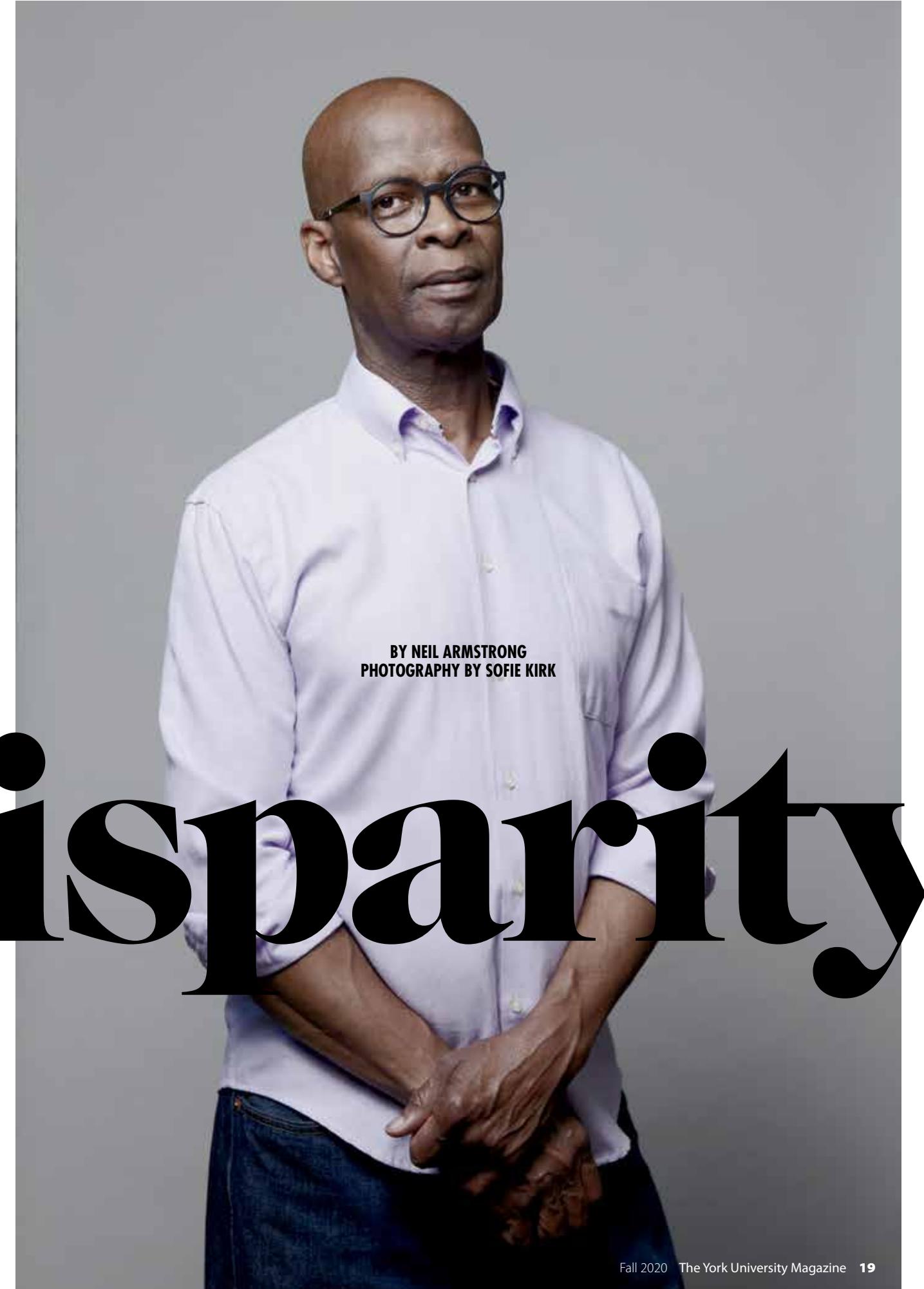
- With a \$5 million gift from Toronto's Krembil Foundation, the Schulich School of Business will establish a new Centre of Excellence in Health Management and Leadership. Beyond industry outreach and research, the centre will partner with two Schulich degree programs designed for business leaders who want to understand health-care economics – whether they're working in health care or managing health risk elsewhere: an MBA offering a specialization in health industry management and a new master's degree in health care management and leadership, currently in development. "It's being created during the pandemic and will be informed by the pandemic," says academic director Amin Mawani. Topics of study will include digital innovation, portable and remote technologies, social determinants of health, and Indigenous health care.

- In July, Steven Hoffman was appointed by the United Nations to lead a "research road map" project that will help guide its global post-COVID recovery efforts. He is co-ordinating researchers and funding organizations to identify areas where new data would help the UN develop better strategies to "Build Back Better" and end the victimization of at-risk communities. "We'll be finding answers to the questions we haven't been asking," he says, "and highlighting questions we've never had the resources to investigate." He is particularly hoping to find new ways to engage business. "A lot of it is about aligning systems," he says. "Business has a critical role in responding to the pandemic and building a more resilient society so we don't have to go through this again." ●

equity disparity



*York's Blackness in Canada project
explores systemic racism*



BY NEIL ARMSTRONG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOFIE KIRK

WHEN ANTI-RACISM

Black Lives Matter protests erupted in major cities across the U.S. earlier this year, some Canadian pundits dismissed the possibility

of the same thing happening in this country, declaring that the system of racism that endures south of the border just doesn't exist here. But Lorne Foster (BA '76, MA '79, PhD '84), a professor of human rights and public policy at York University, has news for them: Oh yes it does.

Not only does systemic racism exist in Canada, it often lies hidden beneath a veneer of normalcy, allowing for discriminatory practices in all sectors of society to continue unchecked for years. This isn't just a perception. It is fact. And Foster would know.

As the director of the Institute for Social Research at York University, the country's largest statistical and survey research facility, Foster has for years been collecting data that prove beyond a doubt that inequities do exist in Canada, particularly with regard to Blacks and other people of colour. The 2016 research he did on traffic-stop violations in Ottawa, for instance, firmly established a pattern of racial profiling that police in the nation's capital have since taken steps to rectify.

But even when they're confronted with statistics, it is still difficult for some people to admit that Canada just might have a discrimination problem. The country's belief in itself as a progressive and social justice-minded nation, a reputation often bolstered by comparisons to its neighbour to the south, has something to do with that. But Foster, who concerns himself with the facts, can see through the myth. "The dominant cultural narrative defines Canada as a non-racist or post-racial society," he says. "Yet disparities

continue to exist unabated in education, child services, criminal justice and the workplace."

To drive the point home, Foster recently launched the Blackness in Canada project, a three-year initiative unique to York University and the first nationally focused research project of its kind. The aim is to uncover what it means to be Black in Canada by focusing on Black people's actual lived experiences in such areas as education, child welfare, criminal justice and the labour market. Information about those experiences will be obtained by means of a pioneering research approach combining traditional survey techniques with social media tools like wiki surveys. Where traditional surveys present questions from researchers for people to answer, wiki surveys, on the other hand, allow people to identify the major questions and problems that they want to address, and to present them to others to either confirm, deny or expand on.

This interactive process of information-gathering will enable the Blackness in Canada project to get to the heart of community narratives from Black communities across Canada and, at the same time, build a data foundation allowing for knowledge and critical analysis of one of the most marginalized groups in Canada. "We might not be able to dismantle systemic racism," Foster says, "but the data will allow us to give better attention to some root causes that we can then address. The hope is to be able to have an effective strategy and plan for moving forward in various sectors. Racial discrimination in Canada is a multi-layered phenomenon that requires a multi-layered approach."

This is good news to other scholars for whom the Blackness in Canada project represents a chance to identify previously hidden dimensions of the Black experience in their own fields of study.

The dominant cultural narrative defines Canada as a non-racist or post-racial society. Yet disparities continue to exist unabated in education, child services, criminal justice and the workplace



RACIAL RECKONING:

Lorne Foster investigates the Black experience



This project will provide very useful information, especially as we try to understand the education of Black Canadians within our education system

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL:

York's diversity and inclusion expert Carl James

"This project will provide very useful information, especially as we try to understand the education of Black Canadians within our education system," says Carl James, the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community & Diaspora at York University's Faculty of Education. In August, James was also appointed to the role of Senior Advisor on Equity and Representation to the University, as part of the Division of Equity, People and Culture (EPC). In this newly created role, Professor James will work closely with Vice President of EPC Sheila Cote-Meek to support the advancement of equity, diversity and inclusion throughout the University.

One of the measures James has already introduced using data from the Blackness in Canada project is a road map for Black parents to navigate racial issues in the classroom. "Qualitative data such as the project will provide will enable us to see how education could become a foundation for social life and all sorts of other experiences that might come later in life. This will be very useful information for all of us on which to build."

Adds Karen Flynn (PhD '03), an alumna of York University who is today an associate professor in the Departments of Gender & Women's and African-American Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, "This project is significant because its national scope allows us to examine the specificity of the Black experience geographically. I hope the project will be inclusive of Black people's differences – gender, sexuality, class, age, disability and other factors that intersect with race."

To date, the Blackness in Canada project has secured the involvement of participating organizations in Alberta, Quebec and New Brunswick, in addition to those already in place in the project's home base of Ontario. Some of these networks came on board following a public policy launch held in Toronto in February to tease out some important areas of investigation for Black communities across Canada. "We want to embed more equity in society," Foster says. "If we can do that even a little bit, then I think that I could call our project a success."

But societal change, as Foster knows from his experience as a public policy analyst, generally comes slowly and in increments. Data collection is an important first step because it shows where the gaps lie. Facts are facts. They are not pre-drawn conclusions, and neither should they inspire wishful thinking. When applied to the labour market, for instance, data can be used constructively to create routes leading to gainful employment opportunities for Black youth. This can happen when the relevant data are provided to

organizations and institutions in pursuit of strategies that critically appraise the root causes of systemic discrimination in the workplace. "Since we know that systemic problems have to be solved systemically, then those kinds of sectors and major institutions in society are a part of the problem, so they have to be a part of the solution," Foster says.

The Black Canadian Studies Certificate Program, also at York University, similarly takes a multi-layered approach to questions of racial identity within Canadian society. Launched a few years ago by the Department of Humanities, it is the brainchild of Andrea Davis (MA '91, PhD '02) and Leslie Sanders, York professors who encourage an integrated examination of people of African descent in the Americas. Much of the interdisciplinary program foregrounds the Black Canadian experience in areas such as history, literature, theatre and music.

"Until now, Black Studies has been virtually absent from Canadian universities but for occasional unconnected courses, and only in some places," says Sanders, who has published widely on the works of Black American poet Langston Hughes and on such Black Canadian writers as Austin Clarke, Dionne Brand and Djanet Sears. "It was pressure from Black graduate students at York several years ago that led to the creation of a coherent program of study."

To Foster, the timing makes sense. Like York's Black Studies Certificate Program, his research project is happening at what seems to be a propitious moment in the history of Blacks in Canada and around the world. The launch in 2015 of the International Decade for People of African Descent, combined with the explosion of anti-racism protests in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, has forcefully pushed ideas about the Black experience to the forefront of cultural awareness. Much of the ensuing conversation revolves around slavery and racial servitude, historical practices believed to have contributed to many of the economic, cultural and social disadvantages experienced by Blacks today. Slavery and its attendant evils have created long-standing intergenerational trauma that no amount of data-gathering will easily erase. Yet current events have created a moment in time when change just might happen, given the right circumstances.

"It's not a slam dunk that this convergence is actually going to take us to where we would like to go," Foster says. "But I think that it has given us an excellent opportunity to move the needle toward a more equitable and democratic society in Canada. I'm hopeful that we can do that." ●

TRANSFORMING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

New tech and digital education go the distance

BY DEIRDRE KELLY
PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS ROBINSON





STUDENTS ACTUALLY CAN SEE THE THING THEY ARE LEARNING ABOUT, THEY CAN EXPLORE IT IN DETAIL AND WITH A HEIGHTENED PERSPECTIVE

VR VISIONARY: Eva Peisachovich reimagines the virtual classroom

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE FORD

PICTURE THIS: you're in your bedroom or, if you're lucky to have one during the mandated school closures, your home office. But not for long. Strapping on a VR headset, you log onto a game environment on your desktop and hold onto your chair. It only takes a few minutes, then whoosh! You find yourself on a raft on the Amazon river, gliding by vine-laden trees populated by screaming birds and jumping monkeys. All around you in the amber-coloured waters swim crocodiles and piranhas, so you know you must keep your footing. You must stay the course. Your grades depend on it. For this isn't just a diversionary journey. This is a major scholarly project enabling you to get up close and personal with a subject in ways you could never have imagined before. It's what your education has become in the pandemic: a whole new boldly reimagined reality. Welcome to your new digital classroom, where school is no longer a building of bricks and mortar but a multimodal network of connections that impart a visceral experience.

At a time of distance learning, immersive technologies have become a student's new best friends – expanding and enhancing their educational experience while providing insights and heightened perspectives on subject matter far beyond that found in books. This is an educational model as all-encompassing as an IMAX film, and just as immediate. The above example is hypothetical, but it is illustrative of where education is capable of going in the 21st century. Virtual reality, to highlight but one piece of popular technology being introduced to education as a pathway for positive change, isn't just about turning the learning experience into a joyride. It's about creating possibilities and, yes, opening the mind to new forms of inquiry and knowledge production. Even if some educators are leery of embracing the new tech – worried about turning their classrooms into video arcades, or simply worried that they're just too out-of-the-loop to get what all the excitement's about – there's no denying that tech is sparking new approaches to education now and into the future.

FOR KURT THUMLERT, a professor in York's Faculty of Education whose field of study involves inquiry-driven video production and other hands-on creative multi-literacy projects, digital technologies are just a means

to an end – that end being progressive change in education. Educators who use computerized teaching tools simply to deliver content are missing out on tech's potential to stimulate students' creativity. When students are encouraged to make their own video games and other interactive fictions, learning shifts from being a passive to an active experience that imparts knowledge in novel and relevant ways, an approach especially recommended in situations of online learning. "My suggestions to people, as much as possible under conditions of emergency response teaching, is to move away from traditional uses of technology to deliver content and toward enabling students to use tools to create artifacts or digital stories that have meaning to them and their communities," Thumlert says.

For some, that's a scary proposition. We are so accustomed to the old ways of learning – seated at a desk before an instructor imparting wisdom and computational formulas shared brain to brain. But with classrooms and lecture halls emptied since mid-March of this year, the familiar chalk-and-talk stereotype is on its way out, if not already gone. In its place is a new digital order that borrows heavily from the simulation genre of computer games. Digital education advocates believe the new tech will help raise awareness of the immense benefits and untapped potential of digital education across the entire sector. Millennials and even younger students have already encountered simulated 3D environments under other guises in the sphere of digital fantasy and play, diminishing resistance to the introduction of new learning technologies and methods in the virtual classroom.

"Gaming and virtual reality can be used to enhance student learning and engagement, and can transform the way educational content is delivered by creating virtual spaces in which to learn. They also allow users not only to see what it is they are studying but also to interact with the subject matter," says Eva Peisachovich (PhD '14), a professor in York's Faculty of Health. Along with York colleagues Lora Appel (iBBA '07) and Celina Da Silva (BA '18, BEd '20), Peisachovich is the co-founder of SimXSpace, an interconnected collective of labs at York where experiential education meets various forms of simulation in the online learning environment. "We know from research that visual learners can benefit from this approach, because instead of reading about a thing, students actually can see the thing

they are learning about, they can explore it in detail and with a heightened perspective. It's an enhanced learning experience," Peisachovich says, and one that will create positive change in ways that are only now becoming apparent.

SIMULATED PERSONS (SP) technology, such as Peisachovich employs in her teaching practice at the University's School of Nursing, provides students with an opportunity to investigate health conditions like strokes and heart attacks in simulated patients at a time when interacting with a real-life patient for learning purposes is not an option, such as during the present global health crisis. "Applying SPs as an educational approach enables students to learn and practise interpersonal and interprofessional communication skills through meaningful, realistic human encounters followed by guided reflection in a safe setting," Peisachovich says. "It's also what makes virtual reality and gaming in education so powerful, as these technologies allow learners to develop communication skills, cultural sensitivity, ethical conduct and professionalism, among many other applications."

The relevance of simulations to both the theory and practice of remote learning is drawing interest across the University in departments and faculties as diverse as social work, law, business and education. Future collaborations will involve other post-secondary institutions such as the University of Toronto, Western, Wilfrid Laurier, UOIT and Lakehead Universities. But the aims of SimXSpace extend beyond academe. The York-based project's stated goal is to become "a global leader in realizing the full potential of simulation technologies and methodologies to drive a new era of experiential education and research through collaborations with health-care organizations, intersectoral disciplines, and the corporate sector across Canada and internationally." It's not beyond reach.

The pivot to remote learning at the time of the coronavirus has created a boom market for educational technologies, one of the few industries growing in the pandemic. According to a 2018 *Forbes* report, the global e-learning market is projected to reach US\$325 billion by 2025, a figure that is triple its current estimate of US\$107 billion.

In big demand are simulation and virtual reality, tools which promise to make the digital experience unique for each learner, finds a Royal Bank of Canada report on the future of higher education released in June of this year. "Adapted for smartphones, these tools could usher in a new wave of remote learning, including virtual laboratories and situation-based learning that may be impossible in a physical environment," the RBC study concludes. The continued growth and expansion of artificial intelligence in education hardly surprises researchers at York. "The education market is shifting to virtual learning methods and approaches," Peisachovich says. "As universities transition to online and remote learning, it becomes increasingly critical to introduce and create innovative virtual-learning opportunities to support learner success and graduate transition to the workplace."

Not everyone's convinced of the benefits. A spring survey conducted by the Canadian Association of University Teachers in collaboration with the Canadian Federation of Students found a significant number of students – 75 per cent – worried that distance learning will amount to a poor learning experience. Teachers feel stressed about making the transition from in-class to online learning too, mainly because a shift of this magnitude has rarely happened in education before. Remote learning and the technologies that come with it are largely a gigantic real-time experiment.

But for Kurt Thumlert, who continues to investigate new media and how students can engage with it in impactful ways, it is an experiment not to be feared.

While unwilling to weigh the positives and negatives of remote learning, the York education scholar allows that the current health crisis has presented educators everywhere with an opportunity to embrace change and move with the rapidly evolving times. To do otherwise would be to set the clock backward.

"Under conditions of pandemic," Thumlert says, "we can return to entrenched archaic and stultifying pedagogies or – hopefully – begin to reimagine what teaching and learning might actually look like with innovative pedagogies that situate students as makers of knowledge, art and culture." ●



Giving

FRIENDS & PHILANTHROPY

Glendon student Wilson Munoz



The York community is stepping up in a big way to help students face pandemic challenges

BY IRA LAMCJA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

Giving from the Heart

GLENDON STUDENT WILSON MUNOZ remembers the moment his workplace closed in March. He was working behind the bar at Yorkdale mall's Cheesecake Factory when Toronto Mayor John Tory (LLB '78) announced restaurants across the city would have to close their doors to the public.

Wilson's first thought was of his finances. His mind racing, he ran through the list of expenses that had already started piling up: rent, tuition, groceries, car payments, dog food, credit card and more.

Not long after, Wilson received an email from his managers notifying him of his cancelled shifts. He started to panic.

"I was reeling," Wilson says as he recalls the stress of those first few days after lockdown began. "As much as I had tried to save, I am still a university student, and in the weeks before the pandemic, I had also lost a lot of my income from tips after diners stopped going out as much, so I hadn't been able to really prepare for this."

But for Wilson, help came just when he needed it most. He felt hopeful after reading an email from York University President and Vice-Chancellor Rhonda L. Lenton announcing the York University Emergency Bursary for students who needed urgent financial aid to cover the unexpected costs of the pandemic.

"I was in such dire need that I applied within a few hours of seeing that email," Wilson says. "And when I was approved to receive \$1,500 toward my expenses, I was so grateful to York University and the community that made this happen. At a time when everything was so uncertain, this money eased my stress."

The University has committed \$2 million to the Emergency Bursary, and aid has been distributed to students since March, but their need for emergency relief has far surpassed expectations. Thousands of students applied for financial aid after incurring unexpected costs related to travel, emergency housing, food and other necessities. Countless students have also lost their part-time and summer jobs, internships, co-ops and other work they had lined up to pay for their university education.



The York community is rising to the challenge in a big way.

Hundreds of York community members have rallied around our students, making donations to provide additional support to students through the York University Emergency COVID-19 Student Relief Fund. With support coming from alumni, donors, faculty, staff, the York University Alumni Board and members of York's Board of Governors, over \$450,000 has been raised to provide further support for students.

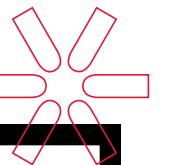
"I am incredibly proud of the way the students, staff, faculty, alumni and others have come together to support one another," said President Lenton. "Even in these extraordinary and challenging times, York continues to show it is a caring community dedicated to the well-being and success of students. I am grateful to everyone who has contributed to our emergency bursaries."

Lenton noted there is still much work to do to make sure no student falls behind. As we head into the fall, students will continue to need support. COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on students, and the generous support of our community can provide funding to help them complete their education.

Wilson knows first-hand how much the support of the York community has meant to students over the past few months.

"Thank you to everyone from the bottom of my heart. This support means everything," he says. "I am so grateful to everyone who has contributed. We really need it, and we're really struggling. If you are able, please consider making a donation to help other students like me."

Help other students access the financial relief they need by making a donation online: alumniandfriends.yorku.ca/give. ●



Champions spearheading relief efforts

YORK UNIVERSITY ALUMNI and long-standing donors Pierre Lassonde and Victor Dahdaleh (BA '78) responded quickly to the urgent need students are experiencing in the wake of the pandemic by contributing a combined \$300,000 toward the York University Emergency COVID-19 Student Relief Fund as a match to encourage others to give.

"York students need the support of the entire community at this unprecedented time, as the pandemic is creating economic uncertainty," said Lassonde. "Providing financial relief to our students is an important part of York's commitment to providing a world-class education and preparing global citizens who will make a positive change to our world." At his namesake Lassonde School of Engineering, students, staff and faculty are working on groundbreaking research into technological solutions that will help stop COVID-19 transmission.

"Students must be supported through this crisis. Today's students must complete their education to become tomorrow's leaders," added Dahdaleh, who established the Dahdaleh Institute for Global Health Research. In the current reality of COVID-19, the Dahdaleh Institute and its team are fast becoming a trusted global resource.

Around the world, friends of York are pulling together to contribute to COVID-19 solutions at home and abroad. Learn more about these collective efforts at yubettertogether.info.yorku.ca.

Alumni



NOURISHING BODY AND SOUL: Gurbeen Bhasin in her charity kitchen

Taking good care,
especially in a pandemic

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

BY AVA BACCARI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZLATKO CETINIC

HAPPY THOUGHTS. That's what keeps Gurbeen Bhasin (BA '92) going as she and her team at Aangen work tirelessly to provide meals and cleaning services to Toronto's most vulnerable populations – homeless and at-risk community members – throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the city went on lockdown after Mayor John Tory (LLB '78) declared a state of emergency on March 23, Aangen has prepared and



SHE GIVES SANCTUARY: Aangen founder Bhasin with co-workers at Aangen

delivered 8,000 meals to city shelters and respite. “That’s the number one priority: to make sure people in shelters are fed,” says the founder and executive director of the not-for-profit social enterprise.

Sanskrit for “courtyard of a home,” Aangen is as much a philosophy inspired by Bhasin’s Indian heritage as it is a refuge for disadvantaged community members and families. Its three business lines – farm products, cleaning and catering – fund community service programming. In response to the pandemic, Aangen has launched a designated cleaning service for restaurants and stores to maintain proper hygiene protocols, and received a grant from Red Cross to help hire more cleaning staff and ensure the safe reopening of local businesses.

The wheels of social change started spinning for Bhasin as a political science undergraduate student at York. More specifically, it began with a word. “I was in a fourth-year political theory class, and we were reading *The Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci. In it, Gramsci talks about ‘hegemony’ – the dominance of one country or social group over another

– and I was just mystified,” she recalls. Breaking the cycle of oppression and becoming an agent of change, she says, “became my life mission.”

After graduating, Bhasin volunteered with the Scott Mission in Toronto and went on to earn a master’s in social work in social policy in the U.S. At a placement with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, she hatched the plan for Aangen. Today, the Toronto-based organization works with community food banks, homeless shelters and housing organizations to help local families in crisis access employment, housing and food. Aangen also raised money to build an industrial kitchen in an orphanage in Nigeria, among other international initiatives.

Now in its 20th year, Aangen employs approximately 100 staff members, many of them facing economic and personal challenges (the cleaning manager is a survivor of domestic abuse who once sought Aangen’s services). Bhasin never expected her little not-for-profit to grow so large. “What keeps me going,” she says, “is knowing that someone’s going to have food on their table and a roof over their head.” ●

A Nurse’s Journey

From classroom to clinic across two continents

BY DEIRDRE KELLY

MATTHEW MUTAMIRI (BHS Health Studies ’15, BSCN Nursing ’17) was born only four years after Zimbabwe secured independence from Britain in 1980. He grew up witnessing the chaos that ensued.

After introducing ruinous land reforms aimed at reversing decades of colonial rule, Zimbabwe’s then-President Robert Mugabe destabilized the country’s economy and plunged the people into unrelenting poverty. Life expectancy in the Southern African nation is now among the shortest in the world. The average person in Zimbabwe is not expected to live past 60, according to a recent United Nations report. HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases often go unchecked due to a dearth of resources.

But Mutamiri is one of the luckier ones.

He worked hard and did well at school, rising above his ailing nation’s particular difficulties. Advancing to university, he took a bachelor’s degree in science with a focus on public administration. He had wanted to use his education to promote the development of Zimbabwe. “But the situation was so untenable,” he says, “and I eventually had to leave.”

In pursuit of a better life with his wife, Josephine Mukwaira (BHS Health Studies ’14, BHS Health Informatics ’15), Mutamiri immigrated to Canada in 2010, settling in Niagara Falls, Ont. Despite having changed countries, his ambition to help others remained as strong as before.

In 2012, he enrolled at York University to take a degree in health policy. In 2015, during the final year of the honour’s program, he sat in on an information session for the University’s nursing program. It had a profound impact. In Zimbabwe, Mutamiri had often seen people with poor mental health cast out onto the streets, shunned due to ignorance, fear and a general lack of public health care. The memory

goaded him to switch directions and take yet another degree at York. “I decided I wanted to become a nurse,” he says. “I wanted to work with the mentally ill to address social inequality.”

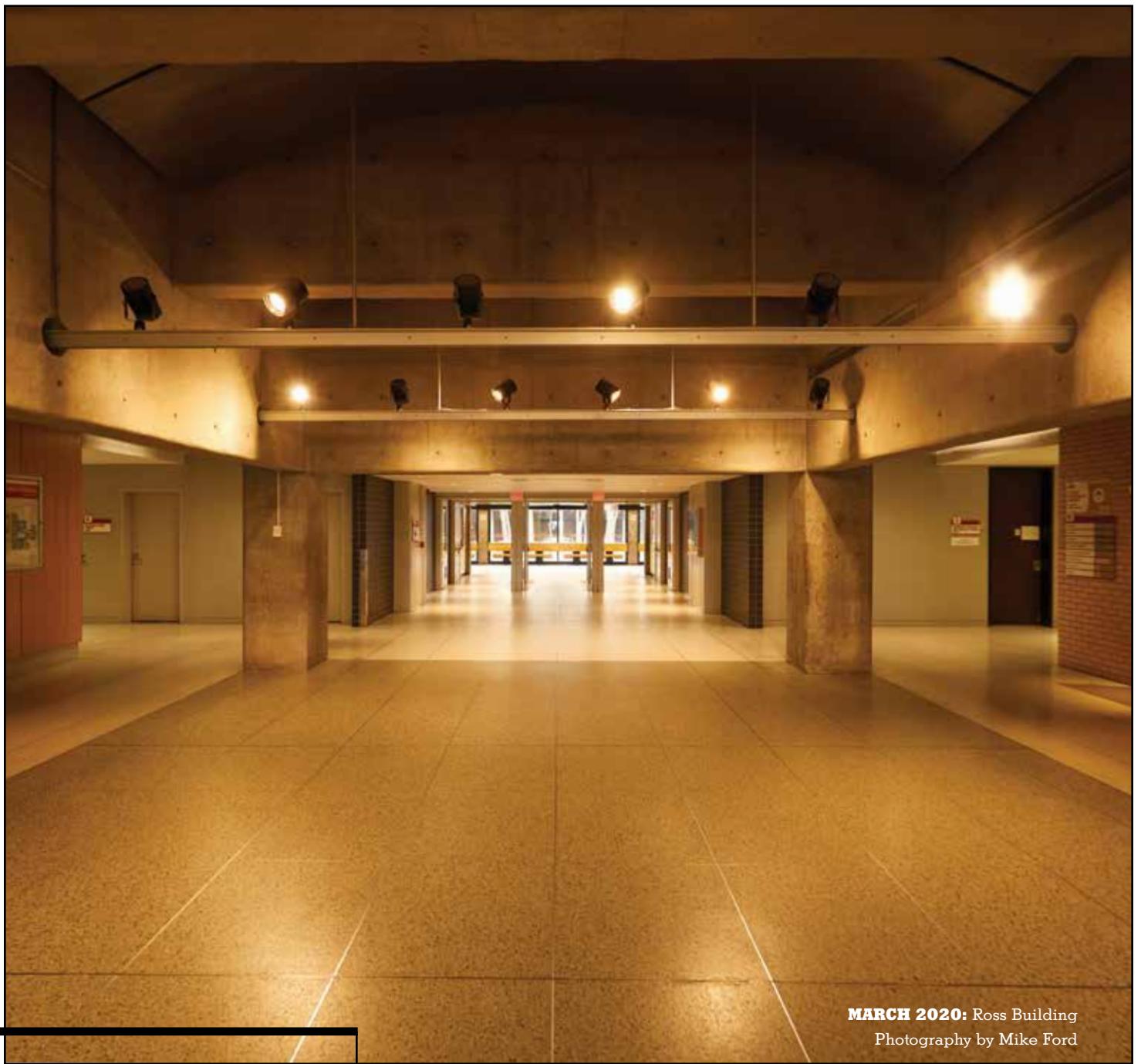
Today a registered mental health nurse at Brantford General Hospital, an affiliate of the Brant Community Healthcare System in Paris, Ont., Mutamiri builds on the compassionate approach to medical intervention he learned while a student at York. An internship at the mental health unit of Toronto’s Sunnybrook Hospital, a key component of his nursing studies, taught him the soft skills he now employs every day in his practice. “I really enjoyed the way they humanized the care, and I enjoyed interacting with the patients,” he says. “Mental illness is not them. It is something they might have. It doesn’t define them.”

Yet treating their illness does pose challenges, even more so during a global health crisis. As a result of the pandemic, Mutamiri has seen an uptick in patients with mental health problems, especially those suffering from delusions. “For people who already had this disorder, COVID-19 has not helped them, with its conspiracy theories and mistrust of scientific information,” he says. “It’s hard to have patients who think the system is working against them.”

Just like in Zimbabwe, here in Canada many with mental health issues end up on the street. As part of the PhD program he began in September, Mutamiri will investigate homelessness and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic to help the vulnerable living on the fringes in Toronto. “But I will not study these people as specimens in a lab,” says the father of three young boys. “I will work directly with them to do the research they deem important for treating their mental health. The main thrust will be how we can improve the situation.” It’s a question he’s been a long time asking. ●



FROM ZIMBABWE WITH LOVE: Husband and wife health-care workers and York grads Matthew Mutamiri and Josephine Mukwaira at their 2015 convocation



MARCH 2020: Ross Building
Photography by Mike Ford

Flashback



Have a great
photo from
your days at
York?

Email us at magnotes@yorku.ca

IT'S BEEN MORE THAN SIX MONTHS since York University closed its campuses in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But look at how much has changed since then. The months now feel like years, measured not by the passing of time but by the astonishing number of accomplishments that the University has accumulated at a time of crisis. Even as classrooms and lecture halls remain empty, York continues to offer students a transformative and positive learning experience. Technology-supported instruction and socially minded research projects are among the many new initiatives driving the University forward. ●

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MAKING A GLOBAL IMPACT

UNIVERSITIES HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT as catalysts for positive change. We live in a world filled with incredible innovation but also one facing serious and complex challenges. We need globally educated citizens able to work across traditional boundaries to build their own success and that of their communities. We are very pleased to be recognized by *Times Higher Education's* Impact Rankings as a world leader in building multisector partnerships and pioneering new educational approaches. From confronting climate change to building more inclusive and equitable communities, York is leading the type of community engagement needed to tackle society's most pressing concerns.