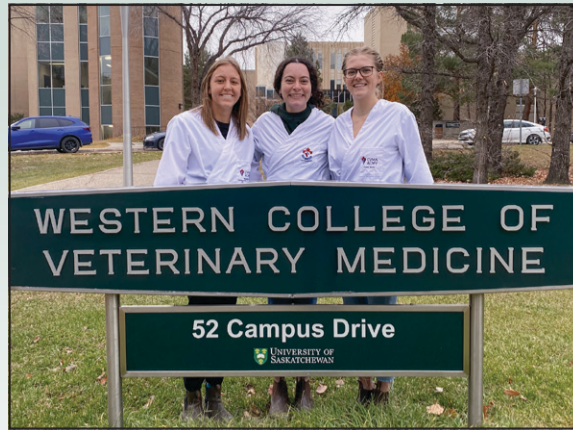


The Road to Vet School

While many farm kids probably dream of becoming veterinarians early in their lives, fewer and fewer graduates seem to be actually 'farm-grown.' That said, we are excited to share accounts from three women who grew up on family farms, thrived in 4-H and WCC, and are now at different stages on their journey towards a common goal: a career in veterinary medicine!

Amanda Poelman



(L-R) Danielle Groenendijk-Westwood, Tara Sweetnam, and Kyona Bruns are all at various stages in their vet med journey but agree that this experience has been incredibly rewarding.



Danielle loves ALL animals! She was able to travel all over, including Thailand, while playing professional volleyball in Norway before starting vet school.

Danielle Groenendijk-Westwood
Chemainus, BC

2ND YEAR

Danielle grew up on her parents' Greendike Farm Ltd, where they milk 160 Holstein cows. She participated with the Cowichan 4-H Holstein Club for 11 years and went to WCC with Team BC four times. "I love the cows," says Danielle, who prefers animal care jobs on the farm over equipment work. Upon finishing high school, Danielle knew two things for sure: that she wanted to earn a science degree and play volleyball. She headed to Vancouver Island University (VIU), where she earned a biology degree, with a minor in Kinesiology, all while playing with the VIU Mariners, a 4X National Champion in women's volleyball.

"Vet school was not something I'd been dreaming about since the age of five," Danielle says, "I first thought I'd go into physiotherapy, but when I did a job shadow in that field, I didn't really love it." While still at VIU, Central Cowichan Animal Hospital reached out and Danielle enjoyed working there for a few months, solidifying the notion of vet school. In 2022, with her degree in hand and her application enroute to Saskatchewan, Danielle and husband Ben headed to Norway where Danielle played volleyball professionally until May 2023, returning home to the farm before starting her first year of vet med in August.

Now in her 2nd year, Danielle says, "Coming back in second year has been great! I feel like I had a better idea of what to expect this time." The biggest change over her undergraduate degree is the amount of time spent in lectures and labs. "Second year is the worst," she says, "There's way more lectures than labs and it's information overload with an exam every week." On the plus side, Danielle says, "You get to know your classmates better - we call it 'trauma bonding' because we're all exhausted and struggling together!"

Danielle has been very surprised by the diverse options in vet medicine. "There are so many avenues of specialization! You can do cats, exotics, or research - the possibilities are endless. I keep getting surprised by what other vets are doing!"

In her spare time, Danielle is an Assistant Coach with the U of S women's volleyball team, attending two practices a week and all home games. "It keeps me involved in sport, which has been such a big part of my life," she says, "I'm slowly transitioning from being a high-level athlete to being a coach and it's a good break from studying."

Danielle has also joined several clubs, including Production Animal, Emergency Care, Equine and Pathology, all of which are good ways to try new things that she might not be exposed to in required labs. "Sometimes it can be overwhelming because there's always something you COULD be doing - but you can't go to everything!" Danielle is looking forward to finishing second year and hopefully putting more of what she's learned into practice this summer, both on her family farm and with local veterinarians.



Kyona, home at Hamberlin Holsteins, where she developed her love of cattle and was encouraged by her parents to pursue vet med.

Kyona Bruns
Mara, BC

3RD YEAR

Kyona calls the sunny Okanagan valley home, where she grew up at Hamberlin Holsteins, an organic 60-cow dairy farm. A member of the Milky Way 4-H Dairy Club for six years, Kyona attended WCC with Team BC twice, thanks to the encouragement of 4-H leader Kirsty McAvoy. At age 16, Kyona completed an exciting semester abroad in Germany. Returning home to finish high school, Kyona spent weekends working at Shuswap Vet Clinic, a mixed animal practice, as well as on her family farm. "I always enjoyed being out on the farm with the vet," she says, "I was more excited to pursue a vet med career than taking over the farm and I had a lot of encouragement from my parents and Dr. Jay Thurgood from Shuswap."

Kyona pursued Animal Science at Thompson-Rivers University in Kamloops and applied twice to vet school before she was accepted. "In university they asked us what we wanted to be and five people said 'veterinarian.' The professor told us we better have a backup because only one of us would make it," says Kyona. "That was a major eye opener, so I decided I'd apply three times and if I didn't get in, I clearly was not destined for this journey, and I would find a new path."

While she says that vet school is the hardest thing she's ever done, Kyona adds, "This is also the most excited I've ever been about learning!" When she first arrived in Saskatoon, a professor described the learning experience as "drinking from a fire hose" and Kyona agrees. The intensive workload and the ongoing memorization and regurgitation of information have provided Kyona with valuable challenges, allowing her to adapt and grow, even as she recognizes her strengths as a more 'hands-on' learner - all qualities that she believes will prepare her for her future career and life's hurdles. She was initially surprised by the greater focus on small animal medicine compared to large animal medicine. However, she is gaining more experience in large animal medicine through her core lectures and chosen electives. "I came in with my heart set on being a dairy vet," she says, "But as I've progressed, I'm leaning more toward mixed practice because I think it would be a shame not to apply everything I've learned about small animals."

Seeking as much hands-on experience as she can, Kyona keeps busy with various clubs including Production Animal, Equine and Imaging. She is also a student rep for 'Catsnip,' a completely student-run program, which offers spay and neuter clinics at a low cost, as well as physical exams and vaccines. Kyona also stayed in Saskatoon last summer, working at a small animal clinic to gain more experience with her skills, and is excited to head to the Cornell Summer Dairy Institute to focus on dairy medicine this year. She is extremely excited for fourth year and all the various rotations. "We're not playing pretend anymore then," she says, "It's time to apply everything you've learned!"



Tara's passion for dairy has been fuelled by working alongside her parents and brother Mark, flushing and showing cows; including 2024 favourite SWEETRIDGE FUEL BRYSTOL.

Tara Sweetnam
Winkler, MB

4TH YEAR

Born in Ireland, Tara now hails from Winkler, MB, where her family owns and operates Sweetridge Farms, milking 50 Jerseys and 300 Holsteins. At age eight she got involved with the Southeast 4-H Dairy Club and spent 10 years with Team Manitoba at WCC. "Vet school was always the goal for me," says Tara, "My job on the farm was feeding calves and keeping them healthy, which piqued my interest, but flushing and showing cows further drove that passion into the job I wanted to pursue." She also notes that having her parents and brother Mark so heavily involved in the industry really encouraged her to want to work with producers like them.

Tara did her undergraduate degree at the University of Saskatchewan and applied twice to vet school before her acceptance. "I had also applied to do my Masters in Dairy Nutrition, but when you get the green light to do something you've always wanted to do - **you go!**" Now in her 4th year, Tara is looking forward to finishing her final rotations and graduating in June. "Fourth year is AWESOME," says Tara, "You're pretty much done with the books, and you get to spend a whole year going on rotation to put everything you've learned into practice."

On rotation since May 2024, Tara has spent time at Abbotsford Vet Clinic (BC), Morden Vet Clinic (MB); Bow Valley Genetics (AB), Agwest Vet (BC), Ontario Vet College, a clinic in Wisconsin and six weeks at Cornell University (NY). "There are some mandatory rotations done at the college, but the rest you have to line up for yourself to fill your schedule," says Tara, who is now actively looking for a job. "I'm not sure where I'll end up yet, but I want it to be somewhere I can do as much dairy and IVF work as possible." Although she is not afraid of going to a mixed practice, Tara's heart and passion is in the dairy business, where her goal is to help producers achieve their farm goals as efficiently as possible.

With most of the studying now in her rear-view mirror, Tara sums up vet school quickly, "In first year you learn how to study in vet med, in second year they hammer you with exams and how everything gets sick and dies, third year you get to learn how to treat and fix things and fourth year is a complete whirlwind of rotations where you're here, there and everywhere!" She laughs, "It's a good thing this interview didn't happen in my second year - **that year sucked!** You're in the trenches getting overloaded with information and somehow you make it to fourth year which makes it all worth it."

Growing up as a farm kid and learning to do things a certain way, Tara says that one of the biggest challenges has been bringing new ideas back home without stepping on anyone's toes. "And learning anything about horses," she laughs, "That all sounds the same to me!" With 85% of her class being female, Tara notes the importance of learning different tricks for doing things with smaller hands and arms than a male. She's also amazed by how much you can learn from different people out on rotation, where perspectives and techniques can vary so much from place to place.

While in different stages, Danielle, Kyona, and Tara all agree that vet school, despite its unavoidable demands, has been an incredibly rewarding experience. Each of them is excited to continue building on what they've learned through the journey of veterinary medicine.

