



Hailey Vidler '15

~~FAREWELL~~ to NOVA SCOTIA

ACROSS NOVA SCOTIA, NEW COLLABORATIONS ARE HELPING REDEFINE POSSIBILITIES FOR THE PROVINCE. STFX ALUMNI ARE AMONG THOSE IN THE CHARGE, AMONG THOSE BELIEVING WE CAN BUILD A BETTER FUTURE TOGETHER. IN THIS ISSUE, WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE EFFORTS OF SOME OF THOSE ALUMNI WHO ARE WORKING TO ENSURE RESIDENTS HAVE MORE CHOICE TO NO LONGER SAY FAREWELL TO NOVA SCOTIA.

BY SHELLEY CAMERON-MCCARRON

When Hailey Vidler graduated from StFX in 2015 with a joint major in development studies and anthropology, saying farewell to Nova Scotia could have been an easy choice for the Ontario native. She'd only just started to grow roots in the province.

Not only did she choose to stay, she's now part of a non-profit group working to ensure it's easier for everyone to have that option.

For the past two years, as an engagement strategist with Engage Nova Scotia, an organization teaming with partners across the province to advance collaboration, innovation and self-reliance, Ms. Vidler has been getting hands-on experience in supporting Nova Scotians making change in their communities for a better future. In fact, of Engage Nova Scotia's six full-time staff, four are StFX alumni, chief engagement officer and founding chair Danny Graham '83, and engagement strategists Jennifer Brenton DeCoste '03, Jeff Overmars '02, and Ms. Vidler '15.



“I decided to stay in Nova Scotia after graduation because I saw it as a place of opportunity, especially for young people,” Ms. Vidler, a self-proclaimed Nova Scotian by choice, says.

While that statement may seem contrary to popular narratives, she says when you spend time engaging in communities, you realize many young people are stepping up to build a better future for their communities and for Nova Scotia.

Ms. Vidler, who is currently working with local municipalities to build greater capacity for engaging citizens and on Nova Scotia quality of life research, says her work has been transformational personally and professionally.

“Being a ‘have not’ province has become an entrenched part of the Nova Scotian narrative. There is no doubt we have economic and demographic challenges facing our province,” she says.

“Engage Nova Scotia works at the root of these issues to create a culture shift towards better civic engagement and collaboration. If we improve these conditions by focusing on the quality of life and lived experiences of people in our communities we can build a thriving province, together.”

It’s about asking how we show up as citizens in our communities, she says.

“These are similar questions I began asking myself when I was in development studies at X. That program was a deeply impactful learning opportunity that started me on a path to realizing the importance of citizen engagement when co-creating the development of our communities.”

It’s a sentiment to which Ms. Brenton DeCoste can relate.

The StFX political science graduate says when she and husband Scott DeCoste ’00 chose to return home to Nova Scotia she wanted to do her part in supporting the changes necessary at a provincial level for Nova Scotia to become a successful and thriving region where their two young boys could excel.

“We became very active in our church, supported and started small scale social enterprises and two small businesses. Working for Engage Nova Scotia allowed me to combine my volunteer passions for community development with dedicated, professional support on a much larger scale,” she says.

As part of her work with Engage Nova Scotia, she’s supporting municipalities across the province that are looking for ways to work more collaboratively with citizens to grow, from the grassroots, the hometowns and the province “we all want to live in.”

Engage Nova Scotia’s small team has had great impact because of the network that has formed around this shared vision, she says

This work and this approach is essential in this period of global growth and change, she says. “The stronger our communities are at the base, the more resilient we will be, creating a safe place to start and grow businesses and families.”

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REDEFINING POSSIBILITIES

Mr. Overmars, a StFX sociology graduate who also attained a certificate in Participatory Action Research for Citizen-led Change from StFX’s Coady International Institute in 2014, is currently seconded from the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission to help Engage with highlighting an emerging new narrative for the province.

He’s been focused on recording interviews with Nova Scotians demonstrating leadership at the community level and promoting their stories to inspire others and show how each one of us can make a difference. These stories are available in the VOICES: Stories of Change podcast available on iTunes and Stitcher, and on the Engage website.

Amazing work is happening at the community level, he says, where new collaborations are redefining the possibilities for the province.

“We all have a stake in the success of our communities and our province. I’ve always been interested in community development and how everyday Nova Scotians are doing their part. I’m descended from immigrants, like all settlers, and believe a diverse province is a strong one. If I can show how newcomers and people from diverse communities are helping to create a more resilient province, I feel like I’m spending my time on something worthwhile.”

Mr. Overmars says initiatives like Engage Nova Scotia that focus on the province and its future are vital.



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JENNIFER BRENTON DECOSTE '03

“Communities across the province are demonstrating the value of volunteerism, engagement and taking initiative towards improving the quality of life. More Nova Scotians need to hear these stories and take action,” he says.

“The responsibility of building our future can’t rest on government alone.”

PROMISING SIGNS

“Part of what we invite people to do is to step up and not give up on the future of our province,” says Mr. Graham who came together with a group of passionate Nova Scotians who believed they could do more to form Engage Nova Scotia five years ago.

They wanted to explore the deeper systemic challenges that hold Nova Scotia back, celebrate the successes, and to see more clearly the advantages, opportunities and hurdles in front of them.

“We’ve been seeing promising signs,” he says.

As example, Engage Nova Scotia has worked with municipal leaders in Nova Scotia to help build trust in their communities. The enthusiasm they’re receiving is gratifying, Mr. Graham says.

He says a general declining trust in government, media, businesses and NGOs, has resulted in an emerging paralysis of leadership and the rise of populism and superficiality to public discourse.

“Amongst the things we do to build trust, we work with community and municipal leaders to help understand why, when and how they should engage their citizens and we help them to understand how to do it more effectively.”

Just last month they were in Cape Breton for an event aimed at improving understanding and connections between Mi’kmaq leadership and municipal leaders, and in January, they’ll be part of a public engagement exercise within the Town of Antigonish to tap into the wisdom of citizens there.

Other examples of recent work include planting seeds that led to the creation of jobs for unemployed artisans and tech start-ups in the Annapolis Valley, and for new relationships to develop through Share Thanksgiving, an initiative that matches international students and newcomers with Nova Scotians for dinner, a chance for Nova Scotians, new and old, to sit together to connect.

More than a shared meal, the initiative builds community and helps focus on improving immigration, a goal for the future population of the province, by asking how inclusive and welcoming are our communities and institutions.

“We’re really proud of Nova Scotians on how they’ve responded and what Nova Scotians have done with just a little nudging by us,” Mr. Graham says.

“We’re just opening up the space to do things differently,” he notes. “We’re catalyzers.”

Engage Nova Scotia’s aspiration is for more people to know the advantages, opportunities and hurdles in front of them, he says.

“We will be a more vibrant and resilient Nova Scotia if more people are stepping up to our challenges and opportunities and if we are more adaptive to change and see with clearer eyes.”

People value the quality of life here, the connections and authenticity, he says, and Engage Nova Scotia is deeply focused on measuring what Nova Scotians treasure to further improve this quality of life and to ensure that everybody gets to share in that quality of life.



Family enjoying Share Thanksgiving together



“PART OF WHAT WE INVITE PEOPLE TO DO IS TO STEP UP AND NOT GIVE UP ON THE FUTURE OF OUR PROVINCE.”
DANNY GRAHAM '83

Engage Nova Scotia is working too to see that more of the province’s young people see the potential of the place. Quality of life is incredibly important to millennials, he says, who are more than ever able to choose where they live while they work nationally or globally.

For Ms. Vidler, another aspect that drew her to Engage Nova Scotia is the emphasis on ‘narrative’ and creating spaces for historically marginalized voices to come to the fore.

When communities have a process where they can listen to one another and uncover what they collectively value, they’re more likely to be successful when aligning across differences and building a better quality of life for everyone. Cross-sector collaboration and diverse representation from different communities is critical to the process.

As for the influence of their alma mater?

“I knew the day that I stepped foot on campus in 2011 that there was something special about StFX,” Ms. Vidler says as a way of explaining why she believes so many grads find themselves giving back to society.

“The values of community, social justice and leadership are deeply ingrained in our identity as Xaverians. The responsibility to promote these values in aspects in your personal and professional lives continues long after you leave campus.”

Mr. Overmars says in addition to the regular academic streams, the Extension Department, Coady Institute, and the legacy of the Antigonish Movement are renowned leaders when it comes to new approaches to community, leadership and development. “It’s an inspiring place to study.”

The commitment of StFX alumni to support and foster the skills and talents of recent grads is unlike anything Ms. Vidler says she’s heard of. “Alumni mentorship and leadership has been a pivotal part of my journey to finding a job I’m passionate about,” she says. In particular, she’s worked with Mr. Graham in various roles since fall 2015. “He is the embodiment of compassionate leadership,” she says.

Says Mr. Graham, “I find purpose in giving back. I think we all do.”



Greg Hadley '05 '07 '16

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EDUCATION TO SLOW OUT-MIGRATION:

GIVING STUDENTS THE TOOLS FOR ECONOMIC SELF-DETERMINATION

Can education be used to slow out-migration in Nova Scotia?

That’s a question top of mind for StFX PhD student Greg Hadley '05 '07 '16 of Antigonish, NS who’s examining the potential for entrepreneurship education in Nova Scotia public schools to serve as a mechanism to slow out-migration and enhance economic development.

“I am particularly interested in rural areas, as population decline and economic stagnation has threatened the stability of many, once vibrant, communities,” says Mr. Hadley, supervised by StFX education professor Dr. David Young.

“As a former public school teacher in rural Nova Scotia, I have seen what population decline has done and am keen to explore what educational avenues might help to slow this troubling phenomenon.”

Mr. Hadley says as a lifelong resident of rural Nova Scotia, it was an easy decision for him to stay in the community that gave him many positive experiences. He became a social studies teacher, delivering courses in economics, entrepreneurship, geography and history.

“It was very rewarding work, but I was continually troubled by the shift in experience many young people in rural Nova Scotia are now subject to. Many of those neighboring communities where I spent much of my childhood have largely dissolved. Schools have closed, young people have left and economic hardship is of an ongoing concern.”

As communities depopulated, he became increasingly motivated to find ways, via education channels, to disrupt this cycle.

Entrepreneurship education, in the public school context, is programming that provides students with knowledge and skills related to business creation. Usually offered as a standalone course, it’s part of

a wider business education curriculum. Its centerpiece, intensive project asks students to envision, develop, launch and successfully manage a business. This engaging and educative course is rarely offered in rural communities where small schools have limited course options, he says. As a result, many of these high school graduates leave school with no exposure to business education—a reality that usually leads to employment elsewhere.

“My research has shown me that many young people from rural communities would relish the chance to live there later in life, but sparse economic opportunities often prevent this from happening. By giving students the tools for economic self-determination, we have a real chance to upset the out-migration that has come to define rural Nova Scotia. Young, motivated entrepreneurs could be just what Nova Scotia needs to stem this tide.”

Recently, Mr. Hadley received a 2017 Nova Scotia Graduate Scholarship, awarded to research graduates at Nova Scotia universities to help advance the economic and social well-being of Nova Scotians by investing in graduate thesis-based research in priority sections.

The award has allowed him to create a robust research plan of a truly provincial scope, he says.

“The funding will allow me to engage with stakeholders, academics and policymakers and, I predict, will open many other doors that may have remained closed by economic forces. This funding offers me a great deal of research flexibility and has been truly transformative for my work.”