




VOICES

How our unique experiences shape who we are
2023-2024





Interior art by Julia Fawcett

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VOICES

AZAAD GILL

USC Grants and Recognition Committee Coordinator

We, as people, do not give others or ourselves enough credit for our accomplishments. I know I have done this many times, and I am sure some of you have, too. We choose to recognize or congratulate people when they win an award or get the highest grade in the class. Oftentimes, we don't give a pat on the back for getting out of bed in the morning or showing appreciation to those who stand by us. I believe that this is because it is generally expected that everyone will get out of bed in the morning, find a summer internship or pass their classes. While yes, this may seem like the norm and not worthy of congratulations, I want to challenge this narrative; I think we should help recognize the

accomplishments of those around us, no matter how large or small. While I can probably go on and on about all the different reasons we should shout out those around us and ourselves, I think the majority of the reasons boil down to one concept, one action that we are all capable of but one that can be really hard sometimes, this is change.

Change is inevitable, especially when you are young and moving to a new city for university. Moving to London, Ontario, is the biggest change I have ever experienced in my short time of 20 years. Coming to Western University, regardless of where you are from, was a change, whether it be navigating the new city, getting

used to new classes, or just being away from where you call home (assuming you are not a London Local.) Each and every one of us is able to navigate and adapt to change, and that deserves a pat on the back.

Change can come at a structured time, like a planned move to Western University, but it can also come unexpectedly. Whether it be an unexpected loss of a friend or family member or a breakup out of the blue, it is when change comes unexpectedly that we, as people, are pushed to the limits and our adaptability and strength are tested. We may fall, we may cry, and we may feel hopeless, but in the end, the act of getting back up again speaks volumes. For each of you reading this right now, you have experienced change, you have survived said change, and you should be proud of that I know that I am proud of you.

Remember, you don't have to face change alone. There are support systems all around you, filled with people who genuinely care about your well-being. Whether it's friends, roommates, parents, partners, counselors, sophs, professors, or peer support services, they are there for you. If you ever feel like you can't reach out to any of these people, know that I am here for you. I'll leave my contact information at the end of this article. You deserve to have someone in your corner, cheering you on, and I'll do my best to be that person for you. Because no one should have to face a difficult change alone.

I am normally someone who likes to face challenges on my own. I enjoy being independent and know that I have the perseverance and strength to get through things by myself. That being said, there have been moments in my life, especially some as recent as a week ago, where I faced a pretty big change regarding my romantic relationship, and I realized the need for my support systems. Hugs from roommates, calls from my parents, Facetimes or hangouts where my friends distracted me or heartfelt messages from others

shouting me out for getting through it, all of these actions are what is helping me cope and adapt to the change that I am facing. I know that I am lucky to have so many people to guide me and be there for me, and I am aware that not everyone has this safety net to fall back on. That is why I am writing this: to promote a culture where we are there for others, a culture where we give credit and recognize those around us who are going through changes because change is hard.

Change happens to everyone, and there is no stopping it, but that doesn't mean you are alone. Be proud of yourself for getting out of bed during a tough time, and shout out to your friends when they do their best on an exam. Let's show change that we are ready for it and that we are proud of ourselves for being strong enough to get through it, even if we had a little help.

To all your future moments of change,

Let's do this!





VOICES

EMILIE KALAYDJIAN

Incoming USC President, 2024-2025

Before I ventured into the realm of student government, my life revolved around sports. From competitive swimming to softball to volleyball, you could often find my family in some kind of sports complex cheering on their daughter. With MVP ribbons won and first-team all-city made, it seemed logical that I would continue with athletics during post-secondary school. There is a lot to be learned from sport; particularly how to navigate team dynamics and conflict. These experiences starting from a young age made me comfortable with competition, especially when I was able to engage in it alongside a team.

After looking into some schools in the U.S. for softball, I ultimately decided to come to Western due to stronger academic opportunities and its nationally renowned softball team. When I moved in for my first year in 2020, I visualized the next four years as a student athlete. Sport was a part of my identity, and at that time I could not imagine my life without it. As a recruit, I was eager to get started and represent Western in purple ball pants at home plate with my parents camped out by the dugout, just as it had been for the last eight years of my life. My watershed moment hit me in the beginning of second year – it was when I opened an email

from the head coach containing the roster for the upcoming year, only to realize that my name wasn't on it.

As I navigated life without sport over the course of that year, I went through an intense process of self-discovery. I was confused and frustrated, but I knew sulking would make the rest of my university experience an incredibly long one. Simply put, varsity athletics was not my destined path here at Western; I had to find a different community to call my own. A strength that got me through that time relatively seamlessly was getting involved with different aspects on our campus. Whether it be my VP role with One Love Western or the Social Science Students' Council as a Senator, I had lots to look forward to in my second year. What I didn't realize at the time was that working with these groups became a new source of competitiveness and comradery I used to find through sports. It's also how I started working at the rec center; since I wasn't getting exercise through softball, I needed to start a new regimen for my own mental health. Because I always had such a great experience with the staff there when I worked out, it prompted me to apply to become a membership services associate, and later a shift leader.

If the version of me from my first year, lugging my softball bag across campus and skipping Orientation Week events for practice, was told that I'd be leading it with the USC this year, I wouldn't have even understood what that meant back then. I learnt one simple thing then: rejection is what you make it. Going through the grieving process is important; however, once I accepted that I needed to hang up my cleats and throw on a blazer for my upcoming Senate meeting, life got a lot easier. Through this experience, I learned a lot about myself and what I am good at. Nonetheless, I didn't forget the lessons that sport taught me: win as a team,

lose as a team, build people up when they are down, be confident but not to a fault, and most importantly, listen.

As I navigate my transition as the incoming USC President, I think back to my days of playing four two-hour games of softball in the hot August heat, anticipating a fly ball being hit to me in centerfield. That feeling of anticipation, although in a different context, has never faded. Redefining your plans for the future can be scary and it definitely was for me – I believe that the most powerful thing a person can do is redirect that fear into opportunity. Take a dive off the deep end, make a shot at half, and throw a curve ball. Plans will change and you might too during that time, but your potential is the most exciting part. To me, that's what university is all about.





VOICES

ESHA ANEJA

Associate Vice President of Communications and Public Affairs

Experience is a phenomenon we encounter in every moment that we are alive. From what I know, to experience is to live, and living shapes us into who we are as people. However, the best part of living is the power we hold to choose the experiences that are meaningful to us. Some are deliberate, some are accidental, and some may be a coincidence or the work of fate. Either way, each experience that impacts your life molds you into the person you are. And so, being intentional with which experiences you give importance to is probably the most essential part of living a meaningful, fulfilling life. And that is something I try to live by every day.

My Nani (maternal grandmother) was very dear

to me growing up. Trying to get me to leave her side was often impossible and often ensued with whining and crying (admittedly, it was a bit of an overreaction.) Growing up, one of the best moments she gave me was when we went to the Golden Temple. As we walked around the Sarovar (lake), Nani told me about the history that marked the temple's walls. She talked about the selflessness of our Gurus, the gold that covered the temple walls, and our community's struggles to get to where we are today.

Before leaving the Golden Temple, my Nani gave me a silver bangle. "This is a Kara," she said, "a symbol of our religion, of who you are. You are a Sikhni Eshu, a warrior for those less fortunate."

When you are wearing this, you are only to use your hands for seva (selfless service.)" I have lived by that principle ever since.

After that, every experience I've chosen has been towards serving others. Yet, I hadn't known what my seva looked like for a long time. I came to university wanting to do Sociology with grand ambitions of becoming a lawyer and opening a pro-bono immigration law firm. But the biggest question was, until then, how do I do Seva now? The answer to that question was the USC.

I started my journey in student government as a Social Media coordinator at the SSSC and then moved on to be Associate Vice President of Communications and Public Affairs at the USC, two positions I never would have thought I would have the opportunity to work in. Yet, seeing the scope of impact these roles have has truly been life-changing. However, I would not have gotten these opportunities had I not chosen to take a chance on myself, felt empowered enough to choose experiences that fulfilled me, and allowed me to create change in the community around me. The advice I give every person who asks me about the USC is that this organization gives you the best opportunity to create change and give back to your community in a supportive environment. We stress it a lot as an organization, with our motto being "Students have the Power to Change the World." But it couldn't be closer to the truth: each and every one of you has the power to change the world, and the USC is here to provide you with the opportunities and resources so that you may comfortably do so.

Looking back, I realize that every step and experience I embraced led me to where I am today. Each moment, from the teachings of my Nani to my involvement in student government, has been a piece of the puzzle that has shaped my worldview and my purpose in life.

Through my journey, I've learned that meaningful experiences are not just about what we do but also about how we approach them. They're about being present, intentional, and open to learning and growth. They're about

recognizing the impact we can have on others and being willing to step up and make a difference.

As I continue on this path of service and self-discovery, I am reminded of Nani's words and the values she instilled in me. I write this story wearing the same Kara my Nani gave me, and after all these years, it has never lost its lustre; it's a symbol of my identity and my commitment to using my abilities for the betterment of others.

In every experience, I seek to embody the spirit of seva, whether through my work in student government, my interactions with friends and family, or my contributions to society at large. By living authentically and with purpose, we can make a meaningful impact on the world around us.

Ultimately, the power of choice in shaping our experiences and lives is a gift we should cherish. It is through our choices that we define who we are and the legacy we leave behind. So, as you choose your own experiences, make sure whatever you do fulfills you. Only you have the power to choose the experiences that make you who you are and change the world around you. Embrace this gift of choice, pursue experiences that resonate with your soul, and let your journey be a testament to the transformative power of intentional living.





VOICES

JACK LIANG

USC Student Experience Coordinator

As I sit in my room writing this, days before I move out of London, the realization that I have finished my undergraduate degree still hasn't sunk in. Time flew by like a blink of an eye, so fast it could've just been a dream. But while I sit here with the same name, in the same sweatpants I've had since my first year, typing on the same laptop I started my degree with, there is evidence of my evolution all around me. For me and many others, university was an opportunity for a fresh start. It was a chance to take control of who I wanted to be without the weight of my expectations pulling me to the ground, but my habits ran deep.

The practice of being a “chameleon” who

adapted to fit what people wanted me to be had been habitual since I was young. It came in the form of people-pleasing, perfectionism, and passivity. At the time, I didn't realize any of these practices were harmful because I always received praise for being “nice”, “high-achieving”, and “agreeable”, but its consequences festered within me. Not many people know I spent most of high school feeling alone, unconfident, and lost. I came to university feeling one-dimensional and like I didn't know who I was.

I am proud to say that person is unrecognizable to me now. Reflecting on my time at Western year by year to decipher the web of events,

experiences, people, choices, and knowledge that has drastically shaped who I am now, one decision stands out.

One of the best decisions I made during university was to apply to be an executive in the social/cultural club called the Chinese Students' Association (CSA). I was fortunate enough to be selected to join the CSA team as a Graphics executive that first year. The following year, I was rehired as one of the Productions department directors.

My time in CSA was pivotal to my growth because it gave me something I never really had: community. To feel included and part of something bigger than yourself, I believe, is human nature. CSA provided that for me and gave me a space where I felt safe to grow. The club has a culture of uplifting each other and creating a family I had never experienced before. Frankly, it had been jarring to receive so much love and support from my team members after a long period of feeling unworthy of love during high school. Hearing words of kindness and soaking in the warmth of the incredible people who surrounded me at every weekly meeting, my thinking changed.

I began to see myself positively and noticed the ways that I had been putting myself down. Slowly, my insecurities lessened and my strengths grew more prominent. I watched as I bloomed in confidence and took the first steps in a journey to dismantle the mental schemas holding me back. The people on CSA showed me that authenticity is freedom and that you can be loved for both your merits and flaws. Seeing others boldly being themselves inspired me and I pushed in every moment to be me as well. CSA's faith in my abilities pushed me to challenge the restrictions I placed on myself of what I could or couldn't do. Suddenly, the impossible seemed within reach and the opportunities I felt I deserved grew vastly. It's in CSA where I made some of my closest friends, whom I cherish deeply and feel incredibly lucky to have met.

These people stuck with me after I left CSA, and have been pivotal in supporting me through the remainder of my degree.

I tell you this story to say that no matter how small, kindness is impactful in ways you may never expect. It did for me. Although the compliments, cheers, and smiles I received may seem like small gestures, it was what I needed to allow myself the space to grow. I encourage you to think about how you can make kindness an everyday practice, for yourself and others. Start by being kind and compassionate to yourself, then extend that to the people around you. Furthermore, the community is incredibly important for growth. As a collective, we need to foster safety, inclusion, and love in our communities and support each other, whether we are the same or different. In a world with so much conflict, we need each other's support.





VOICES

MARIANA BATISTA

Incoming Vice President University Affairs

For a long time, I hated the question, “Where do you see yourself in five years?” As the eldest daughter of an immigrant family, this question came with many expectations. It was a silent demand to chase financial and academic success, often at the expense of my personal desires and interests. Growing up, I often found myself following the paths laid out for me by my parents rather than the ones my heart yearned to explore. As I navigated my adolescence, I lacked a sense of purpose and identity; I didn’t know what I wanted to do, who I was, or what I was good at.

In the twelfth grade and with graduation

around the corner, every teacher was asking the question, “Where do you see yourself in five years?” My peers seemed to answer with ease, yet I stood among them, my mind a blank canvas. The thought of pursuing a career that didn’t resonate with my passions filled me with apprehension. I felt frightened and uncertain of what life after high school would be like.

When I began studying at Western University in 2020, my initial impression was overshadowed by feelings of loneliness. Still stuck at home due to the pandemic, I didn’t know how to make friends. Yet, despite these feelings, I discovered a vibrant community at Western that welcomed

me with open arms, providing a sense of support and understanding I had scarcely imagined possible.

Encouraged to venture beyond my comfort zone, I found mentors and peers who saw in me the potential that I had yet to realize. For the first time, I felt a sense of connection and belonging, which dispelled my feeling of isolation. This newfound belonging kindled a spark within me, driving me to immerse myself in the fabric of campus life. Engaging in volunteer work and creative expression, participating in campus activities, and seizing the opportunity to contribute to something larger than myself afforded me a profound sense of purpose. It became clear to me that my true passions were rooted in supporting and empowering my community.

Motivated by my commitment to support my community, I decided to run in the USC elections, a pivotal moment in my life that challenged me to step out of my comfort zone. Presenting myself as a candidate, vulnerable to the judgment of my peers, was daunting, and I questioned my ability to pursue such a position. Then, being elected Health Studies councillor became a defining moment for me, illuminating the trust my peers had in my capacity to represent and serve them - a capability I had previously doubted in myself. This moment shifted my perspective, reinforcing my confidence and affirming the support and belief of those around me.

This journey of self-doubt to self-belief has been instrumental in shaping my personal and professional trajectory. This experience has instilled in me the importance of community, the courage to follow my passions, and the strength to face my uncertainties with confidence. It has taught me that when faced with uncertainty and self-doubt, I trust in the support of my community and focus on what makes me happy. Western University has not only prepared me

for the world beyond its gates but has also equipped me with the resilience to navigate the future.

As I stand on the brink of a new chapter, preparing for my newest role as USC's Vice President of University Affairs, I carry with me the lessons and memories forged at Western. The experiences that once seemed like insurmountable obstacles are now the bedrock of my resilience. With newfound optimism and purpose, I am ready to face the challenges and seize the opportunities that await. The question "Where do you see yourself in five years?" no longer breeds dread but sparks excitement. In five years, I see myself leaving an impact on my peers and community. For now, I stand ready to forge a path that is not only true to my passions but is unequivocally my own.





VOICES

Michelle Wodchis-Johnson

Incoming Vice President External Affairs

There are two necessary introductions to this story.

The first is to the Shad program, a ‘summer enrichment program’ geared towards high-achieving high school students who excel academically and exhibit outstanding leadership. If accepted, students are placed at 1 of 23 host campuses across Canada to stay through July, and undergo a series of workshops and lectures focused on STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, & math) as well as an entrepreneurial design project.

I had the opportunity to attend during high school, and found it to be not only educational, but also one of the most pivotal moments in terms of my self-growth. There was something

so truly unique about spending a month in another province, surrounded by 79 inspiring individuals who came in with no preconceived notions of who I was.

The second introduction is a brief one to who I am: I have always known myself to be a particularly sensitive person. Growing up, I cried at roadkill. I cried at commercials, I cried when my friends were experiencing hardships, and I was moved easily by the world around me. I never felt any specific way about this part of myself, it was simply a part of who I was. Letting this part of myself into the open was certainly a part of my first experience with Shad, but it was already something I was okay with before attending the program.

Throughout university, I began to lose this part of myself. I don't know exactly where this trajectory started, but the lowest point of it was when I returned to work at Shad during the summer following my 2nd year. Working as a Program Assistant was by far the most demanding job I have ever held, living in and working over twelve hours each day, expected to be ready to respond to anything at any time. I was deeply emotionally invested in the work I was doing and the people I was working with. I put my all into this month, definitively stretching myself too thin, investing so much of my emotional capacity into supporting the youth I was responsible for. However, I was also referred to as "too sensitive" and described as "taking things too personally" by my superiors – though never to my face. I left this job believing that my sensitivity was a weakness. I was treated as though my feelings were too big, a bother to others - that my emotions impeded my ability to do my job.

I was offered the opportunity to return the following summer but instead chose to work the same job at a different campus, travelling to the University of British Columbia. I had looked up to their program director and how she operated their campus since high school, emphasizing the importance of encouraging participants to show up as their authentic selves each & every day, prioritizing their ability to learn about and capitalize on their strengths - no matter what those may be.

Training began with an activity in which the staff were instructed to write down our strengths on a piece of paper. I was taken aback when someone else in the room wrote down 'sensitivity', having never heard it in this context before. We discussed how her sensitivity allows her to take in more information from her surrounding environment, process the information more deeply and effectively, and do more with it. She was inspiring, and I internalized this conversation as I approached my work throughout the next month. I was able to notice subtle behaviours from participants, giving them encouragement in the areas they needed it most.

This trait allowed me to form deeper and more meaningful relationships with those around

me, facilitate a harmonious environment, and be diplomatic when it mattered most. Viewing my sensitivity as a strength and making the conscious decision to capitalize on it, especially in an environment where this was appreciated, transformed my experience. I left this job learning more about myself, and with a greater sense of self-confidence than I had felt at any other point in my life.

I have taken this lesson with me and allowed it to inform the work that I have done in every aspect of my involvement on campus. Whether it was through managing 90 models on Spur Fashion Show or facilitating the transition of ten first-year students into the SSSC, my ability to synthesize this information around me has strengthened the level of support I was able to provide in these roles.

This trait informed not only my decision to run to be your next Vice President of External Affairs, but also played a major role in the way I approached my consultation and campaign process. Embracing this strength provided me with a greater sense of purpose and confidence in my ability to support my surrounding community, and I hope to use this as an opportunity to further the External Affairs' portfolio relationship with the student body.





VOICES

SARA PAULO

USC Brand Journalism Coordinator

Everyone said, "You'll find your people in University!" But despite meeting countless others, that sense of connection remained elusive. It could be Covid or bad timing, but my first and second years felt lonely.

While I met many amazing people, some of whom I'm still friends with as graduation nears, truly "finding my people" was tough. Feeling like I belonged was a challenging feeling to grasp. Then, in my third year, everything changed.

A friend of a friend back home invited me on a weekend cottage trip. Little did I know, this getaway would unite me with some of the most incredible women I've ever met, now my best friends. We spent the whole weekend getting

to know each other by the lake, talking until the bright hues of orange and pink reflecting in the water faded into the moonlight. Since then, we've been inseparable.

While my group of friends isn't huge, the quality of our friendships matters most. They're kind, considerate, smart, genuine, and unapologetically themselves. They make me feel comfortable, seen, heard, and loved. They have gotten me through some of the hardest times over the past year and have shown me that love exists in one of its purest forms—through good friendship.

Leaving University this year without having found "my people" where I was told I would,

I've learned some valuable lessons. The University experience isn't one-size-fits-all; it changes year by year. It's okay if it doesn't go as expected. Moreover, I learned that the reality is that new changes in your life can be lonely, such as going to University. I know now that prioritizing independence, being comfortable, and doing things on my own is crucial. Though my first year had its challenges, I adapted and embraced the freedom of doing things solo if needed. Once I stopped fretting over when I'd find my group of people, things fell into place.

I also discovered that great things truly do take time. Instead of rushing, I learned to be patient. You don't need to pick out friends right away. Seek out those who resonate with your vibe and uplift you. Trust yourself and the timing of everything. This experience taught me that you shouldn't have to change yourself to make friends or befriend someone. There are people out there who are like-minded and recognize your value.

Lastly, and probably most importantly, I learned you're never too old. People often make it seem like we need to figure things out before it is too late, including where we fit in and with whom. While others around you may have what you are looking for at a young age, for others, their time may be two, three, or even five years away. Life moves and changes in wonderful ways, and it's never too late to create new friendships that may last a lifetime!

In the end, I've come to appreciate the journey, with all its twists and turns, for leading me to where I am now. I may not have found my friends where I expected, but I've found them nonetheless, and they've enriched my life in ways I never imagined.





VOICES

SHANTE MAYA ZULU-JOHNSON

USC Grants and Recognition Committee Student-at-large

Have you ever wanted something so bad that when you did not get it, you thought it may just be the end of the world? For a long time, anytime someone mentioned the word Harvard, my body would tense up, my ears would get hot and start ringing, and everything around me would get darker. I don't know if it was sadness, rage, embarrassment, or fear, but all I know is that I felt it all at once and to its full extent.

I got over the desire to be an Olympian or a princess very quickly when I was younger. From age 8, I had my plan for my life laid out; it has never changed. Anytime someone asked what I wanted to be, I always wanted to be a lawyer. When I got older, I realized that to be the best, I

needed to be among the best. So, small naive me set my sights on Harvard University. I opened up my sparkly justice diary in my childhood bedroom and wrote a five-step plan. Step 1: graduate elementary and high school with honours; Step 2: valedictorian; Step 3: Harvard; Step 4: move to California; Step 5: get a job as a corporate lawyer at a top law firm. To me, this seemed foolproof...until it wasn't.

Growing up, everyone around me always told me how smart I was, how talented I was, and how destined I was for greatness. Everyone around me believed in my goals, and it led me to believe in them, too. I believed in them so much that I genuinely thought they would come true. My

guidance counsellor nicknamed me Einey in high school, short for Einstein. He would call me that every single time he saw me, and he truly believed in me and my academic abilities.

I set my sights on my goals. I took advanced placement classes, worked to be the best in all of my classes, played varsity sports, joined half of the clubs in my high school, and led half of them. I had hundreds of volunteer hours and more. To be honest, looking back, I did everything right.

Yet, on March 6, 2020, my heart sank. As I opened my Harvard rejection letter, my ears began to ring, my face dropped, and the world began to move in slow motion. Everything I knew about myself became a lie; everyone who believed in me became a liar, and when I looked at myself, I was nothing more than a disappointment. For a long time, I could not eat, sleep, move or bother to do any of my schoolwork. I decided there was no point, and I gave up.

Once, someone asked me what would happen if I did not get in, and I remember saying the world would stop. I genuinely believed that it would be the end. To my surprise, it didn't. The world kept spinning, and I eventually accepted it.

My mom always told me that everything happened for a reason. Although I did not see it at the time, this, in fact, did happen for a reason. My goals caused me to work ten times harder than everyone around me because my aspirations were ten times larger. I got into every other school I applied to, got scholarships and awards, and learned who I am in the process. I also learned that life is not perfect; the five-step plan I made for myself when I was 12 would not happen as perfectly as I had hoped. Life is never that easy, and that is more than okay; it just means I have to be ready when things get hard.

Through this experience, I learned how hard I am willing to work when I want something, and I learned that I will fight tooth and nail to

get where I want to go. I also learned that I am surrounded by people who believe in me so much that I honestly felt like I could get into the hardest school in the world. If I got into Harvard, I would not be at Western, the school I love, with the people I love. This was a lesson for me to trust that whatever happens is meant to happen and that it will work out. Failure is merely an opportunity to learn, and the lessons I learned about who I am may be much more valuable than anything I would have learned at Harvard. In the words of Winston Churchill, "success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." Overall, I am proud of myself for trying, but I am even prouder of myself for failing and getting back up.





VOICES

SHREYA MENON

Vice President Advocacy for the Social Science Students Council
Incoming Vice President Student Engagement 2024-2025

Hey Western, my name is Shreya Menon and I am the incoming Vice President of Student Engagement for the 2024-2025 school year. I'm finishing up my fourth year in political science and MIT. During these four years, I've had a lot of experiences; some great and some not, but all of them have shaped me into the person I've become today.

I started my undergrad in 2020 when the pandemic was at its peak. Consequently, I had to live at home for the fall semester of my first year. After months of intense fomo while sitting at home and watching people have fun

at university, I convinced my parents to let me move into residence for my second semester. Although I had my concerns about Western, I truly did not know what I was stepping into.

The first day I walked into Med-Syd, I immediately knew that this place was not for me. As someone who grew up in a multicultural city, I wasn't prepared to enter a space with such few people that looked and spoke like me. It's hard enough to be the new kid, and it's even harder when you feel like no matter what you do, you'd never belong. I tried my hardest to put myself out there, be everyone's friend and never

turn my social battery off. It's not to say that the people in my building weren't great – they were really welcoming, but there always felt like a barrier between myself and those around me. During this time, my mental health took a turn for the worse.

I spent a lot of time sitting with my own thoughts, obsessively thinking about how I came off to people, thinking “maybe if I said this instead of that, they would think better of me” or “maybe if I wasn't so loud when I got excited, people would respect me more” or “maybe if I talk on the phone on my way to the caf by myself, people would think I'm not a lonely person”. But a person can only do this for so long.

When you let thoughts about other people's perception of you dictate your life, the joys of interacting with others disappear quickly. After doing this for months, I came to a realization: these thoughts aren't making me a better person, they're just making me dislike myself.

It was at this point that I adopted a new way of thinking: it's okay to think about how other people perceive you; it makes you a more self-aware, conscious, and empathetic person. But you cannot let these thoughts control your life.

After my time in Med-Syd, I realized that others experienced the same feelings as I did. Feeling like you don't belong is tough, especially as a person of colour, where judgments seem to come quicker than for others.

Those feelings were what inspired me to become a soph in my second year. I tried my best to be a reassuring figure for my frosh, letting them know there's a place for them at Western, even if it doesn't always feel like it. It was these same feelings that motivated me to become the Vice President of Advocacy for the Social Science Students' Council, aiming to be a voice for the voiceless and provide as much support as possible to marginalized students. And it's those exact sentiments that led me to

the position I'm about to start at the USC.

My long-winded story is basically my way of telling you that, from someone who started out feeling like a complete outsider to someone who now helps lead the entire university, there is a place for you here. And if there isn't a space for you in a place that you want to be, make one. Though sometimes I still feel like I don't belong, I'm here to represent everyone who also feels like that.

So, although I didn't have a great start to university, I'm forever grateful that I went through the experience I did. Not only did it teach me to let go of things I can't control, it also gave me purpose for the rest of my journey at Western. Make spaces for people who don't have them and cut yourself some slack every now and then, because you belong wherever it is that you want to belong





VOICES

SOPHIA RATANSHI

FIMS Faculty President

I was never supposed to be a Faculty President. The plan was different.

One thing is for certain: life's a journey, and you never know what the future may hold. They say not to "follow The Jones," but it's hard when everyone around you is so driven, hard-working, and academically inclined while being pushed into academically rigorous extracurricular programs. So, I followed The Jones.

My name is Sophia Ratanshi, and I am the 2023-2025 FIMS President. Here's my story.

In grade 12, having a seeming passion for business and consulting with a creative edge, I accepted my offer to Media, Information, and

Technoculture and Advanced Entry Opportunity (AEO) at the Ivey School of Business. Notably, it is one of the best business programs in Canada, and the potential to be an HBA graduate meant the world to me. This program was my dream, an essential component to lead a life full of passion, success, and comfort. That's the funny thing about dreams and life; expect curveballs, obstacles, and the unexpected.

Fixated on this idea of attending the Ivey School of Business, a dream I put on a pedestal, I spearheaded into my first year with a closed but focused mind. Through courses and relevant experiences, what I thought was the best and sole avenue for me to achieve my future dreams didn't turn out how I thought it would.

Have you ever painted a picture surrounding something you are so passionate and driven about to have it only crash and leave you perplexed? That is what happened to me.

I slowly realized that this program was not the avenue that would fulfill my dreams. It was not what it seemed. I started to doubt my aspirations and was unsure how to achieve my dreams, if not through this pathway. At the height of doubt and confusion, I accidentally stumbled upon an opportunity I never realized existed. Walking into a room crowded with students discussing how to improve the Faculty, community, and overall university experience, which would ultimately improve my life. Here, I discovered an instant connection to topics I am passionate about and a venue to voice them, with the possibility of making tangible change. This was right up my alley! "We are looking for a FIMS President next year. Would anyone be interested in running?" said the 2022-2023 FIMS President. It was like a sign. That was me. I was at the right place at the right time.

And so my adventure began the pivotal moment that has molded me into who I am today. I plunged into the summer as an Interim President with a vision in mind and a goal to achieve! At the start of the school year, through countless content creation and campaigning during the bi-election period, I shared my ideas, visions, advocacy initiatives, and policies to sell myself as a leader for the Faculty to make tangible change.

With God's grace and my continuous efforts, I successfully won the election. I put my best foot forward with a promise to revamp the Student Council by bringing innovative and unique ideas and executing them to shape the FIMS student experience for the better, including mine. I became interested in campaigning, sales, and advocacy through this process. Diving into the position with research and consultations, I learned far more than I would have imagined from students' experiences and perspectives, including the intricacies of the Faculty, the University Student Council, and Western at large. I listened, I understood, I planned, I acted.

The once-only avenue to doing meaningful work and success faded, and this new pathway looked promising, bright, and welcoming. I ventured into other opportunities within FIMS, discovering alternative ways to dive deep into the content I loved learning and get more out of my experience from the Faculty and my education by earning the Digital Communication certificate, offering a creative and academic edge to my degree. In the process, I threw myself into MIT, worked on self-development, adopted a growth mindset, found like-minded friends, and initiated a new plan for my future. Collaborating with my amazing FIMSSC team, we spearheaded never-before-done academic, professional, and social initiatives that engaged students and fostered a welcoming and supportive community while following age-old faculty traditions.

Mimicking the highly demanded opportunities that the Ivey School of Business provides, I decided to spearhead a FIMSSC Company Trip, where selected students journeyed to Downtown Toronto, touring, visiting, and learning from top industry-related companies, and their seasoned leaders. This unique opportunity alone elevated career aspirations and professional networks. I decided to design my university experience because life is what you make of it! We brought the unique Ivey-led career development opportunities, the part of the program I had most looked forward to from the HBA program to FIMS, and people loved it!

With philanthropy at the heart of one of my platform pillars for the Presidency, we launched a Charity Bake Sale, donating proceeds to the Heart and Stroke Foundation. As a creative initiative, we established a makerspace to unite students in the bracket of creativity and exploration to provide them with artistic and technological supplies and resources to encourage innovation and design. This act of creation would be embraced through weekly supervised sessions. We initiated Mental Health Yoga Nights, Movie Nights, Frosh Mixers, free Faculty Breakfast, and more to foster a positive environment and community.

As an executive member of singing and dance teams, Student Associations, and Councils outside of the University, while searching for new things to add to my plate, juggling what seems like a million and ten things seems worth it when you're dedicated, passionate, and love what you do. Concurrently, outside the bounds of faculty work, the FIMS Presidency involved me in student government and politics at the University Students Council (USC), allowing me to meet extraordinarily ambitious student leaders who, like me, were interested in improving Western University and the Student Experience. Being an active Faculty President at USC was like being a member in a courtroom; I voiced my concerns, voted on motions that would influence students at large, and had the opportunity to advocate for and represent my Faculty. This new opportunity allowed me to learn and explore new prospective careers with an interest in climbing up the ladder in politics and governance.

Another lesson to add to the list: things always find ways of working themselves out, and what's meant for you will be. If I pursued Ivey, I never would have discovered my true passions and become FIMS President! What I thought would hinder my success in feeling fulfilled with my university experience instead altered my life's trajectory for the better, allowing me to explore what was right in front, but initially dismissed. I am now focused on my unlocked and discovered passions, pursuing them both academically and professionally. Having a Student Council background has pivoted me in a new but appreciated direction and granted me valuable and unique experience in leadership, project management, communications, event management, advocacy, and finance; lessons I thought only the program at Ivey would provide me.

Ultimately, I'm living out all the experiences I searched for when approaching university, from one opportunity as the FIMS President, tied in a neat bow under the USC. From being one who wanted to garner and tailor my life around a specific plan, I learned that sometimes some of the best things come as a surprise! This is a

story for all the people who feel lost and don't know what to do in their life. It's for those who feel disheartened because things aren't going as planned. It's for those who feel like they don't know what they're doing and are left unmotivated and wondering what the next phase of their life will be.

Say YES to all opportunities that may come your way. Be flexible and adaptable. Dream big. Don't stop fighting for your dreams. Put in work and work hard. Find something that fuels you and give it 100%. Trust the process. It's worth it. You got this!





STUDENTS
have the
POWER
to change the
WORLD





VOICES

SOPHIE LUO

USC Community Engagement Coordinator

In my role as the USC Community Engagement Coordinator for the 2023-2024 year and as a student in the Ivey HBA1/Psychology dual degree program, I have encountered various experiences that have significantly shaped my perspective on culture and the importance of taking the initiative to engage with my community. Among these experiences, a particularly pivotal moment was when I co-founded the Canadian Chinese Orchestra's Student Council in my final year of high school, which deepened my appreciation for my cultural heritage and instilled in me a passion for leadership and community engagement.

I was deeply immersed in Chinese culture from a young age, learning the Erhu (the 'Chinese

violin') and taking Chinese language and traditional folk dance classes. These unique cultural activities often isolated me from my peers in elementary school, who mocked my cultural activities as 'weird' due to their unfamiliarity. I internalized these comments, feeling alienated in a predominantly Eurocentric environment. Over time, I found myself naturally distancing myself from my cultural roots, which led to a profound sense of internal conflict and loss.

This disconnect continued until high school when I joined the Canadian Chinese Orchestra, a non-profit music organization. Initially, my involvement was simply to support my former Erhu teacher, who had become the artistic

director. Yet, this decision rekindled my passion for Chinese music. We had weekly in-person rehearsals, playing both traditional Chinese and contemporary pieces, and performed regularly across various venues—I felt empowered to embrace my cultural identity. I even participated in a music tour in China with the orchestra, which made me feel at home with fellow musicians who shared my enthusiasm. However, the COVID-19 pandemic later forced us to move rehearsals online, severely impacting participation and morale.

As these challenges progressed, I saw an opportunity to bring back our shared passion for Chinese music. I proposed the creation of a student council that would plan and host culturally-centered fundraising initiatives. Many high school students in the orchestra were looking to earn volunteer hours, so I felt strongly that their innovative mindset and ideas could enrich the orchestra's programs. Despite initial skepticism from the artistic director and numerous logistical hurdles, my co-founder and I persevered. We refined our action plan and presented it again, this time successfully convincing the director of its potential, which laid the foundation for our council's future success.

Spearheading the Canadian Chinese Orchestra Student Council was one of my most transformative experiences, significantly shaping my leadership and community involvement perspective. It felt surreal to be the one hiring a team of high school students from the orchestra group, taking responsibility for leading meetings, and having so much decision-making power—something that made me feel so powerless before made me feel powerful. Our inaugural virtual fundraising concert, "Confluence," exceeded all expectations by raising significant funds for the orchestra and showcasing the richness and diversity of Chinese music with a broader audience. It also provided a much-needed platform for the musicians in the orchestra to perform virtually during the challenging times of the pandemic. To me, this experience represented the importance of patience, perseverance, and cultural appreciation.

Reflecting on these accomplishments within the Canadian Chinese Orchestra, I realized how much I had reconnected with my heritage—a part of myself I had once subconsciously neglected due to fear of judgment. These experiences strengthened my resilience and furthered my commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion. Now, at Western University, I am proud to say that I continue this work, actively working in spaces focused on promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), such as being a member of the Western University Housing EDI Committee. My journey has reaffirmed the intrinsic beauty and value of every culture, driving me to inspire others to embrace and celebrate cultural diversity in their own communities, something I continue to be deeply passionate about. My involvement in cultural appreciation and community engagement remains an important aspect of my identity, motivating me to drive positive change in the world around me.





VOICES

STEVE XIA

Nursing Faculty President

Hey, I'm Yu Xin (Steve) Xia, a second-year nursing student, and I've got a fun story about how I ended up getting involved with the USC.

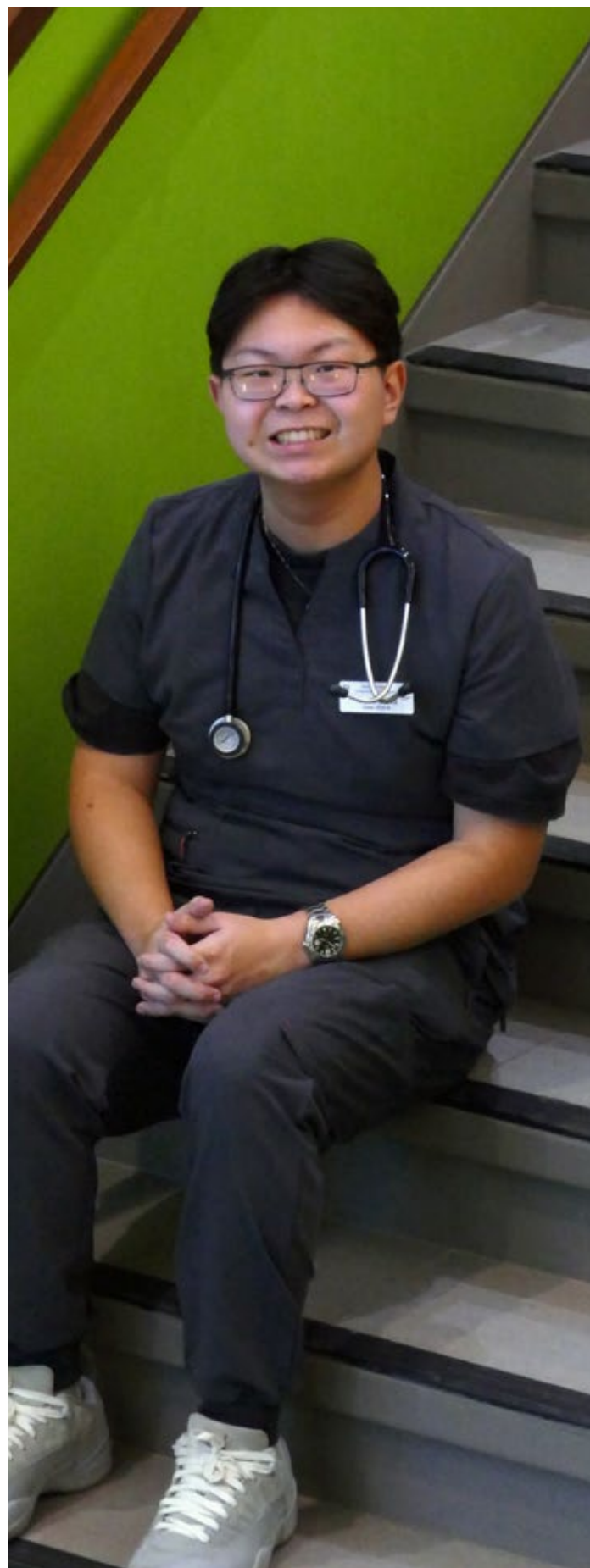
It was my first HOCO, the famed quasi-holiday that many students anticipate. I didn't know what to expect, but what happened next is still vivid in my mind. As I wandered the bustling campus and surrounding streets, I spotted someone I didn't anticipate seeing. Just a few weeks earlier, I had watched him on the O'Week main stage, chatting with Alan Shepard and other notable figures from the Western Community. That individual was Ethan Gardner. Only now, he was smack dab in the middle of HOCO, simply enjoying himself. Amidst the beer pong and police presence, we struck

up a meaningful conversation about student government and more. It struck me that opportunities in life can crop up unexpectedly, so I took our chance encounter as a sign to dive into USC involvement.

Shortly after that encounter, I joined TeamUSC as a student engagement ambassador. In this role, I ran booths for referendums, promoted concerts, and spread the word about USC events. It's been fulfilling to be a resource for fellow students, bridging them closer to USC operations. Additionally, I volunteered with the REACH Conference, a summer program for elementary school kids in London. REACH aims to spark enthusiasm about higher education through a 3-day skill-building conference. While

REACH does not directly impact Western's student body, it acts as an upstream approach to promote education to tomorrow's students. Finally, I was recently elected WFNSA president, marking my most significant advocacy role yet. I'm eager to showcase my dedication to both nursing students and the broader student community. I look forward to a year of trials and tribulations.

While students mainly know about the USC for its social programming and big-name artists, I can't stress the scope of everything else it does. Behind the scenes, various portfolios and volunteers work tirelessly to enhance your student experience. Reflecting back, I am proud of all the work I've put into USC. I'm excited to see what this organization brings me next and excited about the impact it will bring to future Mustangs. To conclude, I share this story because it all began with a chance encounter. I hope that one day, I can also tell you about USC at a time you least expect it.





VOICES

SUNDAY AJAK

USC President, 2023-2024

My name is Sunday Ajak, President of the University Students' Council. I could use the entire length of this article to talk about what I do, why I'm here and what I've done to get to this point, but I think that story has been played out. I want to focus on my true identity, how much effort it took to discover myself, and why I am. Because purpose and identity are two aspects of life that we try so hard to discover and I truly believe that we experience little moments every day that show us who we are and why we are.

Sometimes, we miss these moments because we're not ready; other times, we miss these moments because we aren't even looking.

When you think of a pivotal experience or something that changed the way you think about

life, I always think that it would come at some grandiose moment, that something BIG would happen, and everything would fall into place. My moment was small, so small that I almost missed it. And if I had, I would not be the person I am today.

For me, I simply watched a video.

I was 16 years old, in my room, scrolling through social media like every other teenager. I came across this video by a poet named Prince EA; he was speaking about climate change and how we needed to make drastic changes to our society if we wanted to survive as a species. It wasn't so much the message that changed my life, but it was how it made me feel changed my life. Back then, I had no comprehension of the

power of words; I had no idea that you could write a speech, deliver it correctly, and change someone's life.

That 5-minute video made me feel like I needed to move, like I needed to make a change, like I needed to be a champion for advocacy. Little did I know that was the beginning of my journey as a motivational speaker and community leader.

I took that speech and performed it verbatim at my high school talent show. At that point, I had never given a speech, and I was beyond scared. After psyching myself up, I gave the speech in the most awkward way possible. I thought I totally bombed on stage, but at the end of it, like a scene out of a movie, the entire crowd gave me a standing ovation.

From that moment on, I knew I had a gift. I went on to perform other speeches at my school and in the community. I went from never speaking publicly to speaking almost every single week, from a crowd of 100 to 10,000.

My confidence grew, and so did my ability to lead. Most importantly, I discovered who I am and why I am. I attribute a lot of where I am now to watching that video. It led me down a path of leadership, guidance, and inspiration, and I've been able to take the skills that I worked so hard to build and turn them into a mindset where I knew I could be the President of the University Students' Council.

All in all, my lesson to you is this. The course of your life depends on the discovery of your identity, and the purpose of your life depends on the discovery of your why.





VOICES

YUEUN LEE

USC Grants and Recognition Committee Student-at-large

As a second-born child, I have always looked up to my sister before acting upon anything. Being constantly surrounded by new surroundings at a young age, it was comforting to have someone who had experienced a similar situation to guide me. She was my mentor—in other words, my personal guinea pig.

Moving to Canada from South Korea to begin Grade 3 was a relatively easy shift. I was young, and I could make friends despite my lack of English skills. However, as I grew older in a predominantly white neighbourhood, I noticed differences between myself and my peers. By Grade 9, my confidence had hit rock bottom. I felt that I was a mediocre person and did

not particularly excel in one subject or sport. Unlike me, my sister seemed to get along with her classmates and teachers while thriving academically.

My sister and I shared everything, from clothes to extracurriculars to church friends. Whatever she did, I knew eventually I would be doing it too. My life truly changed after following my sister's footsteps into leadership roles in high school.

I was first introduced to club activities when my sister asked me to volunteer to set up a bulletin board for our school's hallways. I noticed myself immediately looking forward to future events and opportunities. Then, I began taking

on more volunteering roles, and even during the lockdown, I could take on roles such as facilitating online student council meetings.

Eventually, in Grade 12, the school was back in person. I took on official roles like being the Grade 12 Representative in the Student Council and the President of the Healthy Action Team to lead large-scale school events, all while maintaining grades and graduating early. Through these leadership roles, I also met lifelong friends that I would not have otherwise.

By chance, my sister and I both ended up at Western University. Encouraged by my success in high school, I gathered the courage to apply to leadership roles at the University. Though I was scared, seeing my sister begin her own club while contributing to campus clubs strongly motivated me that I could do the same. Thankfully, many roles were available, and despite not making it to my faculty's student council in the first year, I found my place as a student-at-large in USC recognition and awards and an external Executive in the Korean Students' Association. My involvement has allowed me to create connections and push through despite my introverted personality.

Furthermore, I have recognized that my interests lie in guiding others and advocating for education and community involvement, which has shaped how I envision my future outside of schooling. It gave me the courage to continue trying even when I fear failure, as you genuinely miss every opportunity you do not take. Despite my belief that getting involved with a community would become even more difficult in University due to its large scale and population, I realized there are so many unique opportunities waiting to be found. Getting involved in these niche and unique roles allows you to find who you are and what you want in life while providing you with connections with people with similar interests and passions.

In summary, my journey through leadership involvement has been instrumental in my self-

discovery and growth. The satisfaction derived from achieving what initially seemed impossible serves as tangible evidence of my progress. I owe everything to my sister for her guidance and support, and I eagerly anticipate the future with her to build upon our experiences and continue to make meaningful contributions.









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