



She is the Walrus. No, really.

BY JASON WINDERS, MES'10

She has always busied herself in unusual ways. As a child, Shelley Ambrose, BA'83 (English), launched a newspaper in her Calgary neighbourhood. For the little publication, she reported news, drew cartoons, even designed crossword puzzles, all before heading out to make her door-to-door deliveries. Neighbours supported her endeavour by buying advertisements on her pages – ones mainly announcing old lawn mowers for sale or upcoming rummage sale dates.

A lifetime lover of books and the written word, she always had the imagination to match her latest pursuit. She was known for organizing walking tours of her neighbourhood as well as producing “backyard circuses,” complete with popcorn, high-wire acts and dogs in skirts performing tricks, all just steps outside her home.

“All that, all those ideas just came from my brain,” she said. “I was always quite busy and bossy, quite frankly.”

That early training, organizing the strange and the impossible, paid

dividends throughout Ambrose’s career. And today, as executive director of the Walrus Foundation and co-publisher of *The Walrus* magazine, she leads the iconic Canadian literary publication into an uncertain industry future.

Ambrose started her career as a reporter for *The Globe and Mail* and *Windsor Star* before serving for more than a decade as a producer for CBC Radio’s *Morningside* and later for *The Pamela Wallin Show*. After three years in public affairs at the Canadian Consulate in New York, she returned north of the border eight years ago. Ambrose has produced hundreds of events, including forums, lectures, festivals, book tours, Arctic tours, royal visits, and Bill Clinton’s 60th birthday celebrations in Toronto and New York.

Each, one might guess, shared a bit in common with those backyard circuses.

In 2006, Ambrose arrived at a Walrus in crisis. The Walrus



Foundation, the magazine's charitable arm, was struggling to raise money. They needed someone with a non-congruent set of skills, uncommon in the industry, to lead them.

"They were looking for a unicorn," she said. "They wanted someone with a journalism background who also knew how to fundraise. And here I was."

At the time, the foundation was raising no money, in fact, it had one donor – and that family was related to the magazine – with few options on the horizon.

"They still thought the best avenue was to raise money for a magazine about Canada and its place in the world," she said. "What we found over time was a lot of people didn't understand why they would give money to a magazine; they don't give money to *Maclean's*."

Spurned repeatedly for donations, she revisited the foundation's "pointy-headed mandate" to create forums for conversations vital to Canada.

"Nowhere," she said, "does that mandate say we publish a magazine – although it was the original forum, and still a very important forum."

Management had made the key decision to obtain charitable status for the magazine, allowing for revenue on a three-legged stool – advertising sales, circulation sales and donations/charitable giving/sponsorships. That step set the stage for what Ambrose had in mind – the diversification of substantial content across platforms.

Today, the Walrus Foundation is now an industry leader in creating "content-fueled conversations." *The Walrus* magazine is available in print, tablet and phone; Walrus TV features original documentaries based on the magazine's stories, and more, airing on the Smithsonian Channel; and the foundation has hosted 140 Walrus Talks speakers on various topics in 11 different cities.

"Out of necessity," Ambrose said, "the inspiration to 'take it off the page and throw it on the stage' gave us a lot more to offer our corporate sponsors and allowed us to get into communities and makes us truly national."

This spring, she brings Walrus Talks to Western with Walrus Talks: Creativity on March 12, in part to promote The Alice Munro Chair in Creativity. Ambrose sits on the Advisory Council of Western's School for Advanced Studies in the Arts & Humanities (SASAH). Her work with SASAH on the Faculty of Arts & Humanities is her first involvement with her alma mater since she graduated.

"Western always felt like home to me," said the Chatham, Ont., native. "I loved every minute of it." Both her geologist father and teacher mother attended Western, prior to moving the family west to Calgary when Ambrose was five. With family still in London, she arrived at the university to work on her undergraduate degree, before moving on for further journalism training.

For Ambrose, her work today is a continuation of the Canadian conversation she has engaged in her whole life.

"Every job I have had, it has been about Canada," she said. "The thing about *The Walrus* that is unique is the category of magazine we are in is *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Economist* and *Harper's*. People should read all those magazines; they are wonderful. But they are not about us and they are not from our point of view.

"When you read *The New Yorker*, you are a spectator. They are not considering you. When you read *The Walrus*, you are in the game. It's about you."

Walrus Talks: Creativity at Western

Thursday, March 12

alumni.westernu.ca/connect/events

