Western Faculty Profile: Dr. Greg Thorn

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Dr. Greg Thorn is one of the few researchers among the Western faculty to have grown up in London, Ontario. His father worked at Agriculture Canada (where Siebens-Drake is located today). At a young age, his hobbies included bird watching, hiking along the Thames River and, with his dad, collecting fossils in the nearby Thedford area. Dr. Thorn started in landscape architecture with the hope of combining natural history and design to conserve nature. His overarching goal was to create a better harmony between nature and the built environment, particularly in park facilities. During his undergrad in landscape architecture at the University of Guelph, he became very interested in fungi while working as a summer naturalist in Algonquin Park. He met George Barron, the author of "Mushrooms of Ontario and Eastern Canada", who hired

him to take photographs for his book. Dr. Thorn then began collecting, identifying and culturing many different species of fungi. Before beginning his graduate studies, he had already published in Science.

Dr. Greg Thorn described the large amount of effort required to create and prepare for lectures. He recalls the time when he was still an early professor. Creating just a single lecture required a lot of mental resources and time. A typical hour of lecture material usually takes more than a day to prepare, and sometimes even two or three days. It was very challenging to do several new courses at once. The commitment for the lecture material combined with the busy schedule as a researcher was very hard for most professors when they first

started. Dr. Thorn also happened to have met his wife, who was pursuing her graduate studies at the University of Wyoming. He explains how he was fortunate to have his initial busy years coincide with those of his wife. Subsequently, when they both eventually came to Western, they were able to settle down and have a family.

Dr. Thorn explains that having people in his lab is the best thing about his job. It is rewarding to know that he and the people in his lab are working together in the process of learning and making discoveries. An important take-home message is that students shouldn't go in with preconceived ideas. They should go into research with genuine curiosity, asking questions instead of trying to prove something. Dr. Thorn looks at all the data critically—sometimes you can be wrong, and sometimes you can have experimental accidents. He recalls an experience of a student in his lab working on a fourth year project. Although the project was almost finished, the final sequences seemed odd. Dr. Thorn later found out that the student accidentally transposed two tubes, and had created a chimeric sequence from two species. He had to redo all the work from scratch in order to have confidence that the data were correct. Dr. Thorn says, “sometimes you have to start from scratch because of a small error. Being careful—and sometimes slow—is necessary for good science.”

Dr. Thorn suggests that as a researcher, you need to be excited by the work you are doing, as there will be long stretches of work that require a lot of patience and time. Sometimes the work being done is quite tedious and has to be done carefully. You need to be driven by the questions and need to really love the subject. For Dr. Thorn, the love of fungi makes that easy.