

SFU 60th
ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

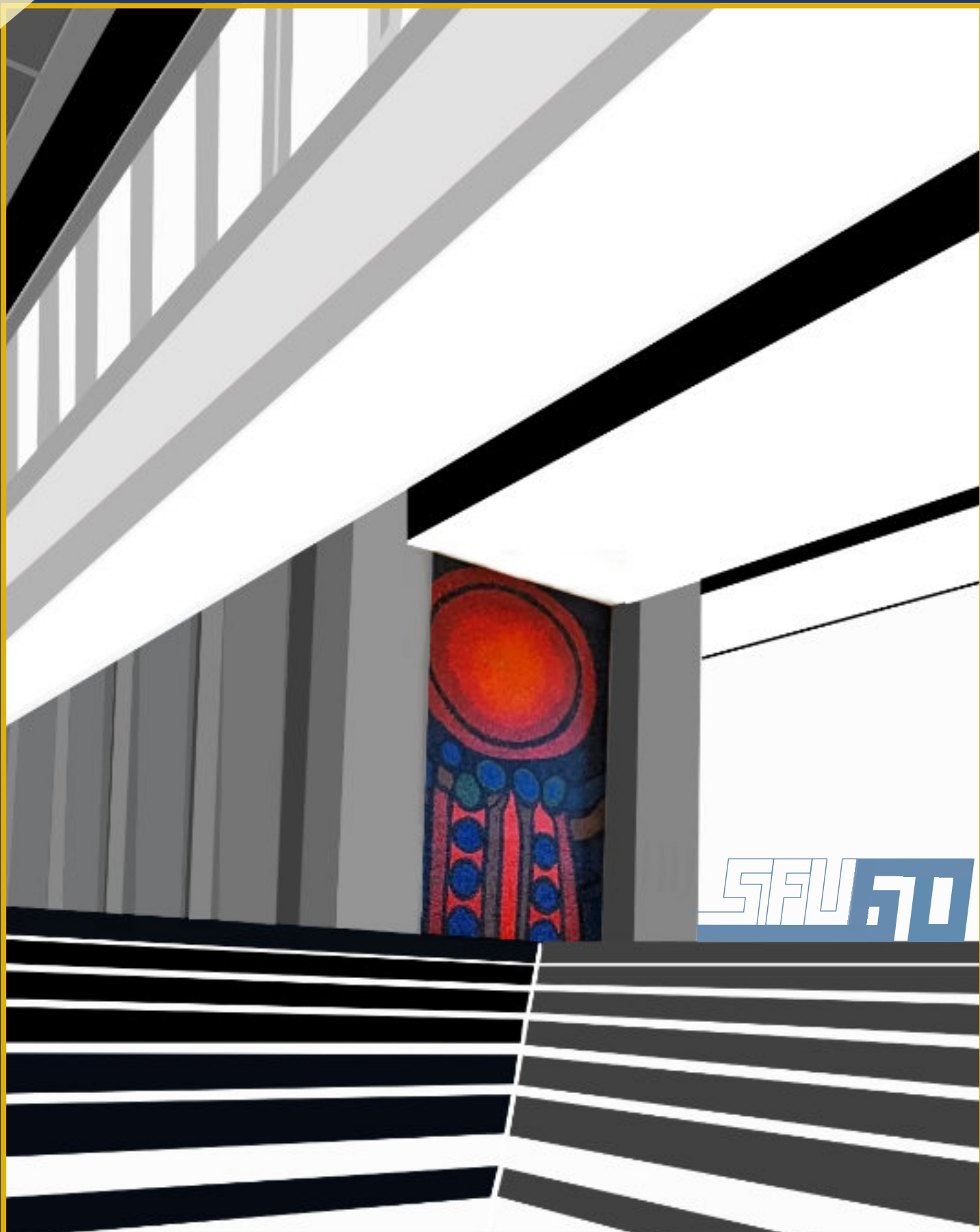
Simon Says

Newsletter

Simon Fraser University Retirees Association

www.sfu.ca/retirees

Fall 2025



SFU 60

Convocation Address

BARRY TRUAX

June 11 was the fulfilment of a lifelong goal of having a doctorate where I said: “I’ve finally graduated from Simon Fraser University with a DFA – and it only took 52 years!” So, if any of my fellow graduands were worried about how long their degrees have taken, they beat me by a mile.

Of course, that’s a joke, because I was obviously never enrolled at SFU. Instead, I worked my way up from a Visiting Instructor in 1973 to Emeritus Professor today, being jointly appointed between Communication & Contemporary Arts. So, the real question is how did I manage to do that without having a doctoral degree already?

Just to provide some context, I had no illusions that most attendees had ever heard of me before, and even less that they would have heard any of the music I’ve created over the last 55 years, unless they found themselves in a Contemporary Music class at the School of Contemporary Arts (which I hope some did).

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So, I could easily have used this privileged platform to convince everyone that I don’t think Canada, as a country, takes its progressive “culture” very seriously. Many probably didn’t even know that Canada is known abroad for its electroacoustic music, but that we’re relatively unknown at home.

Of course, that’s a rather tired argument for those of us in the so-called Canadian “cultural industries sector”, and frankly, I

don’t think people find it of much value in their personal lives. However, in future, if you ever think about “Canadian culture”, ask yourself if it’s just because someone is making money from it. And who else and what else is being ignored?

No, I’d rather return to the “doctorate” question and how my two previous convocations, bachelor’s and master’s, were crisis points in my life, and how the decisions I made at those crossroads were life-altering, but perhaps worth learning from.

Like all convocations, both of mine were a satisfying culmination of all of the work that led up to them. My favourite memory about graduating from Queen’s University in 1969, was being hooded by the legendary chancellor, J.B. Sterling. Each one of us would actually kneel before him as he placed the hood on us, and then with his impressive bass-baritone voice, he would boom out: “Rise, Bachelor of Science – with Honours!” Our chancellor can count herself lucky that a smile and friendly handshake will do just fine today.

But the flip side was “What am I going to do now?” In the 1960s if you were white, bright and male, you were encouraged to go into science. It was the era of the space race,



PHOTO: SFU PRESIDENT DR. JOY JOHNSON, BARRY TRUAX, CHANCELLOR DR. TAMARA VROOMAN

transistor technology and emerging telecommunications. In fact, I could get the grades, but I felt no passion towards it. That lay in the arts and, specifically, music.

I spent the summer of 1967 in Montreal during Expo with every free dollar going to concerts, opera and ballet from all over the world and that experience was mind-expanding.

But the next summer, 1968, I got a research assistant job in the physics department and the reality of daily work in the sciences dawned on me. It was completely mind-numbing, even though I was expected to pick up a manual and write Fortran code for number crunching. I had no idea that in 5 years I would code a computer music system for interactive music composition, and later be recognized as a “pioneer” in that emerging field.

But as I became increasingly disillusioned with physics, something else was happening. During my noon hours, I started pounding out an original “composition” on a piano. And the more frustrated I became with science, the more furious was this emerging piano sonata. Something had taken hold of me that I never expected.

But, the closer I got to graduation, the more urgent the choice that lay before me. I secured an NSERC scholarship, and was accepted into radio astronomy at UBC. But the alternative was a very slender thread. If I transitioned from a mediocre piano player to something resembling a composer, what kind of career could I have in the arts, which I’d been warned about as very impractical?

Well, to jump to the outcome, I took a deep breath and decided to do the only thing that I felt was “worth doing” – namely graduate work at UBC in music composition. Once I arrived in 1969 and walked into the small electronic music studio, I felt right at home. Dilemma solved.

Two years later I had the Master of Music degree, a graduation recital and even a small opera production under my belt, but where to go next? At that time there were no doctoral programs in electronic music in Canada.

I looked to Europe and discovered a two-year teaching and production course at the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht, Netherlands. It had state-of-the-art electronic equipment, and they had just bought a PDP-15 mini-computer. I quickly became a programming nerd. The only problem was they were not a degree-granting institute – but I didn’t care – a new world of interdisciplinary creativity had opened up!

A letter I wrote to SFU looking for a job landed on Murray Schafer’s desk, and he invited me to come and work with the World Soundscape Project, which he described with characteristic understatement, as doing the “world’s most important work”. Today, over a half century later, I think he

was right.

Even more surprising was that another two years later, he abruptly left SFU and I became his successor in the Department of Communication and the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies, a perfect place to combine technology, composition, and a new interdiscipline, Acoustic Ecology.

That's how fortunate I was: to follow my passion, commit to hard work, take advantage of opportunities, and create a unique career that I could never have imagined beforehand, all in six transformative years. It was all about deciding what was "worth doing" for me personally, but I will be forever grateful to SFU for supporting that dream over the last half century.

Maybe this year's grads already have career paths clearly marked out, and that would be great, but maybe there's still something that would really make them feel happy and fulfilled, something they can't actually foresee, but maybe could recognize as it takes shape.

When I was growing up, I heard the old phrase "art for art's sake", but I always thought it was tinged with elitism and snobbery. Now I'm not so sure. "Art" is something that is inherently worth doing, not because it will provide you with job security or money, but because its value to you – and hopefully others – is self-evident and inescapable.

I've found that in life, there are things that you can do – and other things that you just have to do, and it's those things that make your life meaningful in the long run, even if there's not an immediate reward. But as today's event has shown me, eventually you will be recognized.

The other corollary is "anything worth doing is worth doing well" – or as I would elaborate – worth doing superlatively, to the best of your ability and beyond. Acquire the knowledge and technique to make it happen, and stick with it wherever it leads. If you're lucky, you may find the support you need along the way, but in every case, don't give up. It will be worth it.

And finally, once on the right path with something to show for it, don't forget to "give back". I was raised by my grandmother after my parents separated, and my family couldn't afford to send me to university.

Luckily, in my hometown of Leamington, Ontario, there was a family who had established a four-year scholarship for a local student to go to Queen's University, with tuition, housing and books all paid for. That was my lifeline, and it gave me a lifelong appreciation of philanthropy which my partner, Dr. Guenther Krueger, and I have put into practice with SFU and Concordia with the Glenfraser Endowment, in the hopes of helping the next generation of students, just as we have been fortunate to be helped along the way.

So, I wish my fellow graduands of 2025 well in finding and following their own odysseys based on what is truly worth doing for them. Thank you, SFU. ❀

SFU PROFESSOR EMERITUS BARRY TRUAX, WAS AWARDED AN HONORARY DOCTORATE OF FINE ARTS AT THE JUNE 11 CONVOCATION THIS YEAR. HE WAS CITED AS "A TRAILBLAZER OF ELECTROACOUSTIC AND COMPUTER MUSIC, WHO HAS HAD A MONUMENTAL IMPACT ON THE WORLD OF SOUND. TRUAX TAUGHT AT SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND SCHOOL OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS FOR OVER 40 YEARS. IN THAT TIME, HE HELPED ESTABLISH THE SCHOOL'S MUSIC PROGRAM, THE GLENFRASER ENDOWMENT AND RECEIVED AN EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AWARD. HE HAS LED THE WORLD SOUNDSCAPE PROJECT SINCE 1975 AND DEVELOPED THE FIRST COMPUTER SYSTEM THAT ALLOWED FOR REAL-TIME GRANULAR SYNTHESIS, EMPOWERING GENERATIONS OF COMPOSERS."

The Walking Group

PARVEEN BAWA



PHOTO: MAY 7, SEA TO SKY: JOE, SHIRLEY, BEV DAVINO, BEV SEED, DOUG, FRANCES, PARVEEN.

The walking/hiking group, which started as the SFURA walking and hiking group in 2009, is still active. Over the years, SFU participants have declined while younger non-SFU participants have taken us onto new trails. Within Metro Vancouver, we cover trails from West Vancouver, south to Crescent Beach, east to Langley and Pitt Lake, and, of course, trails around SFU and UBC.

Our traditional walk around New Year's Day is still led by Shirley Cohn at Steveston, which is followed by a hot lunch. For years, Ann Crandall has taken the group to Galiano Island to hike up Mt. Galiano for stunning views from the top. Beverley Davino has organized overnight hiking trips: in 2024 we went to the Othello Tunnels near Hope, and in 2025 she took the group to Manning Park. Our weekly walks/hikes are approximately two hours in duration on Wednesday mornings, rain or shine. If you are a brisk hiker and would like to join the group, please email: bawa@sfu.ca. ❀



PHOTO: MAY 29, MANNING PARK: JOE, MARY FELTHAM, MINDY, BARBARA, SHIRLEY, BEV DAVINO, MARY YARWOOD, BOB, SUKH, DOUG, CHER.