

## Actress goes from Queen's University to Queen of England

Rachel Skarsten graduated from Queen's University in 2007 with a degree in English. Eight years later, the actress is playing the Queen of England on TV.

The Toronto native has a successful career in Hollywood and currently stars as Queen's Elizabeth I in the TV show *Reign* about the life of Mary Queen of Scots. People may recognize Rachel from other shows such as *Lost Girl*, *L.A. Complex*, and *Flashpoint*. Most recently she appeared in the hit film *50 Shades of Grey*, playing Christian Grey's assistant.

Her acting career was already established – thanks to a starring role on the WB TV show *Birds of Prey* – before she decided to take a break and come to Kingston.



[Photo of Rachel as Queen Elizabeth]

She considers her Queen's education "invaluable" to her acting career because studying alongside some of the best students in the world taught her to work hard. "I thrived in that (competitive classroom) environment and it prepared me well for the same reality in acting," says Rachel.

She took time out to talk about the importance of following your passion, the importance of a supportive family and give some advice to actors looking to make it big in Hollywood.

**Q: Your father was a doctor. Was your family supportive about your acting dreams or was there pressure to pursue a safer career such as doctor or lawyer?**

A: What a great tragedy it was for me to see so many of my friends being pushed in to "suitable" careers. Two of the greatest gifts my parents gave me were the requirement in our house of going to university and the freedom to study there whatever I wanted. Between them they had six degrees, so education was of paramount importance. They always said, however, as long as I was truly happy they would support my career choice. What an incredible privilege and freedom I had! I credit much of my success to that start.

**Q: You started acting in your teens and your career was starting to take off, but you chose to attend Queen's. Why come to Kingston for four years as oppose to moving to L.A. to focus on your career?**

A: I had missed most of high school because I was acting and I felt very strongly that the school experiences you have in your teens and early twenties can't be duplicated later. I think so much of the learning you do in university is outside of the classroom, figuring out who you are and where you fit in the world. So I left L.A. to come to Queen's for that and I'm grateful I did. I made a lot of mistakes at Queen's, but I saw my peers in L.A. struggle making those same mistakes on a world stage. I felt blessed to come back to acting with a greater knowledge of who I was and with a degree that enabled me to know I had other options.

**Q: How did Queen's help prepare you for the cut-throat world of Hollywood?**

A: There isn't a school as competitive as Queen's. It is bursting at the seams with some of the most well rounded and intelligent students from around the world. I remember during frosh week we were told in an assembly that while we were all accustomed to being in the top 10% of our class, half of us would now be in the bottom. I thrived in that environment and it prepared me well for the same reality in acting. I also believe that the education I received, while not specific to acting, taught me how to think in a different way, how to articulate myself and how to discipline and focus myself and my thoughts. It has been invaluable.

**Q: What has been your favourite TV/movie role so far?**

A: The one I'm doing now! I play Queen Elizabeth. Is there a more interesting, dynamic or powerful woman of her time one could play? [Photo of Rachel at Queen's University]

**Q: This year you appeared as Christian Grey's personal assistant in 50 Shades of Grey and Queen Elizabeth in TV's Reign. What's your next big project?**

A: *Reign* keeps me pretty busy. We film for 10 ½ months out of the year. So aside from working with my brother Jonathan's charity Nyantende (which started at Queen's), I'm focused on that.

**Q: Any advice to Queen's alumni who dream about moving to Hollywood and becoming actors?**

A: If there is anything else you could do and be happy, do that. Acting is so much more than the art itself. It is a difficult, heartbreaking and ruthless business at times. If there is nothing else that sets you on fire quite like acting, don't let anyone dissuade you from your dream. I believe, above all, in following your heart.



Rachel (middle) during her Queen's University days, with roommate Stefanie Hurst (left) and cousin Maggie Ranson.