

Bruce MacLellan

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APR, FCPRS, LM

Toronto, Ontario

Communications Professional since 1980

Bruce MacLellan, APR, FCPRS, LM, has been a public relations practitioner since 1980. He currently serves as Chair of Proof Strategies Inc., the firm he started in 1994.

Born in the late 1950s, Bruce grew up in Toronto, and the city's ravines were a frequent playground. This early connection to nature foreshadows his activity in future.

Bruce graduated from the University of Toronto in 1980 after studying economics and political science. Having been active in student government on campus, he enjoyed finding ways to communicate ideas and policies and decided to explore a career in public relations. Without any contacts in the industry, Bruce "cold-called" public relations firms from the Yellow Pages and secured a position in 1980 at PRSL (Public Relations Services Limited), a small agency in Toronto. For the next three years, that job was his apprenticeship into the profession.

For most of his 45+ years in our industry, Bruce has worked as a communications consultant in the private sector. He stepped into political roles twice in his career, serving as Executive Assistant to the Ontario Minister of Citizenship and Culture (1983-85) and as Chief of Staff to the Minister of National Defence (1987-89). During his time in Ottawa, Bruce supported his Minister, the Honourable Perrin Beatty, to repeal the War Measures Act of 1918 and replace it with the Emergencies Act of 1988. Communications advice and strategy were always a key part of the job.

After Ottawa, Bruce worked at the international PR agency Hill & Knowlton in the

Toronto office from 1989 to 1994. The agency's US operation was plagued by conflict and ethical issues after involvement with clients in the Gulf War (1991). Bruce took the lead to develop a Code of Conduct for the Canadian operation, and this code was eventually adapted and implemented internationally by H&K. He also excelled at client work and was promoted to Executive Vice President of the Canadian operation. Winning Microsoft Canada as a client was a key accomplishment. As a result of this relationship, Bruce met and briefed Bill Gates twice while planning and implementing annual visits to Canada.

By 1994, Bruce realized that an independent agency could deliver the right blend of career support to staff and excellent service to clients. He was also attracted to the advantages of a Canadian-owned agency, where decisions would be made locally and profits could be shared or reinvested in people and the community. With venture capital support from Environics Research, he became the founding President of Environics Communications in the summer of 1994. This agency grew and became an award-winning leader in client service and job creation. In 2018, it changed its name to Proof Strategies.

With the leadership team Bruce recruited, they built the firm over three decades to a staff of over 150, making it one of the largest independent, Canadian-owned agencies.

In 1995, Bruce partnered with Yvon Desautels, of Capital-Image in Montréal to invest and expand that agency as a partner for the distinct needs of Québec. This arrangement continues to this day three decades later.

Also notable was the launch in 1996 of an office in the United States. This Stamford, Connecticut office became the first ever US office opened by a Canadian-owned PR agency. The US operation of Proof Strategies continues in 2026 with an office in Washington, DC.

As a passionate Canadian, Bruce saw a need in 2016 for a "Made in Canada" study of trust in our institutions, leaders and society. With the team, he launched the CanTrust Index™ and it is published annually to track trust levels and trends among Canadians and distributed free of charge to anyone. Thousands of news stories about trust have been generated.

Reflecting his love of nature, Bruce took steps to conduct an audit, reduce the footprint, and buy carbon offsets to become carbon neutral in 2008, making it the first PR agency in North America to attain this status. The family of companies share carbon neutrality to this day.

Remarkable business growth was the beginning of Bruce's evolution from communications advisor to a successful entrepreneur who has made a significant impact on the Canadian public relations agency landscape, with multiple business launches, growth strategies, and job creation. Far beyond his own consulting career, he has inspired the establishment of a family of firms that continue to thrive

as businesses, employers, and industry leaders.

Bruce always collaborated to support new leaders and build new teams. Beyond Proof Strategies, Bruce was co-founder and lead investor of APEX Public Relations in 1998, working with Pat McNamara, APR to build the agency to over 25 staff before a gradual sale to management. Bruce acquired Argyle Communications from its founder (Ray Argyle, APR, FCPRS) in 1999 and implemented an investment and growth plan, as well as a management transition to Daniel Tisch, APR, FCPRS which enabled the agency to expand to more than 50 staff members before a gradual sale to management. Bruce was also the founding President of Proof Experiences in 2000, working with co-founders to build this thriving experiential marketing company with over 40 staff, eventually appointing Mary Beth Denomy as President and gradually selling the business to management.

In 2020, Bruce co-launched Agnostic Inc., appointing Sarah Crabbe as President, and serves as a partner in building this agency to a team of 25 people and an award-winning record of success.

In 2024, Bruce was a co-founder and lead investor in the launch of Oyster Group, a crisis communications and public affairs agency, which is in its early stages of growth and employs seven staff members after less than two years.

At Proof Strategies, Bruce mentored and supported Vanessa Eaton, a 20+ year veteran at the agency, and appointed her as President in 2023. Working less now, he continues as Chair of the agency and enjoys activities with his wife, Karen Girling, APR, and their two daughters.

He takes great pride in having launched so many successful companies, creating jobs and career opportunities for hundreds of practitioners.

What advice would you give as a mentor to a young person entering the public relations field?

“Curiosity is always one of my favourite qualities in a person. The benefits of curiosity are timeless and essential for PR people if we are to understand events and audiences so we can counsel our clients. In the past, our profession was too often associated only with media relations. We were always working to apply our counsel more widely to areas such as corporate reputation or stakeholder relations. Now, media relations work has declined, and PR people need to be skilled in a much wider array of channels and methods. Continuous learning has never been more important.”

What are your thoughts on our industry as a whole?

“The public relations industry is going through somewhat of an identity crisis. There are no boundaries anymore about who does what. Many agencies and people in communications don’t think of themselves as PR professionals.

In its 2025 research, CPRS has found this divide is most evident in trust levels. Fifty percent of Canadians say they trust communications professionals, compared with 36% who trust public relations professionals, even though both groups are expected to build trust, uphold ethical standards and provide strategic guidance. CPRS says the findings underscore the need for clearer public understanding of the discipline and stronger industry leadership.

It will be difficult to resist wider trends as traditional roles and boundaries dissolve. What matters most is strategies, insights, and creative thinking. Clients don't care what you call yourself. Our own trade media recognize this. It is telling that Strategy magazine has named an agency that does not call itself a PR agency as "PR agency of the year" in both 2024 and 2025. My hope is that people engage with our professional association and work together to define our roles and responsibilities, and how we market ourselves. Integrity, ethics, and professionalism can be our differentiator."

How do you think ethics as a fundamental principle of communication and issues have evolved in your view?

"It should be clear to everyone that ethics and governance are more critical than ever in the practice of communications. Artificial intelligence is now sweeping through society and transforming the ways that people obtain information and make their decisions. The challenge is for practitioners to assert and define the human role in governance as machines have greater influence."

How has your volunteering played a role in your career?

"I can't say enough about the fantastic experiences and wonderful people I have met through volunteer work. It has enriched my career beyond words. I encourage everyone to pursue volunteer roles and see how they can expand knowledge and networks and make an important difference for worthy causes."

Commitment to the next generation of communicators

A consistent theme through Bruce's career has been his commitment to advancing younger people into the industry. He's also shown strong leadership in equity and fairness for young people. These values have manifested in several ways. Within his companies, younger people have been given opportunities, challenged and shown how to succeed. Dozens of current practitioners began their careers in entry-level jobs at Proof Strategies or one of the other agencies he co-founded. Once people were on the team, Bruce recognized talent and helped them advance. Bruce promoted Vanessa Eaton to Vice President at age 29 and mentored her so that she is now President of Proof Strategies.

Advocacy for Interns

While serving as Chair of the Public Advisory Committee for the Humber College Bachelor of Public Relations from June 2019 to 2021, Bruce learned about the large number of interns who were expected to work for free or little compensation. Recognizing this attitude created barriers to access and discrimination against students from lower income families and racialized students, Bruce and the committee members launched a campaign to educate. In February 2020, they sent a letter to employers and PR professional societies urging that student interns be paid a fair wage. Bruce took the campaign public with articles in trade magazines and the broader media. A portion of their letter said:

“Humber, like many post-secondary institutions, offers several programs for young people to pursue a career in public relations. One of our priorities is to ensure the future members of our profession are fully reflective of our diverse population. There should be no economic, cultural or other barriers to entry.

Living expenses and education costs are already a challenge to young people, especially in cities like Toronto and Vancouver where the cost of living is prohibitively high. If we ignore barriers, we prevent people with limited economic resources from entering public relations.

Accordingly, we want to share the decision taken by our committee, which is that unpaid internships have no place in the public relations profession in Canada and they should be eliminated.”

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In September of 2020, a variation of this letter became an opinion column by Bruce and student intern Ethan Teclu (paid and working at Proof Strategies) in The Globe and Mail, titled: “Let’s pay student interns a fair wage.”

In 2022, Bruce worked with Julie Rogers, APR in her role as chair of the Advocacy and Ethical PR Committee of the National Board of CPRS to extend the message that interns should be paid. With a working group, they drafted a policy adopted by CPRS against unpaid interns. The policy opens as follows:

“The Advocacy and Ethical PR Committee of the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) developed

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the following policy statement regarding the payment of public relations student interns during their work terms.

According to the Canadian Public Relations Society, unpaid internships have no place in the public relations profession in Canada. We therefore call for this practice to be discarded forthwith.”

In March 2023, Bruce collaborated with CPRS colleague Adnan Bashir to write and publish an opinion column about fair pay for interns in the [Toronto Star op-ed](#). Their column linked fair pay with the importance of diversity. Not paying interns is a barrier to access. They wrote:

“Unpaid internships confirm a certain level of privilege. The unpaid experience internship inevitably shuts the door on some newcomers and disadvantaged communities.”

By 2024, Humber College was reporting that almost 100% of intern positions in the PR program were paid a fair wage.

CPRS Foundation Volunteer



Bruce was recruited to join the CPRS Foundation board around 2010 and served as Chair for 2014 and 2015. (At the time, it was called the Communications + Public Relations Foundation). In 2010-11, a highlight was co-chairing a fundraising campaign with Luc Beauregard, APR, FCPRS, CM. With other board members, \$75,000 was raised to fund research on industry topics today and what we need to be doing in the future.

Working with the Foundation’s Executive Committee, the Board initiated a full operations review and developed a plan to restore budget balances and continue

programming excellence. Bruce also recruited several new board members such as Andrew Molson and Ken Evans, APR.

Bruce has remained a friend of the Foundation after retiring from the board. In 2020, he worked with CPRS Foundation chairs Deb Trouten, APR, FCPRS and Anita Wasiuta with his lead pledge of \$5,000 to help create an endowment for an Indigenous student scholarship in public relations education. The Indigenous scholarship was announced in September 2020 with the launch of a fundraising campaign with contributions from five CEOs (leadership donors) and the dollar-for-dollar matching for first \$25,000 donated (CEOs donations for the match) – potential to raise a total of \$50,000.

In 2025, Bruce is working with Foundation Chair Johanna Ward, APR to reinvigorate the Tisdall lecture as an annual event sponsored by the Foundation. Bruce and his wife, Karen Girling, APR, have pledged \$25,000 over five years to sponsor this lecture, which will start in 2026.

CPRS Award Sponsorship

Bruce is a passionate believer in entrepreneurship and the benefits for the Canadian public relations industry from Canadian-owned agencies. To help inspire others toward starting their own communications companies, in 2019 Bruce worked with CPRS President Dana Dean, APR to create a new Major Category Award: The CPRS Entrepreneurial Leadership Award. He provided a \$5,000 donation to CPRS to support the administration of this award. The qualifications are in part:

“This Award recognizes an accredited Canadian public relations practitioner and entrepreneur who has created and grown one or more successful communications businesses over the years, making a substantial contribution to the advancement of the profession and the prosperity of the Canadian economy. The business has provided exceptional counsel to clients and thereby advanced the status and acceptance of the public relations function.”

It was first awarded in 2019, and recipients to date have included agency leaders such as Yvon Desautel, Judy Lewis, and Theodora Jean.

Conservation Volunteer for more than 25 years



Less well known in his career is Bruce's longstanding involvement over 25 years as a volunteer and leader in the land conservation movement in Canada. Bruce is an unabashed nature lover. From the ravines of Toronto, where he grew up, to canoe trips in Algonquin Park, he is passionate about spending time in nature and devoted to protecting it. As a volunteer, he has given his knowledge, energy, and talent to protecting biodiversity at the grassroots and national levels.

Bruce is known for his candour, leadership and fearlessness in tackling issues or setting goals. Throughout this work, Bruce works to expand protected natural areas and make conservation more engaging and more inclusive.

Within the Canadian conservation scene, there is no other public relations professional (and proud CPRS member) who has done so much or held so many senior volunteer roles.

His volunteer work and contributions include:

Nature Conservancy Canada (NCC)

The [Nature Conservancy of Canada \(NCC\)](#) is Canada's pre-eminent national land trust. Today, the NCC closes an average of two conservation projects a week and has conserved more than 20 million hectares of ecologically sensitive land across Canada since 1962. That is an area more than twice the size of New Brunswick.

Bruce has been a volunteer with NCC in various roles since 1999. He was recruited that year by NCC staff to serve as a member of the first regional board for Ontario. His experience and knowledge in corporate communications and public relations were a valued part of the board skills matrix. Bruce served on this Ontario region board from 1999-2002, and his work stretched across the entire national organization.



While an Ontario board member, Bruce's contributions and accomplishments include:

- Chaired the Communications Committee of the Ontario board and brought a professional opinion and advice to initiatives, many that extended to have national benefits.
- Introduced the first brand awareness research for NCC and the subsequent surveys provided an ongoing indicator of public awareness of conservation and the NCC. The initial research in 1999 was also used by NCC staff in lobbying to create the Ontario Greenbelt. In these early days, Bruce's company paid for the research.
- Created a national partnership in 1999 with The Globe & Mail, working in partnership with NCC President John Lounds. In becoming the NCC's first "National Media Partner" the Globe's collaboration boosted the conservation group to higher prominence with key opinion leaders, government policy makers, and affluent Canadians.

National Board

Bruce has also served as a director of the NCC's national board for seven years, including as Vice-Chair from 2015-17, Chair from 2017-19, and Past Chair from 2019-21.

Drawing on his own business management experience, Bruce provided ongoing advice to staff leaders, helping to make NCC a stronger organization and evolving the management team's function and priorities.

His contributions and accomplishments on the national board include:

- Chaired the Communications and Marketing Committee, which oversaw the NCC's growing efforts to use social media platforms in connecting with Canadians.
- Chaired the Governance and Nominations Committee, where Bruce pushed for more women and diversity of members on the NCC's seven regional advisory boards and the national board. This resulted in all boards having a female as either Chair or Vice Chair during his term.
- Created and co-chaired (with fellow director Mike Pedersen) the Ad hoc Campaign Advisory Committee of the board, providing advice and oversight for the NCC's successful \$750 million campaign for nature. This target was met and exceeded.
- Supported management to increase partnerships with Indigenous communities to adopt traditional knowledge in advancing conservation. Assisted in recruiting Chloë Dragon-Smith, a Metis community member from Yellowknife to the national board.
- In 2019, worked with staff on a review of NCC Workplace Violence and Harassment Policy to strengthen employee protection and governance oversight by the board.

- While chair, worked with staff to hold the first board meeting in NCC history north of the 60th parallel, in Yellowknife, NWT. This 2019 meeting included discussions about conservation with leaders of the Thaidene Nene First Nations community.
- Introduced the idea of a Nature Day as an annual extra vacation day for all NCC employees to celebrate nature, a practice that continues today. (The Nature Day was also introduced by Bruce at Proof Strategies.)
- Served on the Search Committee to recruit the NCC's current President & CEO, Catherine Grenier, who started in September 2020 in a highly successful and seamless transition.
- Serves as co-Chair of the NCC's National Ambassadors' Circle from 2021 to the present, overseeing a program of events and communications to maintain engagement with retired board members.

In February 2025, Bruce received the King Charles III Coronation Medal in recognition of his volunteer efforts, nominated by the NCC to the Governor General's office.

“For over 25 years, Bruce has been an active volunteer with the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), first getting involved in helping to improve its marketing and communications efforts. Bruce epitomizes those volunteer qualities that make a charity successful through his willingness and energy to give his all in time, treasure, and talent.”

— John Lounds, former President & CEO of the Nature Conservancy of Canada

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Lake of Bays Heritage Foundation

At the community level, Bruce's volunteer work for conservation included many years of support for a local land trust in central Ontario, the [Lake of Bays Heritage Foundation \(LBHF\)](#). Bruce served on the volunteer board of LBHF from 2001 to 2016, including two terms as volunteer President (2002-06 and 2011-16), giving hundreds of hours to a wide range of activities.

His work as a board member included:

- Managed the development and launch of LBHF's first website in 2004, as well as launching its YouTube channel, Facebook page, and Twitter feed.
- Led negotiations over several years with three different property owners to purchase separate parcels of land (in 2008, 2014 and 2016) to assemble an overall conservation property of 170 acres and five kilometres of Oxtongue River shoreline for permanent conservation stewardship. This Marsh's Falls

Protected Area is now the flagship of LBHF stewardship and education.

- The above acquisitions required raising over \$1 million from the community, and Bruce played a key role on the team achieving and exceeding this target.
- Received the Vision Award from the Ontario Land Trust Alliance (OLTA) in 2016 in recognition of his introduction of digital communication platforms to broaden the message reach for local conservation.
- Self-published a book of antique postcards in 2007 highlighting Lake of Bays heritage. All 1,600 copies were sold, and he donated over \$10,000 in net proceeds to LBHF.

Centre for Land Conservation

Since late 2023, Bruce has served as a national board member of the [Centre for Land Conservation \(CLC\)](#), becoming board chair in 2025. The CLC is a national standards organization operating the Conservation Excellence Certification™ and designs and conducts leading edge research into the core issues that affect conservation success. This research is simply not feasible for smaller organizations. As the only Canadian think-tank on conservation, the CLC identifies issues and solutions that are strategically significant and designed to achieve long-term impact.

As a Director of CLC, Bruce has provided ongoing communications strategy advice and helped with the implementation of branding and identity for the CLC.

His contributions and accomplishments include managing a research study of Canadian philanthropists in 2024, testing their attitudes toward certification of charitable organizations, with emphasis on conservation groups.

Awards and Benchmarks

- **1988:** Accreditation in Public Relations (APR)
- **1992:** CPRS Award of Excellence for External Communications
- **2006:** Inducted into the CPRS College of Fellows
- **2016:** Vision Award, Ontario Land Trust Alliance
- **2017:** Betty Day Award, Lake of Bays Association, for volunteering commitment
- **2018:** Life Member of CPRS for service and contributions to the profession
- **2018:** CPRS National Award of Attainment
- **2021:** Lois Marsh Award, given by CPRS Toronto Chapter
- **2022:** CPRS Philip A. Novikoff Memorial Award
- **2025:** CPRS Shield of Public Service
- **2025:** King Charles III Coronation Medal, given by Rideau Hall for volunteering