

BELIZEAN Stories



Dr. Johnathan Canton

Johnathan has published more than 20 peer-reviewed research papers, has been cited more than 600 times, and has presented at conferences and universities in Montreal, Rhode Island, Tel Aviv and London.



Two years ago Johnathan lived in the cold city of Toronto, Canada where he and his partner Amy huddled together for warmth when the wind blew too quickly.

Johnathan had left Belize 11 years prior to pursue a PhD in immunology. As an undergraduate at the University of Florida in Gainesville he studied tropical parasitology, marvelling at the interaction between unicellular parasites and the human immune system. Noting his passion, the faculty nominated him for the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Award for undergraduate research, which he ultimately received.

As an HHMI fellow he was sent to the Institut Pasteur in Lille, France where he studied how viruses were able to gain access to human cells. On his return to UF, the faculty of Cell Biology and Microbiology recruited him into the doctoral program, awarding him the Grinter Graduate Fellowship as an outstanding incoming doctoral candidate. Upon successfully defending his graduate thesis, Johnathan was awarded best departmental dissertation for his graduating class. He was then recruited by the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto to pursue his postdoctoral work at the Peter Gilgan Centre for Research and Learning.

Johnathan met Amy after she had returned to Canada from Paris where she had been working as an associate producer with a film production company, dabbling in freelance illustration and embroidery. She returned home to spend time with her father who had been diagnosed with leukemia. In Toronto, she worked to launch an eco-friendly pop up shop with other young creatives.

Both were tired. John had been plugging away 10-12 hour days in his lab, often working weekends. Amy was working at a vintage shop because she needed something easy on her heavy heart. After 2 years of hospital visits, her father had passed away.

So when they met it was magic - a crack in the cement, where the tiniest seed sprouted. They filled their small apartment with as many plants as they could, ate only organically and supported locally and ethically-produced products. They were voting with

their dollars and trying to be active in making change, but still something else was churning.

After many conversations, they decided to leave their jobs, friends and apartment. John had just accepted a fellowship at the Crick Institute in London, England, but called them to say he had changed his mind. They packed their things into "Cutie bubs" (their car) and drove from Toronto to Miami (with lots of camping, surfing and detours along the way). They hopped on a plane, and finally, arrived in Belize. They had made it home to Kunahmul farm.

Kunahmul translates to "love nest" in Mayan, a name the late George Price gave the farm when he visited decades ago. Kunahmul firmly believes that food security and economic growth does not have to come at the cost of losing our rich and biodiverse ecosystems and, equally as important, our cultural food identity. While they only currently farm on 1 acre, *Kunahmul Organics* provides more than 30 varieties of heirloom organic vegetables to Belizean grocery shops, chefs and restaurants.

Never would they have imagined their collective dream of bringing organic, sustainable and flavourful products to Belize would bloom the way it has.



Jonathan's story is one of trying to make this world a better place, but ultimately is a story of a young talented Belizean trained in the United States who has decided to come home to make Belize better and to find success back home.

Johnathan's studies focused on tropical parasites, namely *Leishmania* spp., commonly known in Belize as the causative agent of the notorious Bay Sore.

Find out more about Kunahmul Organics at kunahmul.com & follow them on:

