

Leora Kornfeld ([00:09](#)):

Welcome to Now & Next, a podcast about innovation in the media and entertainment industries, I'm Leora Kornfeld. Now, if someone told you that there were initiatives that you could put into place on film and TV sets that either cost you nothing, or better yet, could save you money and result in things like lower emissions and drastically reduced waste, you'd probably think, "Well, that sounds too good to be true." And then you may wonder, "So why aren't more people taking advantage of these kinds of things?" Clara George is today's guest and she's based in Vancouver. Clara has had a long career as a film and TV producer, close to three decades. But earlier this year she turned her full-time focus to sustainability issues onset in her new position as vice president of studios and sustainable production services at Sim International. Now, in some ways sustainability issues seem pretty straight forward, use less stuff, reuse when possible, cut down on emissions, but now there's COVID to deal with and that brings with it a whole new set of considerations. But as Clara explains, that doesn't mean that pause just gets hit on the eco sensibilities.

Clara George ([01:28](#)):

Every studio is asking for single use items. They're not saying they have to be single use plastic. Obviously the best thing to do with sustainability is to reuse all your items, but that doesn't mean that we have to go to plastic. Actually, there's a great system that we came up with with catering where you end up with zero waste, because you can prepackage all of the food in reasonable portions, which is new to a film set, and you can use completely compostable serving items, it all goes back in the bag and it goes in the compost. So you're not relying on the crew to sort anymore, you're actually creating a zero waste system, which is way better than what we had pre-COVID. COVID has brought everybody the challenge that they have to reinvent how they work. So if you can somehow encourage everybody to reinvent using a sustainable lens, we're going to get massive innovation.

Leora Kornfeld ([02:22](#)):

Well, yeah, this is really interesting what you're saying, because on a previous episode this season we had Alex Kolodkin from Safe Sets International on and he says, innovations are going to happen because the production industry is a solutions based industry, that's what people do. So you mentioned some of the stuff you're seeing, like for example, you mentioned food portions, were they historically just way bigger than they needed to be?

Clara George ([02:49](#)):

Oh, everybody put on 10 pounds easily every production. There was constant food, and constant buffet, and amazing caterers, and you would take more than... It's kind of going to the all-you-can-eat Sunday buffet every day. So now you have to pre-order, you have to think about what you're eating, you have to think about how long it is going to take you to eat because you have to sanitize after and before, and people are being more considerate. There's less craft service. There's less food in the office. There's less food waste on every set.

Leora Kornfeld ([03:22](#)):

So by this time next year, people would be looking at a full length mirror going, "This pandemic, it did me some good."

Clara George ([03:27](#)):

I hope so. We were really proud on my last show about how many donations we were able to give to homeless shelters. However, that's just waste. We're ordering too much. We're serving too much. So there's two ways of looking at it, you either reduce your input or you deal with your output. So I think what COVID is kind of teaching everyone to do is reduce their input.

Leora Kornfeld ([03:50](#)):

And what productions are you working on now, and what kind of sustainability initiatives are you putting into place?

Clara George ([03:56](#)):

So I joined a majority of Canadians who rethought their entire career during COVID. I've been producing for a long time and I love it, but I was really having a hard time coming to terms with the sustainability aspect of film production, and I've been focusing for the last few years on greening my own sets and trying to green the industry. And I joined the Women for Climate Mentorship Program in 2019, and I worked with the City of Vancouver to start creating clean infrastructure for film productions, and I've been working on various committees and working with Green Spark Group as an advisor, really kind of seeing what more can we do. And when an opportunity came up to join Sim, who is one of the most forward-thinking green companies out there, I had to jump on it, and I thought, "If not now, when?"

Leora Kornfeld ([04:49](#)):

I was reading about you taking on city hall in Vancouver, people say, "You can't fight city hall." But it turns out that you can fight city hall and you did fight city hall. And if understand correctly, the idea was to instigate change at the level of infrastructure, at the level of the city. Can you describe what you did there?

Clara George ([05:10](#)):

Yeah, for sure. So basically, production can only be as sustainable as the tools that it's given. And a lot of productions are having challenges because they're just starting the sustainable journey, I had already done all that. So I'd already worked on a show where we had reduced everything by at least 20 to 30%. Paper, we went down by 50%. Fuel, we went down by 20%. Red meat, we went down by 60%. So I was pushing in all directions and then I couldn't push anymore because we didn't have the infrastructure. So I happened to come across an ad, I guess, for Women for Climate, and Women for Climate is part of c40.org, and they had targeted Vancouver as one of their cities where they were going to start a mentorship program. And when I looked at the list of mentors, I focused on Councillor Adriane Carr, the most senior council member in Vancouver, and also has a long history of activism.

Clara George ([06:07](#)):

And I thought, "Okay, let me see if I can do this." So it was quite terrifying because first of all, it's for young climate leaders and I thought, "Okay, well, that's pushing it, but let's see what happens." And I had to write a 3000 word essay. So I called my children at university and said, "Can you help me write an essay?" Because it's been a long time since I wrote an essay. Anyway, I got in and I had to do a two minute pitch. And my pitch was that you cannot green the city of Vancouver without greening film production, because we are the most visible industry in the city. And that we needed their help to create clean infrastructure, and by that I simply mean plugs. We have a clean grid in Vancouver yet we're burning diesel generators every day, and we had over 7,000 shoot days in 2018 in each show would have burnt a minimum of three generators all day long on those 7,000 days.

Leora Kornfeld ([07:07](#)):

Now what exactly is a clean grid?

Clara George ([07:10](#)):

In British Columbia, 99% of our power comes from renewable resources. So we are not burning coal, we are not burning fossil fuels, we are running off of hydroelectric power. However, our film sets are running off of petroleum diesel generators, so if we are allowed to access power from the grid, we would reduce our carbon footprint massively. The number one impact on any film production is fossil fuels. 20% of that is how we power our sets with generators, the rest of it is our trucks, our transport, air travel, anything else that we do that involves fossil fuels. But in BC, we're lucky enough that you can take the electricity and say it's clean, so we would be able to reduce our carbon footprint on every single production by at least 20% by having access to hydroelectric power. So when I pitched that to the Women for Climate panel, I got in and Councillor Carr picked me as her mentee. So our first meeting, we sat down and we started to draft a motion, which was the bones of the motion that got passed in city hall four months later.

Leora Kornfeld ([08:24](#)):

And props to your kids for help with the essay, how much of a difference do you think that made?

Clara George ([08:28](#)):

I think they laughed at me a lot, but I mean, they definitely reminded me that I sounded like I was writing a grade 12 essay. It's been a long time since I wrote an essay at university, so it was very, very helpful.

Leora Kornfeld ([08:43](#)):

So what you've described, why did it take so long? If Vancouver, for example, where filming industry is huge business, why did it take so long to get incorporated into the clean grid?

Clara George ([08:55](#)):

I mean, we're still not, we're still have a long way to go, but at least the city is trying. The reality is, is that we never know where we're going to shoot, right? So if you're shooting in stage or you're shooting on your studio, or if you're shooting at a recurring set somewhere, you can take the months and months and months it takes to put in clean power and make sure you can access it. We started, I believe the first generator was used for film production in the '70s, and that's when we kind of came out of just doing all studio based shows and starting to roam around neighborhoods and capture location work. For example, if you're shooting at a hotel, it's quite common practice if you're shooting on the upper floors that instead of trying to run generator cable down 15, 20 floors of a building, you access their power supply by going into their main panel.

Clara George ([09:53](#)):

However, nobody really thinks about doing that at ground level because it's more convenient to plug into the generator. So now what we're in the process of doing is changing the mindset and the culture and the practices of the locations department, of the electric department, of the transport department, so that we want them to start with the question, "Can we tie in somewhere? Is there clean power available to us to run our catering truck or to run our equipment trucks or to run our lights."

Clara George ([10:24](#)):

And those questions used to happen a lot in the 1970s and early '80s because film production was so new and we didn't have the equipment, we didn't have the generators to supply every production. Now it's gone the other way, we have the equipment and now we have to dial it back. There are companies that are developing batteries, which would be clean as well. So think of using your Tesla to charge your set, but nobody has developed a battery yet that is the equivalent of a generator. Sim actually has developed the largest portable battery source, I think in the world, and it's dedicated for film use and it's out all the time, productions love it, but there aren't enough of them yet. So we have to kind of look at all the options at once to try and replace these 21,000 days of generator use in Vancouver, and most likely the equivalent in Toronto and Montreal as well.

Leora Kornfeld ([11:20](#)):

And like you say, it's just a second nature thing, right? People have their processes that they use and they're used to them, so there is that cultural shift. And along those lines, your plan, if I understand correctly, is to create a template for the whole industry, which of course is great. And of course it doesn't happen overnight, but in the meantime, do you think that one or two people on a set can do things that actually make a difference to move in this direction, or is that too wishful of thinking?

Clara George ([11:49](#)):

No, absolutely. I think it comes down to one or two people. The producer or the production manager has to start the production day one saying we're a sustainable production, all thoughts welcome, all ideas welcome. I have no idea, on a micro level, what every single department faces every day. But when I opened it up to my crew, I got the most amazing suggestions. I suddenly had, the costume department decided that they were no longer going to use plastic for dry cleaning. So they made 40 cotton reusable, garment bags dropped half of them off at their dry cleaners and used them for the entire production to transport all the clothing. They figured they offset 200 garment bags a day of those dry cleaner bags. Every department had something that they could contribute to, but if they feel that they're kind of doing it in a vacuum and that they're not being heard, they're not going to keep doing it because they're going to get tired and they're going to get stressed and they're going to get busy and it's going to be, "Well, I'm not getting any traction."

Clara George ([13:00](#)):

I heard a wonderful story from my sister, who's actually on a show right now in Vancouver. And they were going out to one of the beautiful bays, just North of the city on the ocean, and they were looking for where to put the camera and someone pointed out, "Well, we can't go there because we'll wreck the moss." And they went, "Oh, okay, let's go somewhere else." So 20 people made a decision not to disrupt moss growing on rocks for the shot. That wouldn't have happened two years ago.

Leora Kornfeld ([13:36](#)):

You have some little tricks that you use, I understand. So sometimes you kind of can push some things through without asking, just to see if anybody notices, isn't that how you ended up saving, what was it, hundreds or thousands of pounds of beef being used in craft services? You didn't really ask, you just went ahead and did it, is that right?

Clara George ([13:57](#)):

Yes, that is right. Well, I'm the producer, so I got to make some choices. I went to my caterers and I asked them how many pounds of beef they serve a week? And they said 150. And I said, "Great, can you limit it to 50?" And they said, "You want us to do meatless Mondays?" And I said, "Oh, no, no, I don't want you to do that, I just want you to limit beef." "Well, what about chicken?" "Serve chicken." So by not kind of flagging it and making a rule. Film people, especially film people, get told what to do all day long, they don't want any more rules. And most people who go into film go into film because they don't want to work nine to five, they don't want to wear a suit, they don't want to kind of be constricted.

Clara George ([14:45](#)):

So you really can't go in and say, "I am not going to serve you any more beef." Because that wouldn't work. But then I thought, "Well, will they really notice?" And they didn't. And I did that for two or three shows, and then finally I thought, "The culture is not going to change unless they're aware of what they're doing." So I told people, "We're serving reduced beef to save the environment." And a few people grumbled, a few people asked me what the connection was, because they honestly had no idea of the carbon footprint of food. Most people said, "This is awesome."

Leora Kornfeld ([15:23](#)):

Were you expecting more pushback?

Clara George ([15:25](#)):

Yeah, I was expecting pushback, and especially the first couple of times I was thinking, "Oh, someone's going to think that I'm not focused on the job and I'm focusing too much on sustainability or I'm prioritizing the wrong thing. Or what if it's something they don't believe in?" And it kind of... We're talking about three or four years ago, it wasn't in the conversation, and now it's mainstream, which is fantastic.

Leora Kornfeld ([15:50](#)):

A&W serves veggie burgers, right? I mean, there you go.

Clara George ([15:54](#)):

Everybody's talking about it. We're talking about a green COVID recovery on a national level. So I think that a lot of us, especially who are now aware of what's going on and concerned, to walk onto a film set and see, in your words, hundreds of donuts go in the garbage is painful, we don't want to contribute to that. And I found that on the shows where I became more vocal about this is the agenda, everybody got into it. The actors got into it, the director, the writers, everybody was proud of what our accomplishments were. And that is a really nice unifying force on a film set because on a lot of film sets, the unity comes from misery, like you're working all night in the rain all night, or it's minus 20 and you're in Toronto and it's awful and there's a blizzard and the comradery comes together in kind of the way that you're trudging through war or something. And it's so nice to create a positive goal that everyone is going towards.

Clara George ([17:01](#)):

We have to create it in front of the camera. We have to make it aspirational. We have to make it easy. And then behind the camera, we have to make sure we have the tools to keep up. We need hundreds of electric generators. We need hundreds of clean power sources. We have to scale up quickly to meet the demand of production in the country.

Leora Kornfeld ([17:24](#)):

So how close are the big Canadian production centers in terms of being able to meet the demand?

Clara George ([17:30](#)):

Not very close at all. We need government help. We need infrastructure development. We need clean tech development. We have all the solutions, we just don't have enough of them. We have the will, we just need to figure out how to scale up. We are one of the largest production centers in the world, so we need to scale up to meet the demand.

Leora Kornfeld ([17:49](#)):

Now last season, we had a Zena Harris from Green Spark Group. Their sustainability and consulting group. And we had her on the show and I asked her about her pet peeve...

Clara George ([17:59](#)):

Definitely fossil fuels, I am known as the creepy generator lady. I will walk around the set and I will actually read the generator and understand how it's being used and challenge, "Why are you using three, when you might be able to use one?" It can be done.

Leora Kornfeld ([18:16](#)):

I bet sometimes you don't even have to say it now, they just know, right?

Clara George ([18:21](#)):

Definitely, I've definitely made a big noise about this. And luckily everybody's kind of on board, and to be completely clear, it wasn't my idea. I just, was in a meeting at Reel Green and we were talking about it and somebody said, "Oh, we've been trying to do that for 15 years." And I went, "Why? It doesn't take us 15 years to do anything." So I just accelerated it. But this has been something that the industry has been aware of for such a long time and because they couldn't get any traction they just stopped. I think, equal to the momentum and keep... The most important thing about keeping the momentum going is getting the rewards, sharing your success, sharing your failures and keeping it in the discussion, sustainability has to be part of the discussion.

Leora Kornfeld ([19:17](#)):

And thanks to people like you and initiatives like you've been undertaking, it is. And thank you so much, Clara, George.

Clara George ([19:25](#)):

Thank you.

Leora Kornfeld ([19:28](#)):

And that's it for another episode of Now & Next, this podcast is brought to you by the Canada Media Fund. And don't forget, you can go to their CMF trends website to get a transcript of this episode and show notes with links if you're interested in finding out more about some of the topics Clara and I touched on today. Also, thanks to those of you who have been rating and reviewing the show, it really helps other people discover it in this large and ever-growing sea of podcasts. And that's it for now, thanks for listening. I'm Leora Kornfeld and I'll see you on the next episode of Now & Next.

