

Green-Watch's Interview with Prof. Elizabeth Miller



Over the course of the Winter 2023 semester, the Sustainability Ambassadors team, Green-Watch, set off to discover and interview Concordians who are actively contributing to sustainability at the university and beyond. Our goals with this interview series are to learn about the people behind the initiatives, to spark conversation around sustainability, and to inspire others to take action however they can.

We had the absolute pleasure of meeting with Professor Elizabeth Miller for our third interview: a professor of Communication Studies, documentarian, human rights advocate, and avid cyclist! We

hope you enjoy learning about Professor Miller's work, immersive approach to storytelling, and path in sustainability!

We know that you are both a documentarian and a professor in communications here at Concordia. Can you tell us a bit more about your background and what led you to where you are today?

I started off more as a human rights activist. I had social convictions, I had a sense of adventure, and I had a love for languages. This is what I knew. What I didn't know was how to fit myself into an educational program or which would be a good fit for me, so I started off in sociology.

In my second year, I went to Peru for a year in the midst of a very tumultuous period. There were a lot of strikes, curfews and protests happening in the country. I found that the classroom was a really exciting and important place to think about how we could use social theory to apply to a very fast changing environment. Something deep shifted in me. I had felt a bit lost and unclear, and suddenly I understood that education was a way of interpreting the world and that I could be a player. Even though I was a foreigner and an outsider to a social process, I still had the sense that we can do important things in the class and that I would somehow find a way to use knowledge to apply to everything around me. Beforehand, sociology was interesting, but it felt a little detached. Once I saw that I could use social theories towards social action, I got very excited.



I came back from that experience of a foreign exchange program, and I thought to myself, *what do I need to learn that I can't learn on my own?* What came to mind was economics. I understood that economics was driving a lot of the social chaos in Latin America, and that there were intimate connections between "more developed countries" and "less developed countries," so I shifted from sociology to a degree called Social Thought and Political Economy.

I also took a year off, and I went and worked because I was really charged up with the desire to do something in the world. Going away to another context outside of my home one and then getting a bit of work experience through internships helped shape my educational goals. This all helped me and gave me a better sense of, *do I want to try to change policy? Do I want to work in a nonprofit? Do I want to be an educator? How can I apply my passion into something concrete, when I don't really even know what concrete means?* When I came back to school, I was much better positioned to know how to make use of my time.

I graduated with a degree in Latin American Studies and Social Thought and Political Economy, still with a big passion around human rights. This in combination with how important my experience in Peru had been to me, I decided what I wanted to do in life: facilitate an experience for students who want to live and work alongside nonprofit organizations in Central America. For several years, I lived in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and then Belize coordinating an alternative foreign exchange program. I was

very young, I had a lot of responsibility and a lot of fun. I realized that I'm one of those learners for whom theory is wonderful, but hands-on experience really works for me. I was always the student seeking an internship or independent study or something where I could both think and apply that knowledge. So that's really a value for me, that idea of praxis – the combination of theory and practice.

In Central America, I had this unbelievably amazing job where, let's say Kavi came to me and said, “I am interested in human rights, and I know how to fix bikes”, I would search across three countries to find a really cool internship for him. I was this facilitator of applied experiences and as a result I developed partnerships all over the region. We would pay the organization to take a student and they would do their best to contribute to the group. We paid the groups because we recognized that there was a lot of training and exchange going on, and a lot of these groups needed resources to make things happen.

At that time, I was also working occasionally as a photojournalist. I recognized the power of moving images and wanted to learn video. I pitched to my employer that I should document the different internships — this was a long time ago, pre-YouTube, pre-cell phones and she liked that idea. That's how I got started as a filmmaker, documenting some of these internship opportunities for the students.

I got hooked into this new element of creative practice. It became this kind of three part foundation: I love activism and social engagement, I love creative practice, and I love place-based education. Bringing these things together is very important to me. I started as a human rights activist, but once I tapped into the creative practice of filmmaking, it mitigated some of the challenges in building social movements. Just that joy of doing creative work and realizing how communication products like a film or a podcast can play a role in shifting people's minds.

I went back after five years of living in Central America and got a degree in a field called Electronic Arts. What was interesting was that it was the dawn of the internet. I was beginning to learn how to code and how to tell stories on this new platform. There were moments where I remember saying to another student, *I'm not really clear what a browser is ... If I'm looking for this material, where's it stored?* In Central America, the internet was very preliminary – we were just starting to use emails, there were frequent electricity outages. Then, I was suddenly immersed at an engineering institute where we were animating and coding 24 hours, all the time — it was a bit overwhelming. It was probably one of the hardest chapters of my life, trying to understand if I'd made the right decision.

After graduation I worked in web design and coding for a year, but I quickly realized I'm not a person who wants to be in front of a computer all the time. I needed to get back into praxis and hands-on experience. A friend of mine told me to apply to a job opening at the university where they were teaching and that lasted for

“For all the challenges that we face, [Concordia] is a place that has an amazing combination of people. The thing I love most about this university is the students. In my department, we get some of the brightest, most passionate students. That makes teaching amazing, because it always keeps me learning. I was a passionate student, but a restless student, and I do love to learn. I feel very lucky that I get to continue to be around people who are curious, open, and want to learn.”

two years until I saw the job description at Concordia. And once again I was at a crossroads: I remember I had two job opportunities: one was to work with Witness, a human rights organization that

trained advocates all over the world on how to use media; the other was to take a full time job at the university. I wondered if a university job was the right move, *I was the one who wanted to do the internship, not the one who wanted to be in the classroom for the rest of my life.* But here I am. I took it and have been in a university position ever since. What I try to do is actually ensure that I bring my ethos of mixing theory and practice into what I do in the classroom. I'm always looking for ways to open up the kind of opportunities I wanted as a student, where you can learn from doing.

So, I came, and I loved it. I also found a way that I could create a space at the university to bring in those human rights advocates. The first two years that I taught we held a Video Advocacy Institute with Witness where we brought human rights advocates from all over the world. I've always been trying to figure out how to make the university a place where it doesn't feel isolated or detached from really being a player in the world and – however naive this may sound – trying to make a difference by making education transformative and inspiring.

Can you tell us a bit about your most recent project, [WasteScapes](#)?

Documentary practice pushed me to travel, to get to know people all over the world, and feel as if I was making a difference. But as I became more of an environmental media specialist, I had a lot of angst in my heart about traveling. My friends would ask me:

“Did you really need to?”

“Are you the only person who could have made that film?”

“How are you balancing your carbon impact?”

These questions made me shift the way I made films. I began giving myself challenges such as making a film without leaving my office. I did this using my international networks to hire people in different countries, rather than traveling. It felt a bit

like a loss, I'll be honest with you, but I also felt like I had to find the means to match the method and the message. I couldn't keep doing things the same way. Then COVID hit and we all had to let go of that aspiration to learn through travel. As a result, I tried to find a way to travel, to find adventure and open up possibilities in my own city.



A big passion in my life is biking. I started trying to integrate cycling – a simple but transformative response to the fossil fuel industry – into my class, so a colleague and I pitched a kooky summer class where we were going to teach a class on bikes. The idea was for us to visit waste sites throughout the city of Montreal. It was going to be an interdisciplinary cycling class where we camped in the city and visited wastescapes. It was very ambitious. COVID forced us to shift that version of the class and make it online, but still ask students to cycle to nearby waste sites.

We realized that students would need to visit sites from wherever they were in the city. We started identifying locations that they might be able to visit all over the city. This reminded me of my younger

years, when I was scouting internships all over Central America. I was doing what I love, going out to explore and discover. It was a big aha moment for me because it showed me how little I knew about the history and places right in front of me. At the same time, I was involved in an effort to decolonize our curriculum within my department, so I brought a lot of questions into the process: *how well do you know the history of the land that you live and work on? What are the hidden layers of history?* It worked for me to ground myself and apply praxis locally. It was an important shift for me.

The [WasteScapes](#) project then shifted from a class to a locative app. It's like a treasure hunt. We've got five different tours which take you to different locations, but you can't access the content unless you're there. It rewards the curious, the adventurer who's willing to go to the location and use the app to learn something that might be of out mind and out of sight.



This was the project that really shifted my attention to where I am, rather than feeling that I have to go far away to find the same kind of joy and mystery that I once found through travel. I'm deeply trying to rethink how to be adventurous in my own city, or even what *is* an adventure?

What originally drew you towards Central America?

I grew up in the United States. When I was coming of age, the United States was waging a war on Central America. I learned about the history of colonialism and imperialism, and how involved I was in this as an American citizen. It made me think, *what is my relationship to that? And how can I challenge that?* I had been involved in political movements in the United States, and so working in Central America made sense to me.

I was also invested in both trying to shift the gender dynamics in the documentary field and in finding ways, as an individual, to express solidarity. Expressions of International solidarity have changed a lot now that we have social media to help us work together through alliances, but at the time, solidarity was a lot about being there.

How do you decide what to cover in your documentaries?

Generally, a good equation for a documentary is to follow a compelling person who is in the midst of working through a set of difficult decisions — character driven... that's what we, as viewers, are often drawn to. But I have often approached documentaries by focusing on a big issue and then trying to narrow it down.

One of these big issues I approached for an earlier film of mine was [water privatization](#). I met a Bolivian woman at a conference who told me that they were taxing citizens for water in Cochabamba and this began a several year research project. I came to understand that the right to water was *the* human rights issue of our time. That was a turning point for me. I went to Africa and Latin America trying to scope out how water privatization was playing out — but casting such a wide net is not a great way to make a film — and I ended up finding the story in Detroit, very close to home. Another time I was

approached by a global network to tell a story about [women and climate change](#), again a very broad issue.

Right now, I'm working on the issue of waste – I'm trying to approach it from a bunch of different angles. For example, I'm creating a project around seagulls– animals that we've come to think of as pests, who adapt to our own waste patterns – like seagulls. Through the film I hope to shift our perception of these birds.

How do you see digital media evolving in the future? Could it improve education related to sustainability?

Yes, I think media can be used for education on sustainability. For example. I was called to do this global project [Hands-on — women, climate, change](#). I found five directors from five countries – and facilitated this collaborative initiative remotely where each female director created a nine-minute segment, and I wove them together with animations. The project was used in several Climate Accord meetings since at the time there were not many resources on gender and climate. And frequently people would ask for a single segment of the film – the segment from India, or from Norway, or from Canada. I thought that was interesting; people want smaller pieces, and they need to be able to access this easily.

This led to the conception of an interactive documentary that wasn't a feature film, where you had to wait 60 minutes to get to the piece you wanted. You could access any piece at any moment. This was a big turning point for me, thinking about small narrative units and how media is best used as a catalyst for human interaction.

After that, I began thinking about how to shift my approach – to make less media and to prioritize more interpersonal interaction. I started a project about rising sea levels and unchecked development, [The Shoreline](#), and everybody kept telling me, “rising sea levels and climate change is a problem” but “communicating and coordinating around climate change are at the core of this challenge.” And it's true. We need to coordinate better, we need to build alliances, we need to build relationships. If we don't have trust, and solid relationships and understanding when we encounter a crisis, the problems exacerbate. This idea resonated with me and shifted my sense of media as more of a pretext for conversation, dialogue, engagement, relationship-building. For me, the media keeps getting smaller while the relationship building, and interpersonal exchanges keep getting bigger in my work.

I'm not one of these people who feel like VR or Augmented Reality is a substitute for reality. I'm working on a film right now, which is about the seagulls and waste, with two locations where not everyone can get access to. One is Île Deslauriers, 15 kilometers from downtown Montreal, where 70,000 birds breed every year. It's spectacular. All the birds that we see around the city were born there, but you can only get there if you're a biologist with a permit. In this case, virtual reality can help tell a story that most people would not be able to see for themselves. If virtual reality can take us to places that need to be preserved, or are inaccessible, and that by going there virtually, we could promote a shift of perception or behavior, that's a great use of that technology. But if I could take somebody to a local place, and have them smell, touch, and feel what it is like to be there, I don't see technology as a replacement for an in-person, on-ground experience.

Having people ask you for specific parts of your film, do you feel like that is a recent development? Maybe post mass adoption of the internet that people seem to feel like they have less time and only want to focus on the small thing that interests them, instead of considering the work in its entirety?

Yes, I do. I think the biggest challenge in our life is attention right now. I think our viewing habits, using cell phones or computers, are changing the way we take in information. As makers, we have to be aware of that.

Odd question, but why [Red Lizard Media](#)?

The name was inspired by the beautiful red lizards near my home in Costa Rica. I also saw red as an indication of something that has energy and passion. And then Liz is my name and lizards are creatures that love roaming the earth.

Has there been a moment from a project that was particularly meaningful to you so far?

One moment that means a lot to me had to do with "[The Water Front](#)". It's a film about a struggle in one city, fighting for the right to water. There was a group of activist urban planners who invited me to a conference where the film received an award. I had created this film in collaboration with individuals, and that film was going to be helpful to those doing really important work on the ground – I'd somehow added some tiny little piece to that social movement. That felt good, like I was part of something way bigger than myself.

Or, when I was making that piece with the women directors from all over the world, we took it to a conference where there were maybe 200 members of the [International Association of Women in Television and Radio](#). We were sitting in the room and showing a rough cut of the work. At the conference, I realized that the film had prompted an important conversation; that all of these women journalists from around the world were now discussing what our priority was in communicating this global issue. I thought *this conversation is more important than the film*, the film was just a pretext for us to have a very necessary conversation.

Those are the moments where I felt, *I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing*. Sometimes I feel the same way in the classroom, by facilitating dialogue and helping to awaken curiosity. That is meaningful to me.

What would be your definition of sustainability?

For me, the simplest definition of sustainability is about meeting our needs without compromising our future. It's about practicing care, constraint and justice and it's also about deeply respecting and recognizing each other and all the other living beings that depend on the health of our planet to survive. Practicing sustainability at Concordia is about forging relations with each other like you are doing through this project. It's about finding ways to simplify our lives, to break away from the habits and values that encourage us to consume so much so as to threaten our very existence.

Professor Miller's calls to action and suggestions in engaging with her work specifically and/or sustainability in general:

Overall:

"We need to cultivate respect, reduce our consumption and get involved with other like-minded people. We need to reconnect to the land by learning how to grow food, by noticing the changes around us, by riding our bikes instead of relying only on cars or planes. We need to revisit our ability to listen to each other. We're living in very polarized, overwhelming, and accelerated times. Finding ways to slow down is important."

- Do not do it alone, find an ally!
- Find something that brings you some pleasure. Move away from the "shoulds" and move towards the things you care about. Deepen that care.
- Try to find balance. Don't feel like you have to save the world tomorrow

At Concordia:

- Food is a great first step
 - Take Professor Miller's [Food, Media and Culture](#) course in Communication Studies
 - The Hive, The Concordia Food Coalition and other amazing food [groups](#)
 - There is great work going on around [waste and compost](#)
- Everyone has to visit [CUCCR](#), a hub of artistic creation and reuse
- There are amazing cycling [co-ops](#)
- There is a very dynamic group that meets about [climate change](#) (you can watch this great video created by our students)
- There are ways to connect course assignments to projects on campus
- Of course, the [Sustainability Ambassadors Program](#) is an amazing way to get involved and meet students and faculty from different disciplines
- [As the Gull Flies](#) launches **June 3rd** in the Biosphere.
 - It will be up for a year, and there will be bicycle tours in collaboration with the show. You can see what a tour looks like [here](#).
- [WasteScapes](#) is available to download for free on your cell phone.

"I ask my students to learn more about what is already happening on campus and how we can contribute."

"We really tried to feature young, women biologists [in *As the Gull Flies*] and I think I'm going to feel like it was worthwhile if some young girls go into that room and think, *oh, I can be that person. I can solve that problem.* Or, even if they felt that they could try that in life, being inspired about their next step."

* Photos generously provided by Professor Miller

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