

This is a transcription of the Yellow Jack Podcast, Episode 5.

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Host:
Robert Ouimet

Guest:
Michelle van Beusekom

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Contact info@bigsnit.com

[00:00:00] Hi, I'm Robert Ouimet, and this is the Yellow Jack podcast.

[MUSIC UP then down for...]

[00:00:11 Voice over, Robert] Up until a few weeks ago, the idea of self-isolation, locking herself away from the rest of society was pretty much the stuff of history books or religious fanatics, weirdos or just plain science fiction.

Here we are.

In Canada, anyone returning to the country is now legally required to go into a 14 day self-isolation, and many provinces have instituted the same requirement, albeit voluntarily, for people moving from province to province. That, along with social distancing, is what we are doing to try to slow down, to limit the spread of COVID-19.

I started this podcast out of curiosity. What are people doing when they find themselves having to socially isolate? I mean, yesterday they were going about their lives and now suddenly they have to lock themselves away for 14 days. So I started calling around to find out.

After seeing a post of hers on social media where she referred to her cats as her "quarantine companions", I called up Michelle van Beusekom. She's in self-isolation at her home in Montreal.

[00:01:17 Michelle] So, I mean, for me, it's been such an interesting ride. I was supposed to start or I did start a new job on Monday, March 15.

[00:01:26 Robert] Right. So this is this is your new job at the Documentary Organization of Canada, right?

[00:01:30 Michelle] Yeah. And I was supposed to be in Toronto with the Toronto based organization. And although I'm going to be working from Montreal, the idea was that I would be in Toronto for the first couple of weeks to meet the staff and just find my feet and all of that.

And by the Friday before, it was clear that that probably wasn't gonna be a good idea. So I decided to stay put in Montreal and work from home. Then by the Wednesday, my husband Alex and I started thinking about his mom in Brazil and we were seeing that president of Brazil is denying what's going on. He's being incredibly irresponsible in terms of the health of the citizens of that country. He is not putting measures into place at his level.

And she's 80 years old and started to become really worried for her. And it just kind of happened all at once. It's like we need to get her here.

So we spoke to her on on the Wednesday, March 15th, and said, you know, we think you should really consider coming here. And at first, because she's getting all of her news from Brazil where this is being downplayed or was at the time, she felt that maybe that was a bit of an overreaction. And she has a dog that she's extremely attached to, very worried who would take care of her dog. She said, you know, "if it was just me, I would come in a

heartbeat. But because of Ginger, I'm going to stay." And, you know, within a day, it was clear that it was super urgent for her to come. And thankfully, she spoke to a very good friend who was basically crying on the phone and saying, you need to go, you need to go. You can't stay here. You can't do that to your son. And so she agreed and we were able to buy a ticket and get her on a plane for Saturday. So that was a week ago yesterday. And. Yeah. So it's someone who came here from abroad. She is in self-isolation for two week.

[00:03:40 Robert] Right.

[Michelle] And I am also choosing to self isolate during that during that period. She's in her own apartment. But yeah, just to be safe, that's what we're doing. The whole world has changed for me. Like everyone else.

[00:03:54 Robert] Well, first of all, let me say, as a member of the community at large, thank you for doing that, because it's the safest thing to do and the smartest thing to do. And I know it's it's a really it's a big change in your life having to do that. But thank you on behalf of everybody out there, because, you know, it's an important thing to do and we all have to do our bit.

But isn't it odd how you can go from one reality to another? It's like, you know, in the movies , in a science fiction movie, when they set a new world in place, and it takes you like 10 or 15 minutes as you're watching the movie to adjust your brain to the fact that this is how the new world works. But you do in a movie. But this is real life. Like we've had to adjust how our world works almost overnight.

[00:04:32 Michelle] Totally. Totally. I mean, that's it. Exactly. Like Alex, my husband and I, we were in Puerto Rico for 10 days. We got back like just before everything changed. It was on March 12th. I was in Quebec March 12th. What's the day that the province came in with, you know, quarantine for people who had been traveling and all kinds of new restrictions and recommendations. But March 11th, the day we travelled, the world was still normal.

So we're in Puerto Rico with friends having an amazing time. And then we were listening to Democracy Now every day and getting the updates on COVID and hearing about Italy. And we were speculating, my God, it must be so strange. Imagine a whole country on lockdown. Imagine everyone at home. Imagine having to, you know, only have a few people at a time in the grocery store. Like, how does that work? And we couldn't imagine. We could not imagine that in two weeks we would all be living that way. Here we are. So it's just surreal. And that which is just three weeks away now, feels like a lifetime ago.

[00:05:39 Robert] I find the time is very...I almost can never tell what day of the week it is because it's everyday so much as happened last 24 hours.

[00:05:50 Michelle] One hundred percent. Yet each day is so different. And what you perceive as normal and reasonable behavior shifts so much from day to day.

[00:05:58 Robert] So you've always been you know, you and I have known each other for a while. And and before this job you have now with the Documentary Organization of Canada, you worked at the National Film Board of Canada. Before that, you worked at the CBC. You're a media person. You've worked with media. You've always worked with people all over the world. So you've worked remotely with people always. But it's a little

different when you're locked into your house and you're having to work remotely with people. And that's the only option you have. How is that? How are you finding that?

[00:06:27] I'm finding so far so good because I've always worked for like national organizations. And yes, you said worked with people right across the country and right across the world. It's just always been a big part of my day. Being on, you know, Skype at the time or conference calls before that, you know, for sure having the human contact with the people that you work most closely with. Is it's different. It's strange, but at least for me, I feel like I've I've slipped into it remarkably easy. And I guess because a significant number of my relationships were always kind of played out in that way. I haven't found it that hard. I'm loving Zoom, I must say. We did a industry webinar on Thursday with 360 people and I was so nervous it was going to collapse and it worked beautifully. So, so far for me at least, that hasn't been the strangest thing that I felt. OK.

[00:07:30] So that's sort of the kind of, you know, almost normal work. But what are you finding the weirdest or the hardest transition in terms of the shift? Is it just not being able to go out and see people or?

[00:07:42] Yeah. And I mean, you know, a hard and emotional one for me is my parents who are both in long term care.

Oh, I didn't think I was very emotional. And, you know, they're in lockdown in Ontario.

Normally, I would go I would go visit them quite frequently. Right. And they have a good quality of life there. There's a huge volunteer community and a lot of visitors and family who come in regularly. And, you know, for all the right and obvious reasons, that's not possible anymore. So they're in lockdown. And I feel lucky in that fortunately, they're both on the same floor.

[00:08:27] Up until very recently, my mom was on the first floor with Alzheimer's dementia residents and my dad was on the second floor for people who have more physical limitations. And just serendipitously, my mom got moved to the second floor with my dad about a week before all of this happened. And thank God, because if that didn't happen, he would not be able to visit her. We have someone that you know, that we pay twice a day. She's become a very close family friend to visit with my mom. My mom adores her and just misses her terribly. And there's so many people at that place like this one woman, Chris, she is there every single day with her husband, Bert. You know, who can no longer communicate and is in the chair. But, you know, he communicates by squeezing her hand and with his eyes. And, you know, I think of poor Bert and Chris isn't there. And there's no way that he can understand why she is there. And that's just heartbreaking.

[00:09:25 Robert] Yeah. Yeah. You know, my parents are also in the same situation in Manitoba. And fortunately, they're together and there's no movement in and out of those facilities at all. So they're they're locked down into their facility. And that exchange of, you know, visitors just doesn't happen. But as you say, in a way, you know, they're also probably in the safest environment that is possible at the moment, except maybe in your house.

[00:09:50 Michelle] Oh, for sure. And I think maybe it's. I mean, in their case, their needs are so elevated that we wouldn't be able to do for them all the things that need. Be done, so that's not even an option. What I do worry about and I've heard this from other people as well, is, you know, we all know and I'm I'm sure it's it's the case with your folks as well.

Is all of those places across the country, they're staffed by such a wonderful and caring people, or at least that's the case in the facility, which, again, thank God it's not for profit and not private, but they're understaffed.

They're understaffed because they don't get enough support from government. So on my mum's floor, which is, you know, it's Alzheimer's, dementia patients who have very high needs and they only have two personal service workers to, you know, to attend to the needs of people on that entire floor. They depend so much on the family and the volunteers. And it's my understanding that they haven't increased the staffing. So I really worry about those people getting burned, their immune systems being compromised, them getting sick. They need more support. Like if they don't have a family and volunteer support, they can't be expected to do it on their own.

[00:11:07 Robert] Yeah. And you know, and it's right across the country, these these folks just, you know, jumping in and doing this hard work on behalf of all of us

Normally also, I don't know, maybe not in your new job, but normally you would be also going to festivals and all these kind of events that are part of the film industry. So it's that sort of. All right. Off the table now for you.

[00:11:28 Michelle] Everything is. Yeah, off the table. I mean, Hot Docs is a huge event on the annual calendar. It's the world's second largest documentary film festival, the largest in North America takes place at the end of April, spilling into early May. And that kind of feels like an eternity ago, I guess. That was two, two weeks ago to the day that that was canceled and everything is canceled for the foreseeable future in the industry I work in. You know, documentary shooting with people, that's off the table. Everything is ground to a halt. Like, it's just absolutely surreal. The things that are normally part of everyone's day and calendar are no longer possible.

[00:12:18 Robert] And the organization you work for really is also it's an advocate for documentary filmmakers. It's the voice of documentary producers in Canada. I guess when you're when you are kind of back at work in whatever form that is, that's going to be, I guess number one job is going to be figuring out what how the industry recovers from this.

[00:12:41 Michelle] Oh, for sure. And I mean, I'm working full time now and it's been full on. It's just in a crazy context in which to start in a job, because there's been none of that. You know, kind of little level little bubble you get for a week to figure things out.

like an immediately organization thrown into crisis. I won't get into the details, but some of our financing operational financing has been compromised by coded an entire membership like we represent seven hundred directors and producers and some craftspeople across the country whose livelihood has been thrown into serious jeopardy like documentarians are a precarious crowd at anytime, right? It's not the lucrative side of the screen sector. People make documentaries not for money. They make them for love because they're, you know, committed and have stories they want to tell and think they can make a difference in this world. But it's very, very precarious work always. Right. And now this So people have been totally undercut. People you know, cinematographers, sound people who've had their, you know, their year kind of mapped out for them. All of a sudden, they have no work. Production companies, their projects have been ground to a halt. So what's going to happen? Are they still going to get, you know, kind of draw downs on payments? How do they shift? What are the cash flow scenarios they should be

planning for? Is there insurance coverage for things that have been canceled like everyone has been thrown into a major crisis all at once?

[00:14:23 Robert] Yeah. And the other thing that magnifies that is that it's not just this sector, it's every sector that's facing all of the same questions. Right. So now you've got, you know, everybody trying to figure these things out.

[00:14:34 Michelle] Yeah, no, exactly. 100 percent. And, you know, my fear is a lot of people, independent arts workers, they you know, they they do this for for love. They don't do it for money. And it's really precarious. And for some, this is going to be, you know, the straw that breaks the camel's back and they might not be able to come back. So that's a major preoccupation. For me, professionally and also personally, I like how how do we make sure that people are able to come back from this and weather this storm?

Well, you know, otherwise in our creative communities, we're going to lose a lot of talent.

[00:15:11 Robert] Yeah. I mean, you know, I guess I would say, having known you, that at least if we have someone who's at the forefront of trying to figure out how to do that, it's great that you're there in that job, because if anybody can do it, you can do it.

[Michelle] Thank you.

[Robert] Now, I'm just curious as a as a creative person. I mean, I know in this job you're the executive director of the organization so you're not making films and stuff. But, you know, you, anybody who's interested in documentaries should watch a film that you made. It's called Capturing Reality and it's about making documentaries. So I'm saying that as context - as a creative person, does this thing we're going through now, does it spark ideas for you of films or documentaries that you think would be really interesting to make now that we're in the middle of us, assuming we can make them?

[00:15:58 Michelle] That's an interesting question. Of course, in the in the doc community, a lot of people are saying, so when this is all over, is there going to be a big demand, you know, for things that are reflecting on life under COVID, or is everyone going to be so fed up, want to move on to other things?

But I think for me, like the ideas that are sparking for me and I'd love to see these given different creative treatments in writing, in books and in music performance. And I think it's happening already is I think I don't want to sound corny, but I feel like this is like a message from the planet saying, "Hey, humanity, wake up".

The way you are living is not sustainable. You know, like you live in an ecosystem. You do not live above that ecosystem. And a world that is premised on people and goods traveling back and forth constantly and an economic system that is just here on pumping, pumping, pumping more out of this poor little planet is not sustainable.

And that's why, you know, these kinds of new viruses like COVID-19 are able to come about and then propagate and spread so quickly. Like, as he said, science fiction, the whole world is locked down. 7 billion people like this is just crazy. It's unthinkable. And the other thing that makes me think about is, you know, like sometimes people are like our health system is underfunded. Like I would say, you know, the nurses or the PSW in long term care or education is underfunded. And then we hear, well, we just can't afford it, you know. And when we look at the economic measures that have been put into place globally

the past couple of weeks, well, we can afford it. It's about choice. Yet for some reason, we haven't been making the choices that support people. So let's think about that and think about what kind of world we want and what kind of world we want to come back to. And let's not come back to exactly the same one we left a couple of weeks ago. And I'd love to see all kinds of artistic, you know, interpretations of those sorts of ideas.

[MUSIC UP, THEN DOWN FOR...]

[00:18:10 Robert] I'm going to wrap up in a sec, but I just wanted to. So you have your cat. So you've got cats must love this. There's people home all the time. Is people to do stuff for them?

[00:18:19 Michelle] Totally. Yeah. They are just like so happy. They're all over us. And our cats love people. So they're just. Guess they couldn't be happier. And they're endlessly entertaining and they take all of our stress levels down. We watch them and see how they are and how they come from laugh to laugh. Life is in quarantine is definitely better with Cat.

[00:18:41 Robert] Okay, now can I ask you what happened with her dog?

[00:18:44 Michelle] So fortunately, a friend of mine has been really good with animals, was able to come and stay at her place and take care of the dog. And it works better for him also because people in Brazil are starting to move into self-isolation and his house is a bit overcrowded. So it just works better for everyone that now he has a place to stay and the dog has someone in her own environment with him. And he really likes animals. And it's better for him and his family. So it's all working out for the best.

[00:19:20 Robert] Nice. Well, that's. Yeah, OK. Well, that's fantastic. Michelle, thank you so much. And I hope you and your family and your cats, you've got another bit of time to go, and I hope that you manage that. Okay. And then, you know, we'll see. You may still be in your house after that. You may not be going anywhere. It's hard to know exactly.

[00:19:35] It is hard to know. And then same to you, Robert. Take care. And it's been great talking with you.

[00:19:41 Robert] Michelle Van Beusekom, in Montreal.

[Music up, then down for...]

[00:19:47] For some links to resources and some photos, including Michelle's two cats, please visit the Web site. And if you or someone you know is in self-isolation and happy to share that story, you can get in touch with me on the Web site. There's a form there you can fill out and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

That's on the Web site at www.podcasthouse.ca/yellowjack

I'm Robert. We met. Thanks for listening.