

Honouring the environmental,
professional

forever connected

and personal impact of
Tracey Friesen

Photography by Jan Vozenilek





“Right from the minute that we connected, all we talked about was what was possible. **Not what made it impossible, but what was possible.** Not ‘No, this can’t be done,’ but ‘Here’s how it can be done.’”

In January 2025, we were heartbroken to lose Tracey Friesen, an industry luminary, sustainability advocate and beloved friend. The managing president of the CMPA’s BC branch since 2020, Tracey embodied commitment to social and environmental justice. She also embodied optimism. Her belief in the power of connection—and her extraordinary gift for collaboration—directly and indirectly set in motion countless initiatives for good within Canada’s screen industry.

We recently gathered some of her industry co-collaborators, colleagues and admirers (with Tracey, none of these categories were mutually exclusive) to reflect on how Tracey’s friendship, guidance and shining example continue to propel their own work forward.

How did each of you meet Tracey?

Liz Shorten: I met Tracey probably 25 years ago, when I was at BC Film and she was working for Rainmaker, which was a post-production facility at the time. I remember meeting her at an industry meeting, and just going, “Who is this woman? She’s amazing.” At her request, I later became the first board chair of her charity, Story Money Impact (see page 50). I couldn’t say no to Tracey.

Elisa Suppa: I met Tracey just a few years back, when Telefilm really started to engage on the priority of sustainability,

through [former CMPA and Canada Media Fund executive and current Bell Fund executive director] Marcia Douglas. Very soon after meeting—on Tracey’s impetus—we started finding ways to work together. And she really was quite a dynamic force who incited action in a very constructive way.

Anne-Valérie Tremblay: I met Tracey at the beginning of 2024, because I’m also in charge of sustainability initiatives at the AQPM. Tracey reached out to me so I could share what we were doing here in Quebec. But instantly there was a connection. She’s so nice and so open, and she wanted to see if we could work together to amplify our efforts. Immediately, she felt to me like a people person who knew how to make things happen. She was so good at unifying people.

Lisa Clarkson: I met Tracey, I believe, at Prime Time [CMPA’s yearly media conference] in 2022. It was Liz who said to me, “You need to meet Tracey Friesen.” And we immediately connected. We sat at one of those round tables in the hall and compared notes. And we agreed that the CMPA would partner with the CBC around a green storytelling workshop-type thing. That was in February. We launched the workshops in April. They happened in June. I’d say the truest aspect of Tracey was that she was exceptional at action through connection.

Marsha Newbery: I think I must have met Tracey in the early 2000s, when I was starting out as a baby producer and she was at the NFB. I had a couple of small projects with the NFB, and then it was just one of those things: you’re in the community, you see each other all the time. But I really got to know her when I worked at the CMPA and she came on. I worked very closely with her for two or three years at the CMPA. We continued working together, specifically on sustainability, when I took on a sustainability job at Thunderbird and then launched Producing for the Planet.

Liz, you were Tracey’s supervisor at the CMPA. How did she shape sustainability initiatives there?

Liz Shorten: Tracey was the perfect person for this file, because of her passion and her experience. As folks have already said, Tracey was a connector. She also was somebody who believed in action, and she did that through collaboration. And amazing things happened over the course of a couple of years because she just took charge.

A number of years ago, the CMPA board of directors decided to create a sustainability and climate action committee. This was big. It signalled that the board was going to make sustainability a priority. And it became Tracey’s thing. Each CMPA committee has a staff lead, and Tracey was that staff lead. And the work of the committee, the budget, everything—it was her creation. And the committee has supported all of the CMPA’s work to date on the climate file.

The rest of you, how did Tracey inspire the sustainability work you did within your respective organizations?

Lisa Clarkson: I will tell you: I’m old. And I have never encountered such a challenging initiative as sustainability in our industry. There is such a wide variety of attitudes and approaches, and sometimes resistance. It’s actually very, very, very hard to get things done.

How did Tracey inspire me? Right from the minute that we connected all we talked about was what was possible. Not what made it impossible, but what was possible. All of her work—green storytelling, innovative work on environmental sustainability, costing—all was done with a possibilist perspective. Not “No, this can’t be done,” but “Here’s how it can be done.”

In this work, there are so many people who are so ready to say no. But so many projects—whether or not she was involved in them directly—she just made me think that they were possible. And I’m sure that was part of the reason I thought that I could pull off Canadian Broadcasters for Sustainability [a coalition of broadcasters committed to sustainable change] and start Green Frame [a coalition of Crown corporations, federally funded organizations and CRTC-mandated funds committed to increasing sustainability in the industry]. She gave me the confidence to say, “Well, maybe collaboration will work.”

Marsha Newbery: When I was at the CMPA, we were just coming out of COVID, we were having heat domes and wild-fire season in Vancouver, and I said to her, “I really want to get more into sustainability.” And she supported me taking some training, and she championed me to get into sustainability even more. I don’t think I would even be on this path without her support. That was a good boss moment.

And she was also the first person I called when I was thinking about setting up Producing for the Planet [a non-profit that formalizes independent Canadian producers’ commitments to climate action]. I asked her, “What do you think of this crazy idea?” And I’m not going to lie, she asked some very challenging questions. But it was all to make sure there was a real chance of success. I knew she would tell me it was crazy, and then we would work it out, and she would have my back. That was my experience of her.



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A lasting impact

Over her decades-long career, Tracey Friesen performed many different roles, from executive producer at the NFB to director of communications and engagement at the David Suzuki Foundation. But a role she particularly cherished was founder of Story Money Impact (SMI), a non-profit that assists documentary filmmakers in their efforts to spark social and environmental change through their films. This organization carried on the work Tracey began in her 2016 book *Story Money Impact: Funding Media for Social Change*. Following Tracey's passing, SMI announced the creation of the Tracey Friesen Impact Fund, which will provide financial support to social and environmental justice projects and their makers. Such a fund had long been a dream of Tracey's, and will be an enduring testament to her belief in storytelling's power. To learn more and to donate to the fund, please visit storymoneyimpact.com.

Anne-Valérie Tremblay: I remember, after one of the conversations that we had, I realized that Tracey was not only in charge of sustainability, like I was: in her case, her whole person was about sustainability. And I thought, "Well, Anne-Valérie, now you have to step up, because Tracey is not only in charge of sustainability, she's living it." She inspired me to embrace the values, because she embodied them.

Elisa Suppa: One small example of Tracey's influence: when Telefilm launched our sustainability budget template, as soon as Tracey got wind of it, she said, "How can we get it into the hands of our producers?" So she quickly organized and recorded these training sessions. She always wanted to get the information out to help other storytellers.

And what I saw in our meetings was that she raised the comfort level, even when there wasn't comfort to begin with. When she first started the "sirens meetings," as we eventually called them, I thought, "What's this going to be?" And then you realize that she was really creating—I think we all felt it—just a very safe space to say what we thought.

Can you share more about "the sirens"—the informal sustainability working group that Tracey created? What was her intention with that group?

Lisa Clarkson: It was all her. Initially, I was honestly skeptical about it. I thought, "Who needs another meeting? No, thanks." But I did it because it was Tracey, and she saw the possibility, so I wanted to see the possibility, too. She wanted to gather people that she believed to be influencers in the sustainability space, so that we could hack through some of those really difficult sustainability challenges and problem solve.

And I have to say it was massively effective to share

unvarnished thoughts and get unvarnished feedback. There are so few places in our industry to do that.

Elisa Suppa: At first when she called the group the sirens, I think we all laughed, because of the mythological connotations. But once I understood the vision she had, it made sense. It became clear that she was putting together a sort of tiny think tank—what she called "watchers for the future." Where do we need to go? How can we bring others along?

Anne-Valérie Tremblay: Yes, and "sirens" also has this double connotation, both of mythology and of sounding an alarm. And every time I would tell my colleagues, "I have a meeting with the sirens," they would start laughing. But it was such a good meeting!

What do you feel Tracey has left you with as you continue the fight? What of her legacy would you want others to carry with them?

Elisa Suppa: It's hard to think of just one thing to say. If producers or storytellers can do even one thing, any step, however small, is important. And eventually the tide will change. She made it clear that nothing was too small or too big.

Marsha Newbery: Working in sustainability can be very hard. And, near the end of our time together, Tracey expressed some of that hardness that she was feeling. And the last conversation I had with her, where she knew it was probably the last time we were going to be talking, she just said, "It doesn't matter how hard it is. You have to keep fighting. Just never give up. Never give up. Never give up."

And that is the piece of Tracey I carry with me every day. 🌱