

Conversation between Dana Moraes and Gabriela G3mez
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Photo of Dana Moraes

Gabriela – When did you first hear about the idea of a Haida film?

Dana – Well, this started actually in 2013, when we started talking about it as a community. It came from our Comprehensive Community Planning. The community had identified that they wanted to revitalize the Haida language – at the same time as protecting our land and waters – and the idea of the film was a solution to both, that we could highlight the beauty of Haida Gwaii, get some recognition and also revitalize our language. Working with Leonie Sandercock, she is a professor at SCARP – the School of Community and Regional Planning at University of British Columbia (UBC). We had two students doing a practicum with us, so we had quite a bit of interaction with Leonie. She had done some film work in the past, and she is the one that had brought the idea to us, and that’s how it all started.

Gabriela – How did you personally get involved in the making of the film?

Dana – Well...I had been very passionate about the project since the beginning – since the idea came forward. Being a community member I was able to connect people and start getting people talking about the partnerships and writing the proposals. And then I obviously wanted to continue and be part of the making of the film – since it had started with community planning – so I was just looking for any way I could be part of the project. Really the making of the film, or the pre-production stage of the film, is similar to the work I was doing with community planning. So Jonathan thought I would be a great fit as one of the production managers.

Gabriela – Were you working as a community planner in Skidegate for a long time?

Dana – Well...I started in January 2013 and had been working on the community plan for the last 5 years.

Gabriela – And that's where you met Leonie and Jon and started to get all these ideas for the film?

Dana – Correct. So Jonathan had been a student at SCARP, one of Leonie's students. He was also making films for some of his community planning projects, and that's how it got started.

Gabriela – And when you say you were writing proposals. That was for the film?

Dana – Correct. I was writing proposals with Jonathan for the funding for the film.

Gabriela – So you applied for more money than just from CMF. Do you remember what other proposals you did?

Dana – Well, we wrote proposals for Skills Link, but that one was not funded. We wrote proposals to a local funder called Gwaii Trust Society for the pre-production, actors training, set design, props and costume making and things like that.

Gabriela –What was the first thing that happened after this idea? After Leonie bringing this idea 'maybe we should make a film'. When you say you were making connections, what type of connections were you making?

Dana – Well I have a timeline in front of me. So I can run through the timeline with you.

Gabriela – Ok!

Dana – So in October of 2013, working with Leonie and Jonathan, we brought the idea of the film project forward to the Council of the Haida Nation (CHN). We did a presentation and received official approval from the Council of the Haida Nation. And then in November 2013, a month later – once we received a letter of support from the Council of the Haida Nation –

Leonie put together an application to Social Sciences and Humanities Funding Council (SSHRC), and we were successful in receiving this funding in 2014. That's where the equipment was purchased for the digital media project and the setup of the Haida digital project happened. Then we began the story gathering and script writing workshops in May of 2014.

Gabriela – How did that work? The story gathering?

Dana – Well... so we decided that since this was a community driven project – it came from the community – that we were going to continue the process and host community story gathering workshops in both communities, in the north [Old Massett] and the south end [Skidegate]. That's an important part that I forgot to mention, is that we realized that revitalizing the language and this project was bigger than just the community of Skidegate, and that we needed to expand it to all of the Haida Nation. And that's why we approached the Council of the Haida Nation about the project. So that encompasses the village of Skidegate as well as the village of Old Massett. And it went further to even include the dialect in Alaska.

Gabriela – This inclusion of the Alaska language was because at the end you couldn't work with Old Massett, right?

Dana – It was because Old Massett only had very limited fluent speakers that were able to work on the project. And we had amazing resources in Alaska with Delores Churchill who has family in Old Massett.

Gabriela – And the language that they speak in Old Massett is the same one as in Alaska?

Dana – It's similar. It's slightly different because it's a different territory. And I guess the language is slightly different.

Gabriela – But more similar than say Skidegate and Old Massett.

Dana – Correct.

Gabriela – And so you started to realize that you needed to do this. And then how did you all work on that? How do you organize it? Who participated? How did it happen?

Dana – One of the priorities was to ensure things happened equally between Skidegate and Old Massett. So we mirrored the workshops to happen in both locations and that's when Graham and Gwaii got involved, and a few other people that were helping to host the workshop in those communities. So we brought in workshops to teach about how to write a script, and we also had people come and share their stories. We then hosted a script writing contest, so people had the opportunity to learn about storytelling, to learn about script writing and share their information and then in the end we had a competition. I was also part of the judging panel who voted on the best scripts. We blindly rated the best scripts and based on those stories we chose our script writers.

Gabriela – How many did you receive?

Dana – Oh my goodness...there most have been at least 10. I can't remember...that was in 2014.

Gabriela – And they were written by men, women, old, young...?

Dana – Yes. We had all kinds of scripts brought to us. Yes, from elders, to young people, to men and women.

Gabriela – Who had all participated in this workshop? Were the people – I imagine the people that Leonie was working with –training in how to do a script. Right?

Dana – Correct.

Gabriela – And when you say Gwaii and Graham were hosting, what does that mean?

Dana – Well they were helping to put together the workshops. We also had help from Lucille Bell who was running the language program in Old Massett.

Gabriela – Because I understand that there are some protocols in Haida Gwaii, right? To do any kind of workshop or gathering. And that's why Graham and Gwaii were hosting these workshops?

Dana – Leonie was obviously at the center of it. She is the one with the most experience in script writing. So she was helping to facilitate the workshops but we needed to have local people in the community connect with the community members, you know to figure out the right times, the right location...you know, that type of thing.

Gabriela – And it was like... everyone was sitting in a circle, or as a classroom... and everyone talked when they felt like it? Or how did it work?

Dana – Correct. It was hosted... very similar to community planning meetings.

Gabriela – How is that?

Dana – [Laughs] Well basically where people sit around together and talk. Whether they are working individually in small groups or in large groups.

Gabriela – And this lasted for a long time? Was it several days in the week? Or one day a week for months?

Dana – Yeah, it happened over several months.

Gabriela – Then the competition happened and then you had to translate that script, right?

Dana – So we formed a script writing team in November of 2014. And then April 2015 is when the team completed the script and it was approved by our cultural advisors – some of our elders from both communities approved the script – and then that’s when it went for translation. In May of 2015 is when the Canada Media Fund (CMF) application went in – Jonathan was the one who put that in – and we were approved for 1.8 million dollars with a contribution of \$200,000 from the CHN in that amount. And then we received word in August of 2015 that we had been approved and started pre-production in February of 2016 with the co-directors being hired. I believe I was involved in the project at that point, and they were trying to figure out where I would best fit in the production team. And I think I was officially hired in May of 2016 and we began casting in June and July.

Gabriela – Were you part of the translation work?

Dana – I was involved in the south end [Skidegate] of the translation work in working with Skidegate Haida Immersion Program (SHIP).

Gabriela – And how did that happen?

Dana – The script was brought to SHIP and they began working through it. And I think they might have gone through 2 or 3 drafts before they finalized it. They were translating the words, figuring out the meaning behind the scenes – to make sure that they got the words right – and then also providing audio recordings of the elders pronouncing the words on that script.

Gabriela – And you were part of those meetings? You were sitting there with the elders?

Dana – No. I’m more of a back and forth liason, just to see how things are going and what needed to happen next kind of thing.

Gabriela – So the elders sit down and between themselves they were speaking in Haida. Or they mix both?

Dana – Well I say it’s both. They do a lot of work speaking in the language. But I think that a lot of these things that were in the script, would be things that weren’t necessarily talked about, or not part of our daily conversation, so it would either remind elders of how things were done in the past, or set in the past – to make sure they were talking about it the right way. And on the other side of it, some parts may be not what they would consider to be traditional Haida, and they had to figure out a way of saying it properly.

Gabriela – And who was there to explain to them what the meaning was behind the scene?

Dana – I believe a lot of it would be Gwaii and Graham. Cause they are the ones who wrote the script.

Gabriela – Gwaii and Graham?

Dana – Yes.

Gabriela – Oh I thought it was Gwaii and Jaleen, his brother.

Dana – So Gwaii and Jaleen had submitted a script together. And Graham had submitted a script on his own. So they decided to use those people together to write the script. So yes it was Gwaii and Jaleen and Graham.

Gabriela – They basically mixed both ideas in one script?

Dana – Well no, they all worked with Leonie to write a new script.

Gabriela – Ok.

Dana – So to get back on track with the timeline. So we started our casting in June-July 2016 in both communities. I was involved in that, learning how to operate the camera, while Gwaii and Helen interviewed the cast, as well as collecting information on the cast. And my co-worker was Patricia Moore – she was helping to do that as well – and before that it was Valine Crist. And then, casting continued as the director decided on their final cast into the fall.

Gabriela – Why were you interviewing the cast?

Dana – Well, we wanted to make sure we had contact information if they had any previous acting experience. Their dates of availability for the filming – all of that kind of stuff.

Gabriela – You did that on video? You were recording them?

Dana – Yes, so we did paper work and phone calls where we collected that information from them, and then we video-ed all of the casting calls. And then we uploaded them to the google drive where the directors could constantly review the footage.

Gabriela – Oh I see. So they were looking into how much they resembled the characters in the script... and why this person would work better than the other. It was not a traditional casting because they were not acting, but they were just telling more about their lives?

Dana – Correct. But they were reading the script. So with the actors we had sent them a paper copy of what they would be reading, and also sent them an audio recording so that they could practice it.

Gabriela – The ones the elders did? In this Mp3 application that was developed, right?

Dana – Correct. So each of the actors had been given some homework to come prepared to the auditions with that homework.

Gabriela – And did you have a lot of people auditioning for the film?

Dana – I would say we had a fair number from both communities. One of the things that the directors wanted to do was to see how well the actors could learn their lines. So it wasn't so much about how well do you speak Haida. Our goal was really how quickly could these people learn their lines. Because they had a lot of lines that they needed to learn, and we knew that the majority of the actors were not going to be Haida speakers.

Gabriela – And you had been involved in the language revitalization for a very long time. How did you feel when you were looking at all these people trying to speak Haida?

Dana – Well I've always been passionate about the project, and I've always had hope that the project would be successful, but in the beginning seeing people stumble over trying to speak Haida...it was very overwhelming to think that people would get as far as they did, when they first started.

Gabriela – Yes, it's quite an achievement. Well, I'll let you go through your timeline.

Dana – Yeah ok, so the cast was hired and we began our actors training in February of 2017. Oh, but we did have a group get-together, I believe it was in October - November of 2016 where the cast all met each other at the Haida house at Tlaal. In February to April 2017 we started our actors' training, and that involved a two-week Haida immersion camp at Hiellen, where all 3 dialects came together and we were able to learn Haida in all three dialects, as well as go through all of our scenes. The actors worked really hard to learn their lines. They slept, ate and lived together for 2 weeks. And then following that, we had an actors' training where we had some professional acting workshops. And those were held at the Haida Heritage center.

Gabriela – They were taught by Cowboy Smith. Right?

Dana – Correct. Cowboy and then there was another coach that came and taught us about voice training, Trish Allen.

Gabriela – Did the people know each other? How big is the Haida community? They had seen each other before at least?

Dana – No, there were definitely people that had never met each other before. And we had people coming from Alaska as well. So.... then our production happened from May 2017 into July and the post-production began after that. And in April of 2017 we received another grant from SSHRC to work on a four-year project to look at the effect of the film, and evaluate the

film. What kind of effects has it had in our community? What kind of effects has it had on the industry of film? How has it affected people with the language? Or, how many people are inspired to learn the language from watching the film?

Gabriela – Yes... this is by Leonie, right?

Dana – Yes.

Gabriela – Going back to the actors' training. This is like the first time people are meeting. And they are camping for 2 weeks, so it's super intense for everyone. And there are elders, children.... How does it work during the day? Do people get divided into groups? Is it more like everybody working at the same time? Do elders gather one on one?

Dana – Well we had a lot of things going on. We began with group activities where we would start the day with prayer, in Haida, in both dialects. We would do some interactive activities with language. So, we had Erica Gagne– who has been studying to the Haida language through UNBC to be an instructor – she hosted some activities she does while she works with kids. And then we had Ben Young from Hydaburg (Alaska) and he teaches the language as well and so he did some games together with Linda. So we had a lot of in-house experts that made it fun to learn the language. Then, we would break down into groups and work on themes. And we also had one-on-one help with an elder or language support person being assigned to a specific actor in that dialect to help them with their lines. So there was a lot of support.

Gabriela – And what was your personal involvement there? Were you part of these groups or were you organizing the logistics around it?

Dana – I was mostly organizing with Patricia Moore who runs Hiellen, and she was the production manager of the north end [Old Massett], she coordinated most of that language camp. But I was able to go and run it from time to time, keep people on track, I also facilitated some of the group sessions. But I think one of the interesting things... The two things I can think of about the language camp was...well I say three things...One is that it really helped prepare the actors for camping on set. Because it was a first experience for people to live together, and work together and sort of live remotely like that. Number two is that...it was very...almost frustrating, because people did not know their lines, and they weren't speaking the language very well. So it seemed like it was going to be a very huge task to accomplish, and how realistic is this going to come across on film – that was one of our concerns. But by the second week to see the improvement in the actors and their language, it was phenomenal. And the last thing was that a lot of the elders who had been seeing the language decline, and seeing the affluent speakers pass away and, not enough new people – young or new learners – trying to learn the language, they had given up hope for the language and they thought it was going to be lost. And when we hosted the immersion camp and brought 3 dialects together and heard 3 dialects spoken at the same time, it really gave them hope again.

Gabriela – Wow. You give me goose bumps. It's very powerful the work that you all did. Had there been any previous experience of professional filmmaking in Haida Gwaii?

Dana – There are people here and there that are more like self-taught people, and there are some people that have gone to school, but never really put it to work. There are so many people that come to Haida Gwaii and film, and our people just aren't being paid as actors or part of the production team. So I think it's fantastic that we can provide this opportunity for people, and now when people come to Haida Gwaii, we can say 'Well here is our team, how can we partner with you to do this?'

Gabriela – Were there a lot of jobs created with this Haida film?

Dana – There were. I don't have the numbers at the moment, but I should put those together with how many people were hired.

Gabriela – But it was people making the costumes, the set design... I mean, one of the interesting things of making a film is that it produces more jobs, right?

Dana – Correct. That was one of our main goals. It was to create an economy on Haida Gwaii.

Gabriela – And you achieved it.

Dana – Yes. And there are quite a few actors now that are continuing to act. I can think of a few right now, we have Marika Gladstone – she was flown to Alberta last month to be in her own show, or part of another show. We also had Sphenia Jones who played one of the southern Nanaays, and she was flown down to Vancouver to be in a series for a month or so, and a few other people I know that have been actively applying, going for those casting calls.

Gabriela – What was the biggest challenge that you all faced?

Dana – Well I would say there are two. Number one is having that many people learn Haida and be able to speak it as though they are fluent. Number two, is the weather – cause it never really cooperated with us. [Laughs]

Gabriela – [Laughs] It rained, it was cold? What?

Dana – It rained, it was windy. We had to deal with the tide as well...so trying to make sure that the weather was right and that the tide was right for each shot. But there were also magical moments when the weather did cooperate with us. I believe there was a scene where the wind was actually written into the script as a character, but we weren't sure how we were going to pull that across, and we had gone to another location and that day – of all days – there was no wind at all. And when – I believe Gwaii was calling the shots – when Gwaii had called action, all of the sudden, the wind picked up and it blew through the forest and when he yelled 'Cut!', the wind stopped.

Gabriela – Oh my God! I have goose bumps again! Wow! What did everybody say to that?

Dana – It was amazing! There were so many moments like that where we just knew that there was magic in this film, and it was going to come across on film. We were getting help from our ancestors to make this film happen.

Gabriela – Wow... that's very beautiful. And the weather was tough as well because you all were camping...

Dana – Correct...but then there were these beautiful sunny days where it was too sunny and scenes didn't have the sun in it.

Gabriela – [Laughs] Is camping usual in Haida Gwaii?

Dana – All year long.

Gabriela – But was it new for them to live with other people, strangers, people that were not their families?

Dana – Correct.

Gabriela – Was there any interaction with the rest of the community and the people working in the film? What were people in the community saying about it?

Dana – Well...I think, specially with the village of Yaan is that a lot of people did want to come and check it out, and they did want to come to the set. But at the same time we wanted our set to be reasonably closed so that not too many people would see what was going on. So there were a few people that came to the set to check it out, but not very many.

Gabriela – But then in town, were people talking about it?

Dana – Yes, everyone has been talking about it. Everyone is still asking 'When is the premiere? When does Haida Gwaii get a private showing?'

Gabriela – Did they get any kind of preview? Do they know what the story is about?

Dana – No, not really, A few people are getting little bits on our Facebook page. Little tiny highlights and that's it.

Gabriela – What was your personal motivation to participate in this film?

Dana – Hmm... I don't know... I think I tried to do some acting when I was younger. So I already had a little bit of an interest in film and acting. But I think it was more about that it was such a big project and that I knew we could do it.

Gabriela – It was more like your community planner side wanting to see a big project made by the community?

Dana – Yes! And a project that could be done by both communities. In partnership with Skidegate and Old Massett and people from Alaska.

Gabriela – How did that work? Was that very challenging?

Dana – I think it was definitely very challenging!

Gabriela – I imagine! Are there tensions between the communities of Skidegate and Old Massett?

Dana – I'd say yes, as there has been long standing tensions. But I forgot to talk about how inspired we were by Zacharias and Norman.

Gabriela – Tell me about that.

Dana – Well for them to come and share their stories and their experience with us, was amazing! And Zacharias you know, when he was visiting with us, he was very quiet and very pensive, but he was taking everything in. And then, before he left – he made some great relationships too, with some of the elders and people from the community – but before he left, he shared some wisdom with our band council and with the Council of the Haida Nation. And I think hearing what he had to say, and what Norman had to say, really is what put the faith in our organizations that we could do it.

Gabriela – Wow... I understand that Zach went out hunting and showed how to hunt a seal. And went deer hunting...being basically on the land with some of the people from the community – because that's mostly how he relates. And that Norman was more in his role of intense talkative moments with a lot of people like Helen and some other people, basically sharing verbally the knowledge. Right?

Dana – Yes. I'd say that Norman was helping with you know... the movers and shakers – the people in the community that get things done – who know how to go about putting the project together, where to get the funding from, how to keep pushing things forward. Zacharias was more on the cultural side and what it means to our elders and people.

Gabriela – Which group were you part of? You were more on the shakers I imagine.

Dana – I'm definitely on the shakers side.

Gabriela – [laughs] What do you remember about what Norman said? That stuck with you?

Dana – Well I think just showing you what kind of partners you need to make a project happen. That you need those components and those passionate people.

Gabriela – Did you guys watch any of the films that Isuma has made?

Dana – Yes, we did! And actually that's one of the things that we did when we were doing our actors' training. Is that we watched those films and the actors were able to get an idea about what the product was going to look like. As well as when we were doing some of our scenes, it really helped them understand why we were doing the scenes the way we were doing them. Because we tried to put in some – I say we, but it was Helen and Gwaai and Jon – try to put some nods in for some of that filming style and things that happened in those movies.

Gabriela – Do you think with what you learned you would be capable – or interested – in bringing that knowledge transfer to another community?

Dana – Definitely! And I do this already with my community planning work. I do Nation to Nation mentoring and that's one of my most important things about my job, is that I want to provide those type of opportunities to other Nations, at no cost to those Nations – that transfer of knowledge. We live in a world where so many consultants are paid this high-end money where they go into remote communities and run a project, but they don't leave anything behind, they don't transfer that knowledge or build that capacity. And that's what I want to do.

Gabriela – Beautiful! Do you see yourself doing that anywhere? Not only around your community? But maybe in other countries?

Dana – That would be amazing! With the work that I've been doing now, I've been invited to the Yukon, I've been invited to Thunder Bay in Northern Ontario, I was just in PEI, so I've been doing lots of traveling to do that. But I would definitely love international. That would be fun. And I always talk about the film, as an output from our community planning, and I'm looking forward to showing the film in all of these other communities and talking about how we did it.

Gabriela – Maybe you should be talking to Sam and Norman about how to distribute this film, because some of the films that we have done we have seen that when you generate activities around the screenings is when it becomes much more interesting. Organizing screenings in different communities, in different venues, in different schools. Not only going through the normal distribution system. And that would be really great because you are already doing it and because the objective of this film is to revitalize language and showing the community working together for a common purpose. And that's what your specialty is. So it would be interesting that when they start talking about distribution you are part of those conversations.

Dana – So I am working with Jonathan right now on the distribution plan and trying to get funding for that.

Gabriela – Fantastic! On that note, were there any community initiatives that were strengthened within the film?

Dana – Ah...well I think we've always had SHIP (The Skidegate Haida Immersion Program) as one of our resources, and the partnership with SHIP – the film could not have happened without it. At the same time the work that was happening in Old Massett – even though they didn't have a solid organization – just creating those relationships with those elders, and those people that do speak the language. Even the young people... there are a lot of young people that have been learning Haida in Old Massett, that came to our immersion camp to support the language – so having those people there was great too. I definitely think all of those people that are passionate about language, to be able to come together, was one of the really good things that happened.

Gabriela – Fantastic Dana! Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Dana – Hmm...I think that's it. I'm just glad that I was able to be part of the project from its inception with the community to the distribution of the film.

Gabriela – I think you were a very big part of that project. I think the film was lucky to have you.

Dana – And our partnership with you as well.

Gabriela – [Laughs]

Dana – Right, no one has been talking about that [the digital media component of the film], but I'm hoping there would be more of that.

Gabriela – I think we've faced a lot of challenges. It's also very difficult to coordinate something when you are not in town. And there have been many people involved. At the beginning Sam and Malcom brought that [the IsumaTV Integrated Media System (IMS)] into town, then me taking over, and then Gillian taking over. The technology has shifted [there are new internet possibilities in Haida Gwaii]. But I think once we have more content on the website, then it's going to become more important, like how to distribute this [the film, the experience behind it and the revitalizing of the language and culture].

Dana – Yeah.

Gabriela – That's when the DM is going to start to become useful. At least in Old Massett [Old Massett has CableTV and a community channel to which the IsumaTV Mediaplayer can be connected and broadcast the videos uploaded to the website through television].

Dana – And they have just made an announcement that they will put a fiber optic transmission line all along the coast of BC into Haida Gwaii. I think it's like a 60-million-dollar project.

Gabriela – That's fantastic. Because people are going to be watching the film, and the DM is where they can know more about it. Where they can get immersed in the film, see what happened before and then after, the photos, the interviews, the language.

Dana – The sharing platform. Like you can do it yourself too and here is what we have done.

Gabriela – Yes. The whole purpose of IsumaTV and the DMs is to provide a platform where people can continue to contribute. Where it doesn't end with the film. But actually the film starts a whole process of sharing and revitalizing language and culture. We have achieved that with other communities, but it has obviously taken many years to do that. And I have gone to some of these communities. In the Haida project I just haven't been able – because of personal reasons...I was very sick last year. That also didn't help. Anyways...

Dana – And we still need to get you to Haida Gwaii, so you can connect with the land.

Gabriela – Yeah. I really want to.