



Landscape Ontario Podcast

Accident on purpose:

When fate makes you a force to be reckoned with

Host: Karina Sinclair

Guest: Michelle Francis

Transcription

INTRO:

Karina: Welcome to the Landscape Ontario Podcast, I'm your host, Karina Sinclair. Have you ever met someone with a giant heart and the boundless energy to tackle anything life throws at them? That's today's guest, Michelle Francis.

Michelle reached out to share a story about her late uncle, Ivan Francis, a former member of Landscape Ontario. I'll bring you his story another time, because as I got to know Michelle, I realized her own story is just as compelling.

Michelle is a true powerhouse. She is a first generation Canadian of Caribbean and African descent, a CEO, certified HR professional, entrepreneur, professor, conflict mediator, public speaker, foster parent, youth mentor, amateur athlete and passionate community volunteer. In 2020, she was named one of Canada's Top 100 Accomplished Black Women, recognized for her tireless advocacy for social justice, food security, housing and financial literacy. Her award-winning community gardens reflect her commitment to sustainability and nourishing her neighborhood.

Michelle is also a nature enthusiast with extensive outdoor education training through Outward Bound, where she's now a certified mentor and recently completed her training in Mental Health Wilderness First Aid. A graduate of Landscape Ontario's GROW program, she's found healing and purpose in working with nature — something she's eager to share with others.

Her story is one of grace, resilience and embracing life's challenges with an open heart. She acknowledges that *accidents have purpose*, and the healing she experienced while spending time in gardens and nature has compelled her to create opportunities for others to discover the transformative power of the outdoors.

The sound quality might sound a little different than usual because, true to form, Michelle was on the go when we recorded this conversation, gettin' stuff done and making the most of a sunny day in downtown Toronto.

Music transition

INTERVIEW:

Michelle: So I'm Michelle Leong Francis. I am a first-generation Canadian of Caribbean ancestry or cultural background, and currently the business that I do is pretty seasonal. Right now, I am knee-deep and elbows-deep into the gardening trades, horticulture, and supporting people to get their community gardens up and running, especially raised beds. A lot of my community members are older and are getting back into gardening.

During the colder months, my core industry is HR law, believe it or not. I know! One needs to balance the other! I find being in soil and in nature very therapeutic, especially given the heavier weight of the other side of my life.

Karina: So you're saying that the seasonal part you're doing isn't necessarily a volunteer thing but a service you're offering to people in your community to help them install, maintain, and learn about their community garden beds and raised garden beds?

Michelle: Yeah. The education piece was huge, especially over the last four years. But now I've realized that, as much as people are learning, it's overwhelming for them. Many have not purposefully been in the outdoor space or their own gardens, aside from, thankfully, some perennials that consistently come up and are pretty reliable.

Now, we're looking at growing food and complementary plants, which takes a lot of work. For the most part, people are time-restricted. We get pretty intense heat in the middle of the day, and the time people have to spend in their garden is limited by their 9-to-5 jobs. My volunteer work is really with the community garden piece. My active work involves helping young people learn how to build raised garden beds and then installing those beds in community members' homes for a fee. Most people want a combination of low-ground garden beds or raised beds, or just raised beds.

Karina: Tell me about your connection to Landscape Ontario.

Michelle: People often ask how I got connected with Landscape Ontario. To be honest, I have so many networks that are completely opposite of each other. More than likely, my outdoor education industry connections led me there. I think something came up on LinkedIn about Landscape Ontario.

For me, it was an opportunity to formalize something I was already involved in, had interest and knowledge in, and wanted to take to the next level.

Karina: And so you attended the Grow program during the COVID years?

Michelle: Yes.

Karina: Do you continue to engage in some of the training and learning opportunities offered by the association?

Michelle: They had a golf event in the west end of the city. I went to that, which was really intimidating, I must say, with people who have decades of tenure and legacy in the industry. These are folks with a family lineage in landscaping. And then there's me showing up at two really odd places—golf, which I don't play.

However, I learned so much about some of the opportunities and challenges people face in the industry. It was a good bird's-eye view of what to be aware of. I'd say it's a very welcoming

group. Not every day does a newbie come in and get embraced, but I was well-received and had a great time.

Karina: Well, I'm glad to hear that. Community is definitely one of the pillars of Landscape Ontario. It's about promoting the trade as a whole, with everyone in it being qualified and passionate about what they're doing.

We've talked about this before—all those various threads in your life that keep bringing you back to nature, the earth, soil, gardening, and the landscape. What are some of those threads that keep aligning for you?

Michelle: I remember sharing my earliest memory of being in my mother's backyard, finishing the last remnants of a navel orange, and thinking, with the seeds in my hand, "I think I should grow an orange tree." I had no understanding of hardiness zones or what would be required. It just seemed like I had everything—seeds, sun, and soil. I must have been around nine years old.

The curiosity of a young mind can take you many places. Another pivotal moment for me was a very eye-opening motor vehicle accident. As someone who's naturally active, not being able to do much was frustrating. But one thing I remember distinctly, and shared with many friends, was the daily ritual in the garden.

It became me versus my lack of mobility. Gardening gave me a sense of control. That year, I grew a really large garden, trying every seed I could get my hands on. I even grew corn for the first time. For me, it wasn't just about the crops. It was about seeing potential—in the plants and in myself as I recovered.

With my mobility impacted, I had to be mindful of where I went, how far I walked, and what I wore. But in the garden, there were no restrictions. I could start and stop as I needed. If I struggled to get up from the ground, no one was there to witness my strategic moves to get back on my feet.

I delved deeply into how being in nature—watching bees, slowing down—can be therapeutic. Slowing down isn't something you do in the corporate world. There's no such beast. I almost feel like the accident, I use the phrase, "the accident on purpose," because the purpose was to reconnect me with myself and teach me to slow down.

I'm a Virgo and a Type A personality. Sleep was something I'd heard of but didn't experience much. But at that point in my life, I was forced to move on slow motion and realize what's really important in my life. It became very clear to me at that moment.

Karina: It almost sounds like you don't believe that there are accidents. Do you feel like the universe put that in place for you to make that reconnection?

Michelle: You know, in the moment, it felt like the universe was punishing me. The accident was just—it was not even something that made sense. And so I couldn't even justify the accident to say, you know, it was either one horrific or, yeah, it was bound to happen. It was just a nonsensical experience.

But I do believe as I was moving through the process, it was on purpose. And the purpose was for me, one, to learn about advocacy. So it's interesting—we're speaking about plants and nature, and at this moment, everyone's on board. But at that time, no one was talking about plants. No one was interested in soil quality or testing their own soil.

Being kind to their soil and not putting pesticides in it. People were not thinking about spending time outdoors unless they were truly outdoors, like in camping environments or similar. But not enjoying their own space that they worked so hard for. And now, many people would say, "Right on, I'm right there." But my accident was in 2010, and back then, growing things, landscaping, soil quality, herbs, and anti-inflammatory foods were not on the radar.

So yes, I think I was given an opportunity to hone some intuitive and speculative knowledge into something very viable. I could be seen as a trusted source when guiding people on what products they could grow and in what environment—even in small spaces. Growing in nice weather is wonderful, winter is always perplexing. And when to start. I've learned so many

insightful tips and tools that, had I not gone through this experience, I would never have been aware of, to this finite degree.

Karina: Do you ever wonder why you?

Michelle: Yes. So I'll share just a little bit about the accident. It was 4:00 on a rainy day, sometime in September or October. I was not moving in a vehicle. I heard screeching from somewhere, and I couldn't imagine where it was coming from because it just didn't make sense to the environment.

No one was moving. Everyone was waiting. Then I looked up—which apparently you're not supposed to do in the rearview mirror—to see someone barreling at my vehicle. And that was the accident.

So, I had major back and spinal issues—unfortunately, at two opposite ends: my lower spine and the top of my spine. There was no relief. And that started the journey of me reconciling with a whole lot of things.

Being a very active person, I was now reduced to living in Birkenstocks for about three years. When I graduated to being able to sustain high heels, that was a celebration.

Another piece I mentioned to the other side of my life was in HR. I worked with people like me, and now I was on the receiving end. Understanding what it means when people say they're not well—I had empathy but never understood how important it is to have your health.

Now, soil and nature and having my hands on the ground—it's the building blocks for everyone's life. People maybe just don't know it. I would hate for people to have accidents to realize how important their outdoor space is to them, whether it's theirs or the community's.

Karina: We certainly don't wish that on everyone to have to reach that conclusion. But the fact that you've reconnected with the earth and gardening has actually led to some accolades, right? Tell me about some of the awards you've received because of your efforts reconnecting to gardening.

Michelle: When my children were small, maybe a little socially awkward like myself, one of my ways of helping them was to consistently order soil and seeds and have the kids in the community grow plants. That's how most of the people on my cul-de-sac started eating salads—because they were growing their own. There are a few humans who still eat greens!

In that regard, in my community, I've reconnected with growing a community garden and really enhanced my ability to grow food. I was recognized by my local city, the City of Pickering, which is quite well-known for its international sustainability status—now in its 12th year. I received an award for sustainability.

I also received an award for energy efficiency because of the way I grow, using a permaculture approach. I produce very little garbage that goes back into the community and landfills.

Additionally, I received two awards from the Canadian Health Food Association during COVID: one for being a change agent and another for cultural diversity because I grow foods from around the world.

At the start of COVID, I received a very prestigious award as one of the top 100 Black women entrepreneurs in Canada. That was exciting because I'm a Virgo—I keep my head down, get the work done, and move on to the next task.

It's humbling to know people are paying attention and heartwarming to know my city recognizes my contributions to food security, the health and well-being of the community, and engaging young people. Many young people don't know much about where their food comes from, even in a region like Durham, which is on the cusp of becoming a big city. Not everyone has the opportunity to interact with farms, animals, or gardens.

Karina: I love the idea that, in your 50s, your story is not done. You're still growing—in every sense of the word. You keep reinventing and finding ways to expand and continue. So now that you've accomplished all this, what's next? What does the future look like for you?

Michelle: A few of the activities I've had the opportunity to engage in include sitting on advisory boards and boards of directors. I sit on two hospital boards: the Ontario Health Teams for Durham Region and Scarborough, Toronto. One of my key focuses is ensuring that new health facilities incorporate community gardens and labyrinths in their renovations and constructions.

I've been extremely vocal, sometimes showing up at meetings where people don't expect me, to stress the importance of both. I present the case in a way that highlights the hospital's bottom line, particularly in terms of food security, showing how they can grow much of their own food rather than sourcing it elsewhere.

For example, Women's College Hospital is actively working to give patients a sense of ownership in their recovery. From personal experience, I've seen that even something as small as having a plant in a hospital room can make a difference. Patients will water it, try to get out of bed, and see their situation is not their finite future because now they're seeing a plant bloom and grow.

During Covid, my mother broke her leg twice and developed PTSD about falling. We placed a plant in her room to motivate her to get out of bed. I was worried that she would be completely wheelchair bound after being completely independent. It worked—it became a key part of her recovery, reminding her that life ebbs and flows.

Plants aren't just beautiful or something we control—they're a source of motivation, a reminder of cycles and resilience. They bring deep meaning to life. On a global scale, I hope we're back and realizing that.

They are, in a way, a "gateway drug" to more: chickens, rabbits, bees, and balance. And a natural rhythm of what we were meant to be as humans. I was once the typical person lost in the corporate grind—everything planned out, every detail perfect, with my leather attache case and day timer and iPhone. I did everything and yet still was in a nonsensical accident.

The preordainedness of this experience...the universe couldn't have given this opportunity to a better person.

In terms of what's next, I've become a lobbyist—an extension of my corporate side but today's world almost demands that if you want to have impactful conversations at the municipal level. So I can ask: If we're building affordable housing, are we also creating community gardens? Are our health care improvements including labyrinths and green spaces? Are we educating people about these benefits?

I'm now undeniable in my advocacy and my proof of concept. This works and it makes a difference. I'm stronger and very different from the person I was before the accident.

The corporate world does not allow this part of you to show much. But between the accident and Covid, I have become a force to be reckoned with.

Music transition

EXTRO:

Karina: This was not the first time I've brought you stories about the therapeutic effects of gardens, and it probably won't be the last. But what I think is really fascinating about Michelle's story is the concept of "accident on purpose." The painful injuries she sustained in her car accident made way for purpose, setting her down a path to advocate for more green spaces in her community to promote healing and well being.

If you'd like to connect with Michelle Francis, you can find her on LinkedIn, or through her consulting business website, TTGGROUP.co. I've got the links in the transcription and on this episode's webpage at landscapeontario.com/podcast. As always, I'd love to hear from you, so reach out with story ideas, suggestions for guests and other feedback. You can email me at podcast@landscapeontario.com.

Thanks again for listening. I've got some great interviews lined up to bring you different perspectives from across the landscape profession. Until next time, I'm Karina Sinclair for the Landscape Ontario Podcast.



Resources relevant to this episode

[Michelle Leong Francis on LinkedIn](#)

[TTGGROUP.co](#)

Landscape Ontario's [GROW training programs](#)

[Outward Bound](#)