

# LEADING BY EXAMPLE

By Carole Audet



Model Janika Grey wearing Hi-vis pants adorned with the words "Stop Killing Animals" by the brand Honest Whisper. | Photo by Majid Mehraban Photography



## HOW THE VEGAN FASHION SHOW IS OPENING HEARTS AND MINDS THROUGH CRUELTY-FREE FASHION.

THE VEGAN FASHION SHOW HAS ONE MAIN FOCUS: EDUCATION. ITS FOUNDER AND PRODUCER, VIKKI LENOLA, EDUCATES THE PUBLIC AND EVERYONE INVOLVED IN THE SHOW ITSELF, INCLUDING THE SELECTED DESIGNERS. FOR THAT REASON, SHE FEATURES DESIGNERS WHO AREN'T EXCLUSIVELY VEGAN BECAUSE SHE WANTS THEM TO LEARN ABOUT THE ANIMAL-FREE TEXTILES ON THE MARKET TODAY—AND THE INNOVATIONS ON THE HORIZON. THE INAUGURAL SHOW HELD IN TORONTO ONTARIO, ON OCTOBER 2ND RAISED \$6,105 FOR ANIMAL JUSTICE.



Vikki Lenola, Founder of The Vegan Fashion Show

Have you heard of “total ethics fashion”? It combines sustainable fashion—think slow and eco-friendly, with fair fashion where workers are paid a living wage, and vegan fashion—which we know means completely animal-free. Each of these individually may have a problematic aspect; for example, an item can be ethically made but include toxic ingredients or a garment using plant-based leather is made by people who are poorly paid. The Vegan Fashion Show brought attention to this.

Vikki Lenola made use of her experience and connections in the fashion industry to raise awareness about these issues while generating

a sizable donation for Animal Justice. The show has become her form of activism to share with others the reality of animal use in fashion, to showcase cruelty-free alternatives, and to start conversations about other animal rights issues.

What began as her senior year project while at the University of Waterloo in the environmental studies program, eventually resulted in a successful event showcasing what is possible in animal-free textiles and designs. For example, did you know that strawberry waste can be turned into a leather that replaces exotic skins because it resembles ostrich leather?

A long-time animal lover, it wasn't until she saw a PETA fur campaign that she made the connection. With anger over the suffering of animals in the fur industry fueling her, she educated herself about animal exploitation and did street-level activism while earning her degree.

Vikki has now been vegan for nearly seven years. While animals were the impetus for making the transition, she reveals that she feels and looks great—maybe even better than she did when she was younger, and that's saying a lot for this working model who has dozens of runway shows under her belt, including for celebrity designer Rocky Gathercole.





Producer Vikki Lenola modelling the Zoë MIDI handbag with handpainted elephant by the brand Amaré. Photo by Mark Wong.

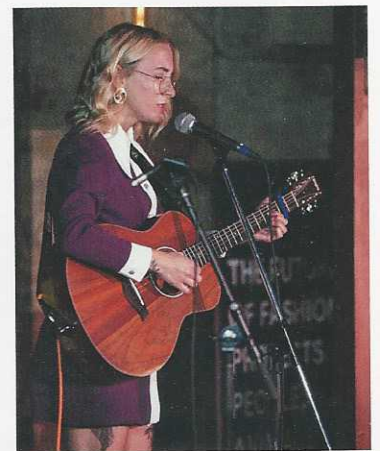
For someone who's gone on to launch some incredible projects and do high-level work, it's difficult to understand why she felt like a fraud during her university days. She had assumed that higher education wasn't in the cards for her. "It wasn't until I finished my degree that I felt I deserve to be here. Education means so much to me because it really empowered me." During the downtime due to the pandemic, she put her degree to use for a non-profit by writing content that outlines the connections between the environment, people and animals.

The theme for this year's fashion show was plant-based leathers, for example, made from apple, mango, corn, hemp, mushroom, and teak leaves. There are more innovative alternatives every year, and they are all produced with much less environmental impact than animal-based leather. Additionally, many don't use plastic.

The resources needed for one animal-leather handbag:

- 86 kilograms more CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions than synthetic leather
- 999 square metres more cleared land than Piñatex, a leather made from pineapple waste
- 164,650 per cent more water use than the cactus leather made by Desserto

*(Statistics provided by Collective Fashion Justice, who also made available an informational booklet for all attendees at the event.)*



Kirstin Corbett performing. Photo by David Fillon

"The show had a variety of local vendors and a beautiful display showcasing all of the alternatives to leather, which stood out to me. As someone who looks forward to purchasing a new leather Coach purse every year, I have changed my perspective and opinions on the luxury brands I am used to and will be paying more attention in the future concerning the companies I am supporting," says Kirstin Corbett, a musical guest who performed her original songs.

Future shows will highlight other alternative textiles to wool, silk, and feathers, then when they circle back to the start, there will be more innovations and designs to talk about and feature.



Host Angela Bell wearing a jumpsuit made out of recycled wood pulp paired with a custom belt with the names of just a handful of the countless animals out there who are held in captivity. Photo by Stephen Bell.







Models are shown videos as part of the educational element of model casting. Photo by Alina Chen

Despite Vikki's experience and connections in the fashion industry, this was still a sizable event to produce single-handedly. Planning starts well ahead of the event and communication with the many people involved—from designers to photographers to models—is ongoing throughout. The hectic pace may seem chaotic to most, but for Vikki, it was second nature since this is the world she's inhabited for some time.

As with the production of any large event involving multiple players, however, not everything went off without a hitch. The photo wall Vikki ordered didn't arrive in time, and a designer from South Africa had to pass because of a travel visa delay. But, five talented designers showcased their vegan fashion trends on the runway this year: Diane Kroe, The Honest Whisper, AVE Bags, Kandy Intimates and Eleanor Geraldine.

While all fashion at the event was free of animal textiles, Vikki explains the importance of inviting designers who are not exclusively vegan to participate. "We are inclusive as we

believe that in order to be a driver of compassion in the fashion industry and mainstream culture, we need to work with and reach many people, including those who have not yet made the connection."

Keeping the reasons for the fashion show front and centre is a priority for Vikki because she wants to make sure it's not perceived as being about her. "I want to be taken seriously and I want vegan fashion to be taken seriously," she explains. That's why she keeps the focus on helping the public understand how we exploit animals in the fashion industry, and it was effective.

"As an individual new to the journey of veganism, this event opened my eyes to the issues beyond what we're eating," says Kirstin.

The evening included the trailer to the documentary directed by Rebecca Cappelli called SLAY, for which Vikki is credited as assistant producer. (It can be viewed free of charge when you join WaterBear—also free—at: [join.waterbear.com](http://join.waterbear.com)

The information presented at the show led one designer to question whether she should eliminate animal products from all her designs. Diane Kroe—a 20-year veteran in Canadian fashion—took to Instagram to ask her followers if she should discontinue designing with Merino wool after she "put her big girl panties on," and watched SLAY in its entirety. For Vikki, this is a win.







Michelle Mackie, Volunteer Model Coordinator. Photo by Alina Chen.

Michelle Mackie, who volunteered as the model coordinator, had this to say after the event. "I'm Indigenous and our ancestors used animal skins to survive and we hunt out of need, but we also have these incredible young Indigenous designers that can still

express themselves and create cruelty-free products. As much as it is part of my culture, I also feel a connection to these animals and I cannot handle them being tortured for my benefit when other options exist now." That's a powerful statement confirming the information Vikki provided made a difference.

Model casting for the show was an event in itself and saw 103 models register. Vikki set out to make this an educational event also, knowing that many models would want to be part of the show. "I'm very forward with it in the registration form, repeatedly saying there's going to be an educational video and then we're also going to talk about it." This



Another educational moment—many said they wouldn't have known if they had not been told that this plant-based pizza from PANAGO was vegan.

disclosure is followed by the applicants confirming they will watch the video and that they are open to learning. The video in question portrayed the consequences of leather in the fashion industry, and sticking with the fashion theme, a short clip was played demonstrating



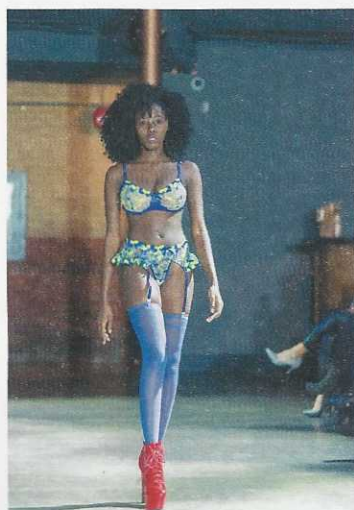
Model Frankell Knowles wearing the red unisex jacket designed by Eleanor Geraldine. Photo by Alina Chen.



"Listen" casual wear sweatshirt by The Honest Whisper. Photo by Majid Mehraban Photography.



Cactus leather handbag by AVE Bags modelled by Trisha Lamatan. Photo by Majid Mehraban Photography.



Model Zeena Mhane in a 5-piece lingerie set by brand Kandy Intimates. Photo by Majid Mehraban Photography



Model model Kamryn Mackie wearing the Leather-look baby doll dress designed by Eleanor Geraldine. Photo by Majid Mehraban Photography.



"Nobody is silent. Many are not heard. Change this." Casual wear tee by The Honest Whisper, worn by model Arjun Arora. Photo by Majid Mehraban Photography.





Satin brocade print kimono worn over a lace maxi skirt worn with latex gloves and sash belt with voluminous organza Peter Pan collar, designed by Eleanor Geraldine. Modelled by Anja Dokic



Model Anstine Apanwun wearing a black unisex robe style jacket designed by Eleanor Geraldine.



Model Joyia McLaren posing in a white chiffon dress with balloon sleeves, paired with latex opera gloves and black organza collar. Designed by Eleanor Geraldine.

the innovations that are better for the environment, the people making these textiles, and that don't exploit animals.

Of those many applicants, twenty-two women's wear and five men's wear models made the final cut. When they were provided with vegan pizza backstage—another educational moment—many said they wouldn't have known if they had not been told it was vegan.

Vikki also works as a PR representative and it was this experience, combined with her past modelling covers—and a lot of hard work—that The Vegan Fashion Show's promotion of innovative animal-free leathers was featured in Forbes Magazine. "It's the accumulation of my previous experiences that I was able to land something like that. I think if I was in my first year of activism and modelling, it wouldn't be possible. Also, knowing the story to pitch; I understand what journalists need and what their readers are



Model Nicole Procyk poses wearing the "I Prefer A Revolution" casual wear tee by The Honest Whisper. Photo by Majid Mehraban Photography.

interested in. I had a good pitch and it made sense for them to publish."

She was also able to get coverage in Forbes for the documentary SLAY.

Being PR savvy, Vikki worked on making the show memorable for attendees, one that they would want to post to their social media, which in turn provides more word-of-mouth promotion. "You want to have Instagram-able photo ops because that's how people find out about your show—through others that have been there. That helps the show, and it's social proof."

Vikki's journey to becoming vegan led her to this moment to be celebrated. She's bringing awareness of animal exploitation to those in the fashion industry, showcasing talent and innovations, supporting local businesses, and demonstrating what we can accomplish when our eyes are opened to the reality of what is that we can no longer ignore.

We have no doubt of the continued success of The Vegan Fashion Show.