

Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Six-time Emmy Award winner, filmmaker and animal activist Allison Argo is with us today to talk about how she changed the way we view the wildlife on our planet. Allison, you have a career spanning 25 years but you started out as an actress. So how did you decide to become a filmmaker, and one in fact that focuses on endangered wildlife and conservation?

AA: Well, I've always been really concerned about conservation, about the health of the planet but I can't really say that I chose it, I think it chose me. And I think it was gorillas in particular that just kind of leapt out and the more I got to know about them both in the wild and then in captivity just captured my heart and my soul, and I started looking around me at the gorillas in captivity and one in particular was living in a horrible little shopping mall in Tacoma, Washington completely alone. He was living inside, hadn't seen the sun or felt the grass for 25 years or another of his kind and it was so unjust and so unfair—and that's a really extreme case, but I looked around me—there was a lot of improvement that could be made in the lives of these beings who we took out of the wild. They didn't ask to come here and live with us. They needed somebody to give them a voice, to voice their stories and to make people aware of their plight and to raise awareness so that their living conditions could be improved.

VC: So, your first film was *The Urban Gorilla*, which got two Emmy nominations, a DuPont Columbia award, so how did you get that done?

AA: I had no idea what I was doing. I had been on sets before because I had been an actor for—oh gosh, since I was a child, actually so I guess I osmosed certain things but in terms of formal training on how to make a documentary I hadn't a clue. And I think what fueled me was passion, first and foremost but also, I think from all my years in the theater and in television I think I got a sense of storytelling and of the protagonist and what a hero is, the struggles that a hero has. The time came when I just had to make this film. And I was really fortunate that my husband at the time was a director of photography and so he was equally impassioned and he shot it and our best friend was a sound recordist and so he recorded the sound and it was basically the three of us spending our own money and our own time to go out and capture these stories, and then once I had captured the stories then I had to figure out what the heck to do with them. And I didn't know the first thing about editing, anything. And it took me, from start to finish, three plus years to come up with a rough cut. In my darkest hours I would be in tears at 1:00 in the morning in the edit room and saying, "I don't know what I'm doing! I've spent all our money; I have no idea what I'm doing!" And then I'd think of the gorillas and I'd think, if one person on late night television on PBS—I'll bet PBS will air this for midnight for free and if one person sees it and if one person is touched and wants to do something then it will all have been worth it and that's what kept me going and sort of through the grapevine National Geographic heard about the project and they asked to see it and I remember, it was July 5th. I remember they all went into a huddle and somebody poked their head up and said, "Well, we do want to make you an offer." And I said "Oh, OK, cool!" And with the offer I was able to pay my then ex-husband and our dear friend the sound recordist. It wasn't a huge offer but it started my career and the film got out there and we got Ivan out of the shopping mall.

KK: You know, when I saw this movie for the first time, friends at PBS said, “Just watch this.” And you could not keep a dry eye. It was the most touching, beautiful thing. I wish I could see it again. Let me ask you, where did you shoot it?

AA: We shot in England, at Aspinall’s place, we shot in the Netherlands at a really very enlightened facility that had captive gorillas, we shot at zoos and also in the Congo. I shot in an orphanage that was taking in baby gorillas, infants whose parents had been poached and it was heartbreaking. So, it really, it spanned the globe and it was an amazing film to get to, to get to go on that journey because every film is a journey and I feel so lucky as a filmmaker that I get to immerse myself into the lives of these animals and into the subject of the film I’m making. It’s a tremendous privilege. And then of course, the flip side of that privilege is the responsibility to bring this story to the public and to do right by the story. And I always have a catharsis when I am finishing, it’s like the night before I record the narration, the day after, I just fall apart and it’s just because I’m just, I’m so concerned, so worried that I haven’t done everything I could do to make it the best that it could be.

KK: It’s always the best. It’s amazing what you do. One of the things I was going to ask you, how do you decide, you have to investigate places that need a voice. How do you figure that out?

AA: A lot of times the story seems to somehow find me but it’s a lot of different ways. I’ve worked with the Nature series on PBS. I loved the team over there. One of my favorite films was actually The Urban Elephant because Fred Kaufman, the executive producer, called me one day and said, and we’d already worked together a couple of times, and he said, “You know, I’d love to work together again. I’d love for you to make a film that’s like The Urban Gorilla. Is there something that you’re really passionate about, a story that you haven’t been able to tell?” And I just immediately said, “Elephants. And he said, “OK, let’s do it.” That’s a dream come true when that happens. On the flip side, I read an article in the New York Times magazine section, oh gosh, 25 years ago, about the disappearance of frogs, and amphibians, and the problem with certain species going extinct and I was just horrified. And it took me at least six months to convince National Geographic that they should let me make a film about that, that they should fund a film about the frog extinction crisis. And I made it really quirky and loveable but...

VC: So, you’ve made a number of wonderful films. So, you made one in particular, The Last Pig. And you filmed this particular documentary on a farm for nine months. Can you talk about that?

AA: My very first film which was The Urban Gorilla and I made that independently, and it found a home at National Geographic. I returned to indie filmmaking with The Last Pig and it was partly, it’s an important story but it’s not necessarily an upbeat, fun and happy story because it’s about the agriculture industry and beautiful animals going to slaughter. It’s about a lot more than that but because of that I didn’t even try to see if I could get funding because I thought that I would have to change the premise of the film so radically that it would no longer be the film that I wanted to make and the story I felt needed to be told. So, I went ahead and made that film. I was really lucky and blessed that a dear friend of mine who had shot a couple of my films prior to that agreed to make it on spec with me, so we approached this farmer who had decided after ten years of raising pigs for meat that he couldn’t rationalize doing that any more, it was not aligned with his values and his beliefs and so I approached him and asked if he would allow us to document the last year of his life with pigs and he said yes. And so completely on spec, Joe and I would go up to his farm in upstate New York, beautiful, beautiful farmland, and we would shoot for a week so a week of every month for nine months we shot and it was such a rich, beautiful experience but also heartbreaking because as we were shooting each time, we’d come there would be fewer pigs on the farm.

KK: Before I forget I wanted to know that with *The Urban Gorilla* somehow you got Glen Close to narrate. How did you get her to do it?

AA: It took me about six months to get through to Glen Close. First of all, I thought it was important to have a name be a narrator because maybe it would get more recognition and I heard that Glen Close was really committed to conservation and cared deeply about gorillas. I had a friend, a colleague who was at the Wildlife Conservation Society and Glen Close narrated a couple of their little short films, so first I tried to go through her agent and that was hopeless. But finally, through WCS I was able to make contact with her personal assistant and I said “please, can I just send you the film? She can watch five minutes and throw it in the garbage, that’s fine,” and she said, “well, OK, I’ll show it to Glennie” and I sent it and I think a month later the phone rang and it was her and she said, ‘OK, Glennie’s going to do it, and you have one hour in New York City on this day.’” And she did a fantastic job. And she also narrated my second film.

VC: What was that second film that she narrated?

AA: It was called *Keepers of the Wild* and for that film I won an Emmy for directing which kind of shocks me because I don’t think it was my best film but it was certainly a love letter to those who care for animals in captivity and it included actually a rhino sanctuary. Is that captivity? It is fenced in and there are guards so sadly, the line between a cage and the wild is starting to blur.

KK: How long does it take you to write the script for the narration? Does the film have to be pretty much completed or do you do it as you go along?

AA: You know, it’s really interesting because everybody does it differently. I want the images and the stories to inform the script and I sort of feel like the script is only there to support the stories. If possible, I want the animals to be the main characters, it’s their stories and I’m only going to fill in the gaps where it’s absolutely needed. And I feel the same way about music. Sometimes things can be overly scored and can be too leading and influence the way you feel—manipulative. With *The Last Pig* I just was very, very sparse with the music.

KK: I agree with what you’re saying. Do you use one orchestrator or do you have many people that work with you on the music and is its original music?

AA: If I can afford it, it’s brilliant to have a composer actually work with you and the earliest that you could bring that composer on so that he or she can start to get a sense of what the score needs to be and the story that’s a gift if you can do that. I’ve worked with not really that many, I’m going to say maybe eight composers in my career, maybe seven and I do have a couple of absolute favorites, and some of them I can’t afford any more because they’ve gone on to start scoring features. The person who wrote the score for *The Last Pig* is somebody I hadn’t worked with before and he nailed it. But it took so much, we almost killed each other in the process, there was so much groping around in the dark and trying to come up with the right sound and feeling. I loved the result, and it was a pleasure to work with him even though it was a hard process.

VC: Now another film of yours, *Forever Home*, you shot that in an animal sanctuary, I know you were talking earlier about sort of the cage business and the sanctuary thing, so would that film be illustrative of that?

AA: Well, *Forever Home* tells the story of an animal refuge that rescues farmed animals. They take in animals that are destined for slaughter, fall off a slaughterhouse truck on the way to slaughter or that are rescued by the Humane Society from a backyard butchery where they have been starved to death, there are all sorts of abuse situations, or they’re found wandering around, perhaps starved in the woods, somebody’s farm animal that somehow got out and is trying to survive. So, their residents come from a lot of different places. But what’s unique about this particular refuge is that it’s a husband-and-wife team and the husband is an architect and he

designs, or together they design these amazing buildings that are specifically for the animals that are going to live in them. So, the goat house is completely different from the duck house. It's not a one size fits all barn, like we were all raised with Old Macdonald's farm, a classic barn. This, on the other hand, looks at goats, what do they love to do, how can they feel comfortable and safe? They love to climb. They like to be up high. And so, they've designed this goat house so that it's vertical, not horizontal, whereas the duck house is cantilevered over a pond and the ducks can just jump into the water, jump out of the water and get their food.

KK: Where is this located?

AA: It's in North Carolina, in Pittsboro, North Carolina it's quite a beautiful place and I like to describe it as compassionate creativity because they are wildly creative and they study the animals. They rescue them and then they really study them and try to understand what makes them tick, what makes them happy and then they come up with these amazing designs, specifically designed for the species.

KK: When are we going to be able to see Forever Home?

AA: Well, I am currently raising funds so that I can start the edit. We've just about finished shooting, I have one more little shoot to get some pickups and I found as of two days ago I have located, I asked an editor—is the perfect, perfect editor and in my wildest dreams I thought, oh, she can't be available—She's available, she's excited, she's totally on board, and she loves my work and I love her work and now I'm about to launch probably an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign because I'm going to need some help to pay this editor. I don't even try to earn any money and I'm at peace with that because I'm doing the work that I'm passionate about but I do have to pay the people who work with me.

VC: Indeed, indeed.

KK: Well, it's interesting that National Geographic and PBS with Fred sort of gave you an opportunity...paid for it, correct? They said, "what do you want to do? We'll fund it."

AA: Yes, absolutely. It's brilliant. The flip side of that is that for instance my early National Geographic films are now buried in the vault. They will never see the light of day again. (KK: Why??) Because they own all the rights. I can't touch them. They paid for them and they own everything lock stock and barrel. Whereas *The Last Pig*, I can still get it out there. I'm still getting calls from people; they just screened it for Earth Day at a town called the town of Boone in North Carolina and there's an upcoming screening in France. We had it translated into French (VC: Very nice, very nice). So, I can do those, I can do that outreach. I can't do that with my old films. They're gone.

KK: Is that only National Geo or is that also PBS?

AA: Well, the thing that's a little complicated with PBS and Nature is that in order to get enough funding to make a one-hour film they have to bring in a co-production partner, an international distribution company. And in the past, it has been National Geographic but of course Geographic is now owned by Disney so everything has changed. So, PBS just needs the rights for North America and then this other company gets worldwide distribution and they own the rights in perpetuity so basically if they bury the film it's gone.

VC: It's gone. The whole business of documentaries and getting them aired, the different media—it's complicated. Now out of all of your work, what films are you most proud of?

AA: So most proud of could mean what films have done the most good but I also have a soft spot in my heart for certain films. I guess *The Urban Gorilla*, I will always cherish that film and the fact that I really think that film did so much good and it got Ivan out of that God-forsaken mall and he was moved to Zoo Atlanta, which

had a state-of-the-art gorilla habitat and he was able to be with other gorillas and be outside on the grass and see the sun for the first time in 30 years.

KK: That is very hard to believe, isn't it amazing what people do?

AA: And it's perfectly legal. (KK: It's legal?). Or it was. I don't know if it still would be. Laws have changed, certainly for chimpanzees. But speaking of chimpanzees, that's another film that's near and dear to my heart, *Chimpanzees: An Unnatural History*, which is a film about, really profiles some chimpanzees that went through the laboratory world and their life after that in sanctuaries and that's a really moving film. +I hope we look back at some of these films that I made and say, "Was that legal? Are you kidding me?" So that's one and *The Urban Elephant*, I really think that that film made a big difference and it's quite a beautiful and moving film. And then a film that's different from those but I think it's so important is a film called *Crash: A Tale of Two Species*. And that film told the story of these little shore birds called red knots and they have to travel, they've evolved to travel all the way from the very tip of South America...they're tiny, they're no bigger than a robin, and they fly all the way to the Arctic to breed. They'll fly for five days at a time without stopping. It's herculean what they do. And they have come, they have evolved to be dependent on horseshoe crabs that spawn in the Delaware Bay every spring, and that's where they stopover, these little shore birds. They can beef up on these horseshoe crab eggs, the ones that aren't viable, that are stirred up by the waves. They feed on those and they get enough bulk to make it the rest of the way to the Arctic so they can breed. And what's really horrifying is that scientists have discovered that the numbers of these birds were crashing and they couldn't figure out why until finally they realized that it's because we humans collect horseshoe crabs to use as bait. We just take thousands and thousands of horseshoe crabs out of the Delaware Bay, chop them into little pieces and use them as bait to catch conch and eel. It is so short sighted and they are also used in biomedical science and I won't go into the details but it's fascinating, but there's a lot of mortality from being collected for that as well. It's a beautiful parable of how you can't just remove one piece of the natural order of things and expect things to go on, business as usual.

VC: Yeah, so you did mention a couple of things that you know have changed as a result of your work in terms of legislation and things that can be done. Can you think of anymore?

AA: Certainly, Ivan is a great example of an individual that was helped. When *Crash* came out the timing was perfect because it came out just when there was a legislative decision in New Jersey about the legality of collecting horseshoe crabs, especially females during breeding season. I know that *The Last Pig*, I'm still getting emails from people who have just caught *The Last Pig* on PBS and I got one recently from a gentleman who said, "I just watched the film and I can't eat pork any more (VC/KK: Oh, my goodness!). I am not going to eat any meat. I just went to my refrigerator and cleaned it out and that's it."

VC: Did that affect your eating habits at all?

AA: Absolutely. I was already a vegetarian but I really hadn't come to terms with the dairy industry and how cruel it is to the dairy cows that are just kept in a constant state of pregnancy. They're artificially, they call them rape racks their babies are taken away from them and oftentimes just immediately slaughtered or put into the veal system. So, I just finally said, I know too much. And I feel so much healthier. I've left any dairy and eggs out of my diet. There are so many alternatives, it's so easy.

KK: The average person watching television and seeing climate change and what happens to the animals, they're more aware where years ago you weren't. It makes it easier for people especially to watch films like yours and make that change like they did with *The Last Pig*.

VC: Indeed.

AA: It's interesting I think, some of the undercover investigative films that have been made. I actually, I can't watch because they are too graphic and difficult for me. But other people, they can watch them and those films have had a tremendous impact on them. So, I made *The Last Pig* for those who can't watch a graphic film like that, they can get the message through a different kind of story. But yes, I think I have hope that we're going to treat animals more humanely because we can't continue to farm animals the way we are and still have a planet left. I think there's hope that we're going to be a kinder species in the future.

VC: Yes, I agree with you. I think that we will evolve as time goes on. So, Allison, can you talk about what you feel are the most challenging aspects of your work, and the most rewarding?

AA: Oh boy. Challenge number one is funding. It just is, sadly, if I had the help that I had in the past when I've made films with Nature and National Geographic, I could make more films more quickly so I'm doing everything pretty much myself. I occasionally will find a volunteer or get a small grant so that I can pay someone to help me but it really slows down my process a lot so funding's a huge thing and I mean, I just got a grant, and I'm so grateful.

KK: It amazes me, you've received so many accolades and awards for your films, I would have thought that it would make it easier to get funding.

AA: Yeah, our industry is in a very strange place and one thing that's happened is that there are a lot more films out there which is wonderful in many ways. There's been a democratization among filmmakers or with filmmaking because the equipment has become affordable. I mean if you have an iPhone, you can make a film and back when I first started, we were shooting on film. Now you can record video and sound on your iPhone and edit it on your computer. Or any degree up from that, more sophisticated from that. And yes, there are more streaming platforms but it also sort of diffuses your audience because there are so many choices out there. So, it's a really different landscape.

VC: And how about the most rewarding parts of this?

AA: When there's a victory for an animal or a group of animals, that's the most rewarding I can ever imagine. It just fills my heart with so much joy and gives me the energy to keep going. And recently I filmed at a ranch in Oklahoma and the rancher had had a change of heart and didn't want to send his cows to slaughter and so he was looking for homes for his cows, forever homes and that's where the title *Forever Home* for my current film, it's, the refuge took in four of his cows so I went out, I shot that story and filmed the cows arriving at the refuge, their new house and all that, but I couldn't leave it at that. There were still dozens of cows back at his ranch that needed forever homes, and so I spent a week just putting together a little two-minute video, I thought it has to be short, I'll just put it out on the Internet and damned if somebody didn't see it who knows somebody with a ranch and she has taken in I think it's 22 of his cows (KK/VC: That's amazing, wow!). It's paradise. And they're a family group, they're bonded. This person was able to give homes to a huge family of cows. And that is the most beautiful, fulfilling part of my work. Yeah.

VC: That's wonderful.

KK: Do you have any words for aspiring filmmakers?

VC: Is it important for you to reach out to the next generation of filmmakers?

AA: It's very important that those of us who are veterans can offer at least a window into our experience and what wisdom we have. Technologically it's changing so quickly that the kids right out of film school are so much savvier than some of us who have been doing it for longer. It's ironic, but we've got the wealth of experience that we can share and I believe strongly in mentoring. But also, I would say, my greatest advice that

I would give to a young filmmaker is to find your passion and never lose sight of that and when you get overwhelmed or depressed and you feel like you're losing your way, go back to—for me it's the gorilla or the elephant or the pig—and find that touchstone for you and never lose sight of that.

KK: That's so important.

VC: Yes, that's great advice. And you certainly embody that, Allison. Absolutely.

KK: Tell us, the people who are listening to this podcast, where they can find you, about your projects, about the GoFundMe for the Forever Home.

AA: If you can remember my last name, A-R-G-O you just put Argo Films together without a space in between, so argofilms.com, you can find a link to me and my work and then that will link to my other films, foreverhome.love. Believe it or not, dot com was taken and I saw that they were offering dot love, I was like, that's perfect! So foreverhome dot love. Yeah, I'm pretty easy to find and I will have news about the crowdfunding campaign and I only send out a few newsletters every year but they're really fun and so if you sign up for my newsletter, you'll know all things Argo or at least Argo films. And I consider everybody who is on my newsletter list to be a member of my team. So, join my team!

KK: It's a great team to be with. I'm thrilled that I had met you years ago at PBS and excited that we've had this opportunity to interview you on this podcast.

VC: Absolutely, absolutely. Thank you so much. We love you and we love your passion and just keep on doing that wonderful work.

AA: Thank you. It has been so much fun talking to you guys, I really appreciate it.

END