

-- Speaker 0 00:00:00 <inaudible>

Speaker 1 00:00:12 Welcome friends to episode two of reward ology. Today, I'm chatting with Dave Johnson who may just be the nicest person I've ever met in my life. We explore his personal journey of discovering what he truly wanted to do in life, why he made the big career shift to starting his own nonprofit and what it was like growing up in a conservative household as a gay man. So a little more about Dave. Dave is a zookeeper who has been working with a package from collection in Denver for over 22 years. He is also the executive director of the Katie Adamson conservation fund, which is a nonprofit that works on wildlife initiatives and global partnerships to help save species and provide sustainability options for the local people wanting to make a difference. He writes kids' books and leads community trips abroad to highlight their work. Dave wants to spread his passion to the next generation of animal nerds. So here's my combo with Dave. This is actually my first time using this software. So we're figuring it out. We're all figuring it out together. Um, but yeah. So thanks again, Dave, for coming on and yes, I'll toast to that. They see you drink you'll bear. Cheers, Brooke shares, cheers to a great conversation. Um, yeah, so kind of just to start out, because even though you and I are both in Colorado, neither of us are from Colorado. And from what I remember, you're from the Appalachians as well.

Speaker 2 00:01:45 Yep, yep. North Carolina.

Speaker 1 00:01:48 Yep. Just the other side, just the other side. I'm from Southern Ohio. So the complete opposite side of the range, but tell me about your childhood. Like, I don't think we've had a chance to really talk about how you grew up, where you grew up and, yeah. Okay.

Speaker 2 00:02:04 I, um, I was born in Florida, but, uh, uh, my mom and dad divorced and I moved back to my mom's, um, hometown of hot Springs, North Carolina when I was in kindergarten. So that's where I developed my accent. So, uh, so, uh, so that's, uh, in the Appalachians it's right on the Appalachian trail, it's, uh, you know, right, right in the Smokies, it's, uh, just beautiful, beautiful country. I was a whitewater rafting guide growing up and just spend a lot of time outdoors. Um, there in the, in Western North Carolina, we were six miles away from Tennessee. So that was where I grew up and, you know, lots of deer and bear and birds and all kinds of really great wildlife around. I did a mountain lion sensitivity study with the, uh, Western North Carolina nature center. When I was 15, 16 years old, I volunteered, um, got my, my state driver's license.

Speaker 2 00:03:01 It was driving around a state truck when I was 16, uh, taking a mountain lion, a urine and fecal samples from the nature center up and putting them up along the blue Ridge Parkway to see if there were any Eastern mountain lions left, um, national geographic was going to do a study. And so they needed a lot of partners out trying to get tracks. I did, um, uh, clay, uh, or casts of tracks, um, of, of mountain lions that, uh, supposedly cougars that I would encounter, um, and would put film canisters with cotton and put urine in there in the middle of a big scraped area to where I could get footprints and stuff. And I was doing that in high school. So I was always just this big animal nerd, uh, worked at the nature center, got a degree in wildlife biology at chapel Hill.

Speaker 2 00:03:51 And, uh, and then just started my career. Um, working with animals, I just had always loved, loved them, always done art with animals, always read books about animals. Any paper that I had to write for school was always about, uh, I remember in college, I did like a 15 page research paper on Russian wildlife. So I always was tying in my passions with everything that I did, um, and wanted to go to zoos and national parks, you know, all growing up and my parents just couldn't figure me out. Um, my mom said, I gave my pacifier to a spider monkey and got her in trouble when I was little. Um, I climbed a fence and ran on, uh, on a fence line with cheetah, got my mom in trouble. I, uh, I, uh, she, she heard me laughing and she couldn't find me. And I bought all these crackers and stuff, them in my pockets and laid out

Speaker 3 00:04:46 And a herd of deer. And, uh, my mom was at my house.

Speaker 2 00:04:51 I was at, I was like, you know, five yea --

-- rs old in the middle of all these deer, letting them eat the crackers out of my pocket. So, uh, that was, uh, that was it. But I think the worst though was, um, I pretended I was an ostrich for about three days. She says

Speaker 3 00:05:06 I had, I had wings. I would walk around, I wouldn't,

Speaker 2 00:05:10 I use a fork, I would pick at my food and she took me to a therapist

Speaker 3 00:05:16 Cause I was an officer. Yes.

Speaker 2 00:05:18 I was at Austria for three days. I was her little rat tight. So, uh,

Speaker 3 00:05:25 Yeah,

Speaker 2 00:05:26 I was still in Florida, so I was probably four, five years old. Um, but she said, the doctor was like, Hey, he'll outgrow this phase. And my mom just always loved to say, you never did.

Speaker 3 00:05:41 Now you do this as a career,

Speaker 2 00:05:43 You know, and you get paid to work with animals and travel around the world, you know, doing conservation stuff. So, uh, it's kind of funny, but that was, that was kind of my background. Uh, just always, uh, always trying to get some, something involved with the, with animals and, uh, and that field.

Speaker 4 00:06:02 Wow. That's awesome. Um, now it's okay if you don't, if it's, if it didn't, but was your father, did he like support you during this stuff? Did he stay in Florida when you went to the Carolinas or

Speaker 2 00:06:13 He did. He stayed, uh, my mom, um, she, uh, she got pregnant really early, right out of high school. And so when they didn't work, she moved back home and, um, my grandparents really stepped up and took care of me and my brother while my mom went to college. And so we, we lived right there with my, my grandparents and, uh, my mom was driving back and forth to school. My dad was still in Florida, but still very much in our, in our lives. And then, uh, my mom remarried when I was about eight and, uh, Frank, uh, my stepdad, uh, really raised me and my brother and him and my mom were very supportive of all my, my animal stuff. So they were, you know, very, very excited about everything. They, they always wanted me to be a vet or do something that made more money.

Speaker 2 00:07:01 Um, they were hoping I would, yeah, I would pick up in that, that I had more zeros in the salary. Some of my buddies from college started to go into dental school and one of them left wildlife with me and went on to dental school, became a dentist. And my, my mom and dad were like, doesn't that sound awesome? And I was like, no, that does not sound awesome. I said, I did not want to be a dentist. I want to do something in the field. So I worked at a zoo in South Carolina for four years after college and then took off for Alaska and did radio telemetry work with bears for the Bureau of land management. So tried to use my wildlife degree, um, took a nine month seasonal position up there, but, um, didn't really, uh, like it, I missed people, uh, when they drop you off in a chopper and you're out with one other bear biologist, that's kind of a, you know, anti-social, he wanted me to stay away from him.

Speaker 2 00:07:57 Here's your gold pan? Here's your shotgun? You put your tent way over there. I was like, wow, this really kind of sucks. I kinda miss miss the community. So that's when I realized that I wanted to use my degree more for conservation education, uh, be more around a community like a zoo. Um, so went to Kentucky and worked at a wildlife education center and then came to Denver and thought, gosh, I'm a little tumbleweed I need to, I need to at least stay five years in Denver. And now I've been here almost 23 years. So a great, great zoo, a great community, a wonderful place. It's like taking the Appalachians and putting them on steroids. And I've got the Rocky mountains, you know, I was like, wow, I can, I can have more wildlife and bigger mountains and more fun. And, uh, so when I came out here, we were backpacking around the country and we climbed Meeker and camped out up in Rocky mountain national park. And I went to a Rockies game back in 93 and I was like, I want to live there one day. And five years later, I got the job and moved to Colorado. So kept it always in my mind that, Hey, that, that Denver area looks pretty, pretty interesting. So, uh, never left

Speaker 1 00:09:18 The Rockies. There's something about the Rockies, it calls to your heart. Like I think once you come out here once you're like, w --

-- ell, this is going to sometime be my home in some way, shape or form, especially sounds like, cause you were kind of all over the place and somehow you ended up here. So was it a job that officially brought you out here or, um, what officially or because you like, kind of just on the wind came out here or

Speaker 2 00:09:41 I was working in Kentucky and uh, and we had an indigenous wildlife. So I was working with bison and elk and birds of prey. I was doing a lot of stuff with Peregrine, Falcons and Eagles. And you know, of course I'm kind of, uh, uh, the love love the one you're with kind of guy, you know, every time I'm with different animals. I'm like, ah, this is it. This is the animals I want to work with forever. This is my species and this is my jam. And then I'm like, Oh wait, shiny. And I go to another job. And so, uh, the, the job here in Denver was with a PACA derms. And so in South Carolina, I had worked with African Asian elephants, uh, white rhino. So I had experience. And so, uh, so I just came out here and took the big mammal test with the city.

Speaker 2 00:10:28 And, uh, I think there was, I think there was about 65 of us that took the test, um, for one spot. And so you had to be proficient enough in all your animal knowledge to get into the top five, and then they looked at your interviews. Um, and so they granted me an out-of-state interview. And if, once I tested in the top five, they called me back and they, they hired me, um, for the packet herb spots though. So I packed up all my stuff and, uh, moved West to Colorado and, uh, have been here ever since it's, uh, been pretty, pretty amazing.

Speaker 1 00:11:04 And that was in 98, correct? Yup. 98 98, right. Oh, that's wonderful. So you just came out here and didn't know anybody. You're like, this is the job for me. You got the mountains I'm coming out here. Yep. Oh my God, that's awesome.

Speaker 2 00:11:19 Going out. Um, the people that I visited with and climb Mount Meeker with, I, uh, two of my soccer buddies had gotten married out here, uh, Tracy and Scott. And so they were in this area briefly and then moved away. But, uh, so they were like my only connection here. And when we were going through, um, their brother Scott said, Hey, let's stop and Denver and see my, my sister and her husband. And so we had all played soccer together, growing up. So that led me to go into the Rockies and climbing Mount Meeker and see in Rocky mountain national park and just got that, that excitement for this area of the country. And just to get out of the Carolinas, you know, uh, growing up in a little town, uh, always around your family. I think it gave me a little bit of wanderlust.

Speaker 4 00:12:06 I can, I can relate to that very strongly. I don't know if anybody ever asked you, how long has it been here? Almost exactly. Five years. Okay. Our fifth year Colorado anniversaries and like a week or two or something like that. So yeah. I mean, if anywhere has felt like home it's here and it sounds like you definitely have the exact same feelings. It just, it just attracts people who are very outdoorsy who just love playing outside. Um, cause even right now, cause so we're recording this in December of 2020, everything is still so shut down and Denver is pretty shut down. Um, and we still have the mountains. So, you know, just as long as you go out with your mask and your smart, I mean, I we're both like when we're hiking, but you can still do that. So there's still some sort of freedom that we have here, which I know. I appreciate, I don't know how much you're able with how much you do. I don't know if you're able to still get out of the mountains much or, um, do you,

Speaker 2 00:13:16 Um, I still, I still do, you know, we're still climbing fourteeners and we do, uh, we started doing that climate for rhinos stuff. So we were doing fourteeners and getting pledges and donations and everything that led me to climb Kilimanjaro. So the whole mountain thing being here led to this whole offshoot of the conservation reality is that, you know, Hey, I can lead people up these, these mountains and we can get people to pledge, you know, a certain amount of money. So I took 20 people to Tanzania back in 2016 and we, uh, we had 12 of us make it to the summit of Kilimanjaro and we raised \$10,000 for black rhinos. So, uh, it was all, all, you know, we put in and, and uh, uh, just the, the outdoor vibe here, you know, the runni

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-- ng the races are, I ran a marathon here back in 2010.

Speaker 2 00:14:08 I did the Colfax marathon. And so I made elephant shirts and we, we raised \$10,000 that year. So it just became something like, wow, I can, I can put my love of nature and exercise and outdoors coupled with my conservation passion and get this whole community involved and invested in, in making the planet just a better place for everybody. And that's what really excited me because, because not only do people in Colorado love the outdoors and love getting outside and getting to see wildlife and getting hiking, but they also have this mindset, Brooke, that they want to help. They want to make a difference and they want to be a part of something bigger than, and that's, that's where this whole connectivity, this whole, this whole, um, uh, sense of a sense of family has come about over the past almost 23 years that I've been here. So it's, it's been, it's been amazing. Um, you know, and when you can have an event now and, and, and invite some people out and you end up having 400 people come through the Gates, I mean, that's pretty spectacular, lots of hugging and that we can't do anymore. Lots

Speaker 4 00:15:24 Of people love you for sure.

Speaker 2 00:15:27 Lots of people toasting and, and hugging and person rather than me and you doing, uh, uh, toasting and, and hugging, uh, virtually.

Speaker 4 00:15:36 I know I promise as soon as COVID is up and we all are cool and healthy, we are going to be seeing each other in person, and we're going to be doing this in person, whatever the next update is. Um, yeah. So tell me about that transition. So I was a zookeeper for awhile, um, and I, and we have very similar personalities. So I think that I might know kind of what you're going to say, but what made you want to engage the community? Like what, what was that inspiration deep in your soul? Because having been a zookeeper, there was a lot of my coworkers that were just fine taking care of, of whatever the collection was, whatever, you know, zookeeping job I had at the time, they were just fine taking care of them and not dealing with anybody, but you've gone above and beyond. Like, you've gone above the call of duty. Why what's, what, why did you decide to do that

Speaker 2 00:16:31 For me? Uh, I want to, uh, I want to spread my passion. I want it to be, uh, I want it to be infectious, Brooke. You know, you only have a finite amount of time. I'm, I'm 52 now. I don't know how much longer my zookeeper career is going to be. There's going to be a time when I'm not going to want to haul hay and shovel and Pitchfork, and I'm getting them all. I'm going to walk that next, that next step. But, uh, for me, I think it was having a captive audience that, you know, wanted to learn and wanted to be inspired. And you just see that with the kids at the zoo, you see that with, uh, with your, your students and the people in Colorado, you know, that just, um, they want to be just big sponges and they will stop you and speak to you and ask you questions and keep you at a demo like 15 minutes longer than you're supposed to be doing something else.

Speaker 2 00:17:25 But you, you realize that more people are coming up and more people are asking questions. And I think, uh, I think just like with our personality type, you w you want to talk, you know, you want to, uh, engage. And for me, that's, that's the thing that's, you know, I think sometimes in your career, you have to, um, you have to Mark some things off your list. And when I went up to Alaska and was out in the, I mean, I couldn't believe they paid me to be out there, you know, collar and bears and canoeing and fishing and panning for gold waiting for a bear to get in our trap. It was a dream, but it was not a career choice that I could see myself being happy. I needed to surround myself with people of the same mindset. Um, and for me, it just has always been about wanting to, uh, make that connection and excite people about animals, excite them about wildlife and in whatever way I could, you know, just talk in the ear off of people at different zoos. You know, when I was a little kid and my mom trying to get me away from zookeepers, you know, cause I wanted, I wanted that. I wanted to be them. You know, I couldn't believe that they had a job that they got to do that every day. And so for me, it was, it was all about just wanting to spread, spread that passion around, --

-- I think, um, and having the gift of gab. I mean, when you're from the Appalachians, you know, I guess you can, you can,

Speaker 1 00:18:54 I mean, my bourbon is tucked away in the cabinet accident will come back and you want the lead model.

Speaker 2 00:19:08 I don't even have one anymore. So

Speaker 1 00:19:11 It's still, it's still embraced there in your heart or you still have your accent. I love it. I love, it just reminds me of home

Speaker 2 00:19:19 When I do the elephant demos and rhino demos and stuff and talk to people, I sometimes try to joke around and tell them I'm from Southern Colorado. And they're like, the, all their heads are like, no, I was like, yeah, like Trinidad, Pueblo. They're like, mm,

Speaker 1 00:19:34 Farther better. It's like, keep going, keep going. We don't claim you. Oh, that's so good. No, I feel you. I totally feel you. Um, I think it's probably one of the reasons why we're such great friends. It's like, huh, we get each other, like, I think we can take each other home and it would be so much fun. It really was. Yeah. From, from day one. Um, Oh my gosh.

Yeah. So, I mean the next part, I mean, I'm thinking about day one. So day one, I met you. I was working at the children's museum at the time and my incredible boss, Kim, um, she had just gotten in your kids' books into the museum gift shop and they're like, I just met this amazing person, Brooke, you need to meet him. I had just gone to Colorado. And the museum was the first job that I was grateful enough to get. I mean, it wasn't in my field, but I was still a nonprofit and I cross a really great experience. And I also got to meet you and the process, which is

Speaker 4 00:20:48 Incredible. Um, so kind of bringing it back from your books back, what is the Katie Adamson Adamson conservation fund? How did it start? How did it come to be like, I know it's your baby. Um, yeah. Tell me about Katie everything. Um,

Speaker 2 00:21:08 We started, um, you know, I ran that marathon and we went to Nepal in 2010 and we started really, um, I started realizing, you know, took four people that first year. And then we went back to them, Paul and took 12 the second year. And I was like, wow, this is fun. This is very engaging, taking people out. Um, we were going to open up a new elephant exhibit. And so I wanted people to be in range country with Asian elephants, greater one-horn rhinos, clouded leopard Sarus cranes, all these animals that were going to be at our zoo. So, um, so I thought about, um, you know, taking people over on these trips and I, I work with the zoo Explorer Scouts. And so, uh, I'd also worked with teens in South Carolina at Missou. So it always wanted to, uh, help be a mentor. And, uh, one of the, the kids that we had, uh, at the zoo in our Explorer program was Katie Adamson.

Speaker 2 00:22:01 And so she, she had worked her way up through the post. She had interned at Hoofstock and primates. Uh, she had, she had just, um, they do it's amazing stuff. And she was at, in college at CSU and Katie ended up getting a, a Ewing sarcoma. She got a, a childhood cancer, she fell off her horse and, uh, upon x-rays and stuff, they found a tumor and she fought it off Brook a few times and kept going back to school, wanted her wildlife degree wanted so bad to go to Nepal. Um, and then in 2014, uh, Katie finally succumb to the cancer. So, uh, at that time she was 25, um, which when it finally took her from us. But, um, at that point we had been to Nepal several times. We were getting a bigger community. I'd come out with elephants of Denver in 2012.

Speaker 2 00:22:56 And so I knew I started wanting to write books about, uh, conservation and, uh, just didn't want Katie's passing to, uh, to go unnoticed. I didn't want to lose that. And I knew her parents. I knew her mom and dad. I knew her sister, Heather. So, uh, went to, I hop with them and just told them I've got an idea. I want to, I want to start a nonprofit and use my kids' books, go to schools and use these trips. And, you know, their family was still in shock, you know, and Colleen Adamson, you know, you could tell sitting there is, she was just so not, not wanting to talk about stuff like this. And they, they graciously let us use their daughter's name for our organization. And, uh, we're, we're very moved, I think by, by that, um, by us wanting to do that.

Speaker 2 00:23:47 But, um, I think it took se --

-- veral years for John and Colleen to, uh, to, to go to Nepal, to, to start wanting to be involved. Heather's on the board now, John Katie's dad was on her board. Um, uh, they've been in Nepal twice. Uh, they bought South Africa safaris with us, so they're going to go to South Africa with us. Um, so now I think for them now it's been six years and I think part of the, the pain and the hurt by her loss is now replaced by passion. I think now they're fully engaged in this and it's all in, um, their daughter's name. And so, uh, for me, I was looking for something, um, I wanted to do something more and I needed something to get my, my butt off the couch more. I needed that I needed that poke that, that to make me, uh, write more books and do more for the world. And Katie's passing was my wake-up call.

Speaker 4 00:24:52 Well, I think it also just goes to show your incredible character by, I mean, you could have named your organization and anybody's name, but the fact that you did it in her name is pretty incredible. Like, I can't imagine how, how many years were you around Katie?

Speaker 2 00:25:13 Well, uh, she had joined explorers at 14 and so, uh, I had known her for 11 years. She was in zoo crew at 13 years old and then joined explorers at 14. And so when she passed, she passed, she was 25. So, uh, I had gone down to see her when she was going through her chemo. I, you know, I was, you know, I was trying to, uh, get her positive and get her thinking about what things were going to be like post cancer. And, uh, I'd bring her, you know, Nepal pictures and just talk about our trips and she just so wanted to go, but she never got strong enough Brooke to go after that. So, uh, it was just, uh, and, uh, you know, looking for something more to do. Um, and then having this, uh, this young girl's spirit just kind of awakened something in me.

Speaker 2 00:26:08 Um, and now Colleen and John are like family, you know, to, to, to us. I mean, they, they really are, they've become, uh, just like a lot of the <inaudible> community. It is a tight knit wonderful group. I mean, when you go hiking and do the Bharti of bootcamp and the Paul and you walk on these trails and you have a tiger come out and roar at you, or you have a rhino run at you through the trees, I made it, it's very bonding. It's like going to war, uh, and go back to, uh, go back to the lodge, to forest hideaway and have a drink together and talk about the Cobra that we saw or the, the tigers and the it's just been an amazing, uh, wonderful journey for me, um, to, um, not only do the books, uh, but also to expand people, uh, get there, get them out of their comfort zone.

Speaker 2 00:27:05 You know, you got to volunteer at the zoo, Brooke, that, um, talks to people about human elephant conflict or sustainability or conservation. It is one thing for them to read a pamphlet and, and try to impart some wisdom. It's another thing to take them to Nepal. It's another thing to see damage that elephants do to, to houses or hear of people meet somebody that lost their mom to a rhino or lost their, their father to a leopard, or it is a different world. Um, and I think you bring everybody back and they become just entrenched in the whole philosophy and the concept, and you create a bunch of conservation soldiers and it is, uh, it has been life-changing for me. It really has.

Speaker 4 00:27:52 I really love that you bring that up. Um, cause I feel the exact same way and I think it takes actually going to these places to really put it in context, because I used to be the same way. I used to be one of those, like, how dare you want to kill an elephant? Like, how dare you want to kill a lion? Like who, who do you think you are? These are these magnificent creatures here. I am in my little small town bubble, not knowing any better. And all I know is, and still by the time I was in my former Zu career, I still had that very close-minded view as well. Um, it wasn't until I started to travel that I realized that this is actually a real problem. I, I don't live with elephants. I don't live with rhinos. I, the biggest predator, well, I guess wolves just moved across the border, which is very exciting.

Speaker 4 00:28:51 But the biggest predator in our state is a mountain lion. Like who am I to judge someone else for failing the need to kill that animal? I, I mean, I'm sure you feel the exact same way, like anything ever happened to Ray or one --

-- of your family members, like how you would feel if an animal severely hurt or might've even killed somebody in your family. Like me, you know, my background is in, um, predators. So especially like African predators. And I think the big, the big change for me happens when I went to Namibia and I saw what it took to keep everybody's livestock alive, which was like their currency and also keep these predators alive and how of a system that it took to do that. And because I mean, one leopard taking out a head of cattle could be the difference of you sending your child to school.

Speaker 4 00:29:52 And you not like, I mean, this is literally life or death living with some of these animals that you and I just love so much, you know, just having grown up like, Oh, I, I absolutely love, I mean, the discovery channel, all I did was watch discovery channel and lions and cheetahs and all kinds of stuff. So, I mean, I was the very similar, similar to you. And so the fact that you bring people to Nepal and you have these experiences, I think that it just really goes to show and just show people what it's like to actually live with them. Like this is what it's like to live with them. Like we can go to a zoo any day and I love taking care of rhinos too, but it's different when you live with them. It's a very different story when you live

Speaker 2 00:30:38 With them, like it's a

Speaker 4 00:30:40 Whole different ball game and tigers. Yes. This majestic tiger. That's behind inch, the glass and strong bars. It's never going to get to you, but then you take people to Nepal and you show them what it's like and what conservation actually is. And God, that's why I just love your trip so much and to speak of Nepal. How did that trip come to be? Like, what relationships did you form? Like how did you start to bring people out there? Cause that's not something that you just like conjure up on a whim?

Speaker 2 00:31:14 Well, it was all about, um, you know, the, the new Toyota elephant passage opening up. And, uh, and I wanted, we were getting a new species here. The, the, the zoo where I work at never had a greater one on rhino. So I started doing research about, um, we already had Asian elephants. I'd already worked with them for years at the zoo. Um, maybe a Dolly, uh, but I was like, all right, we're getting these new animals in. Um, where, where do they co-exist, you know, what, what countries do rhinos and elephants live together at, over in Asia? And I started research and I was like, Oh crap, there's only two. It's just India Nepal. So I started formulating this plan is, is to get people excited, um, about the opening, uh, and about my kid's book, elephants of Denver, about me being Dolly. And, uh, I just wanted to up the, up the game a little bit.

Speaker 2 00:32:08 And so went to India, checked it out. They have a lot of people doing conservation, a lot of money. Um, everything was, uh, was really, uh, like a well-oiled machine. Nepal was different Brook, you know, they had, um, they didn't have much going on. Um, they had just got out of a civil war. Uh, Maoist, Maoist uprising had killed thousands of people. There there'd been so much poaching. Rhino numbers were down tiger numbers were down. It was, uh, it was a different story. It would actually was a little bit dangerous for us to go over. They were still advising people not to travel. So I was just going to take one of my, uh, my keeper assistants, Chuck with me, uh, but then another one Joanna caught wind of it. And she said, well, me and my husband, we've been in a Biblia, we've camped down all these dry river beds, you know, with Dr.

Speaker 2 00:32:59 Leggett. And, you know, you know, you're not going to scare us away from Nepal. And so the four of us went just to, just to check it out, just to see what it was like, uh, go to Chitwan go to Bardia. Um, and, uh, you know, me and Chuck talk about it all the time. Um, I've been 11 times now to Nepal, I've taken 150 people, um, over, but you know, you, you go over there for the wildlife at first, but then what captures you are the people that people's everyday lives and wanting to help them. Problem-solve, you know, not coming in Brook with this Western philosophy of you, poachers are bad, and you're, you're all horrible people, but being open-minded enough, uh, when you travel to be like, they're trying to feed their families, they're trying to send their kids to school. If th --

-- at rhino horn will pay for three years of, of a salary over there, um, and put it into the black market, uh, you know, you've got to come up with different ways to connect with them and to make live wildlife more important than deadlock wildlife.

Speaker 2 00:34:13 And sometimes that's just making the connection, like, like we did with the chuppah, they said, Hey, these guys are rhino poachers, do something with them. They were like, go and meet them and try to figure something out. So we, we help them build a fence to fence in some of their land. Uh, we, we paid for it and actually one year, 2015, we actually helped put part of the fence in, we got them beehives for honey, uh, and the bees, the bees keep elephants away from the community and, uh, provides them honey. And so every year we go back and we do a little bit more with them. We just had an art contest with the <inaudible> children to get them engaged, um, with, uh, with conservation. And so to watch rhino poaching, uh, and, and just the 11 years we've been going. I mean, until this year, you know, and with COVID and everything they've had, they've had some rhino poaching in the park, but we went from 10 to 12 rhinos being killed annually in Chitwan to lose an, a rhino every other year.

Speaker 2 00:35:15 So, and that's just in, you know, the 11 years that we've been going, we saw, you know, just a great increase in, and to see people running rhinos out with fire and try to get them away from the town to then watching them feeding, planting plants so that it crossed the river and coming and knocking on your door, saying there's a rhino in our garden, and they're not trying to, to, to show, throw fire at them anymore, but they're like waking up the tourist to come look at rhinos that are, that are in their garden. So it was such a, uh, amazing change of philosophy. And if you keep going back every year, if you keep building on the positives, uh, and you watch their children grow up and you, uh, you, uh, help, um, and they know that every year Dave's coming back with more people and they're gonna buy honey, and they're gonna have an art contest with our kids, and they're going to come out and do these amazing things.

Speaker 2 00:36:12 And it's a community that cares about them on the other side of the world. And that makes such a difference for people, you know, um, just that we believe in them, you know, and sometimes that alone will keep them from going to the park and poaching. You know, that that alone will, we'll have people telling on each other and, and having people, you know, talk them out of going out and killing rhinos. So it's, uh, it's just been a, an amazing way to grow. Not only our K ACF community, um, in, in and around Denver, but to keep building it and building it and growing it to where that good feeling, those vibrations are felt, uh, everywhere that we travel. And that's, that's what I want.

Speaker 4 00:36:59 God, Dave, that was beautiful. Oh, a lot of them. So I guess just for, for anybody who would want, how did you make the connection? Like, who did you connect with? Like who was the person that you were able to connect with that got you over to Nepal to show you these kinds of things? Like, I would imagine that there was one incredible person that really changed it for you,

Speaker 2 00:37:25 That that person was, uh, Hamata, Meesha the author. He wrote solo, the rhino. And I had been introduced to, um, uh, Eric diner, Stein, uh, and he's an author and he said, you should, you should, uh, get up with, uh, Hamata Meesha and from Nepal, but live in Virginia now. And so, um, reached out to him and, uh, he knew world wildlife fund Nepal and soar ha he knew in TNC the national trust for nature conservation. And so building this relationship with him, we flew him out to come and do a book signing and, uh, and, and had people meet him. Um, and we met him in Nepal one year and we had him just come out again last year at Brooke. Um, he came out again to see us and he stays with Chuck at Chuck's house and, and Chuck's bed and breakfast. So it was really, it was really Hamata Meesha that made the difference because he opened up so many doors for us, but cause I think, um, I harassed him enough, you know, through emails and phone calls, you know, just like, Hey, I'm going over there?

Speaker 2 00:38:33 Who can I meet? Who can I talk? And I'm sure he was like, God, this guy is annoying, but he's g --

-- ot, he's got so much passion behind this that I'll just throw him a bone. I'll give him a couple of names. You know, we'll give him a, we'll give them a deal, a conservation deal at some of the parks and stuff. So, uh, so it ended up being, uh, you know, then we got our foot in the door and that's when it was a game changer. You know, we started meeting everybody and you know, that first year Brooke, we, uh, we, we raised about \$10,000 with the K ACF. And I was so excited, you know, for our little zookeeper zoo Explorer, scout, you know, uh, uh, keeper, assistant community raised 10 grand, you know, cause I would never be able to give \$10,000 to, to anything that I love, you know, and that philanthropic thropic feel, you know, as I was like, Oh my God, it became contagious.

Speaker 2 00:39:32 You know, something, I was like, I want more of that. And so the next year, Brooke, uh, you know, we went from, from 10,000 to, to 41,000, the next year after that, we made 89,000. And uh, and so every year it just got bigger and bolder. And now, now you, uh, it's amazing that I would get so excited about a hundred dollars donation. And now this year we got a \$20,000 grant. We got a tip, we got a \$10,000 grant. We got a new book grant for \$6,000 and it's, it's just, um, it's become the, where, you know, our K ACF organization. Now we've gotten Anna just do an elephant rhino stuff. And now we're working with frogs and Ecuador. We're working with African wild dogs. We're working with penguins, you know, and we've got this, uh, this whole movement. And a lot of it is, is around the Zodiac kids.

Speaker 2 00:40:29 And this book has 12 animals for totems, for people to, uh, engage with conservation by their birthday. And that is, uh, that is a global thing. Everybody has a birthday. Everybody knows when their birthday is. So if you're an April baby year, that's our elephant month. So all the April kids can have elephants as their totem. Uh, if your December you're, you're a rhino person. So that's your, that's your totem. So, uh, so I just, so now we're trying to help all 12 species. And, and so when I go to schools, I don't have little Sally look at me like, well, what are you doing for my birthday? It's in, it's in June. It's like, well, Sally, those are penguins. And we're helping with SANNCOB and we're sending the zookeepers to work down to South Africa with penguins and they're putting them back to the wild. And so I can have a story like that for any kid that asks me about their birthday. And so, uh, so that's, that's what has fueled this movement into all these other, other realms,

Speaker 4 00:41:32 The Zodiac kids, from what I remember that is not your first book, correct. What was your first book?

Speaker 2 00:41:39 The first book I wrote was elephants of Denver and it was the one about, uh, Mimi and Dali and building a new facility for our, our, uh, incoming bull elephants going from free contact to protected and just getting the community behind us, getting a new exhibit and new animals. Um, so that was, that was about, uh, maybe a Dolly. And that came out in 2012. And then I wrote in Ariadne and it was about a little orphaned rhino that was found in Nepal. The first year we went 2010. She had gotten washed away from her mom in the monsoons, had a broken leg and, uh, they were taking care of her at the end TNC. And so, uh, so I was, I, I wanted to write a book about her and her coming to live with people and being a princess and the animal world, and that she changed all the lives for all the animals, because she came in to, to the human world and change people's hearts and minds about wildlife.

Speaker 2 00:42:39 And so she kind of took one for the team. It's like, eh, sorry, girl. You know, you got a broken leg, you got washed away from your mom, but you are going to be a princess because you're going to change attitudes. Um, and she went on to live at the central zoo in, uh, in Katmandu. So, uh, and then, then I wrote, uh, the Zodiac kids, I think for me, Brooke, I started off with just Denver and the zoo, and then I moved to Nepal and then I wrote something global and I think it's been kind of mirroring, uh, how our work has been and how it's expanded. And I didn't want to write a book that wouldn't mean anything to, uh, to somebody in another, in another country or another state or another school. I wanted them to be able to resonate and be able to have these books be a, someth --

-- ing, no matter if you're a kid in New York or a kid in Costa Rica, you know, or somebody growing up, uh, anywhere on the planet.

Speaker 2 00:43:35 And I think, uh, I think we're moving even in a different direction now because this next book is called. I am Katie. And it's about Katie turn into the Baton, the torch over to the next generation and we're actually getting it translated. And so each page is gonna have it. Uh, the pages are going to be written in English, in Spanish, in Swahili and in Nepalese. And so all of the places that we work, uh, we're never going to have to reprint or anything. All these kids will be able to read them and also see what, what these words are like in other languages. So, uh, so, so we're kind of building on that global, uh, impact piece.

Speaker 4 00:44:20 God, that's amazing. God, Dave, you're freaking amazing. Oh,

Speaker 2 00:44:33 It's an inspiration. It's a, it's been a fun career Brook and, uh, an amazing ride. Um, and you know, I'll have to be honest with you. I have been propped up on shoulders of people for a long time. Um, I have, uh, the ability to have an audience by being a zookeeper. Um, but so many people have devoted so much time and energy and, uh, and passion to this project as well. Um, you know, so it's a, it's definitely not a, not a one trick pony. It's a, it's a community effort. You know, even, even Ray, my husband, you know, who, when we got together, he knew nothing about animals. He didn't even recycle. I was like, ah, so I bought a recycle bin. And now, now he is now he's the assistant director of the fund. He's been in Nepal three times. He just, uh, loves all the work we're doing. He did all the graphics for the last two books and he is so committed to the, uh, the organization and conservation tomorrow. He's doing a whole talk tomorrow. Cause I'll be at the zoo working, he's going to be doing a whole presentation to a business group about our organization. I just sent it to him and he's gonna, he's gonna take off and do that. Cause I have to, I have to work. So he already knows. Now he can talk, talk conservation. So well, I'm so proud of him.

Speaker 4 00:46:02 That's amazing. Cause you should just got married, right? It was very recent.

Speaker 2 00:46:07 Yeah. We got married in October on the 11th, so we got married and uh, then we lived through COVID together. So, uh, so we survived, we survived COVID and a marriage two weeks together and pajamas and Netflix as we got to feel it better. So

Speaker 4 00:46:29 How'd that goes, yeah. So YouTube did catch COVID. Um, so like how are you now? How are you guys feeling? Are you feeling okay now?

Speaker 2 00:46:38 Yeah, much better, much better. Uh, Ray had worse symptoms. He had, he had it worse than I did. Um, he lost 20 pounds. Um, I gained five pounds. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I was eating throughout and he was like, Oh, nothing tastes good. I'm not going to eat. I just want jello. Um, and so I was, uh, you know, I had to be home. We had the core and tea together. So, uh, we just watched a lot of TV and wore pajamas and took naps together. Uh, but, uh, it was, it was a little scary because, um, you know, as, as you see your, your partner's oxygen levels dropping as his fever continues, you know, his oxygen went down to 92 and I was worried about when I take him to the hospital, you know, and how long is this going to be months that we're going to be battling this?

Speaker 2 00:47:31 I mean, there are some people out there that have really suffered through this virus and just horror stories. And you wonder, um, is your situation going to turn into a horror story? And it's, it's a little frightening. Um, and then every day that you're feeling better, it's, uh, it's a little bit takes some of that, uh, pressure and stress off of you, but I'll tell you what, getting back to the zoo, getting back to my team, uh, and those that, you know, there are some really good therapy animals, uh, at our, at our zoo. Um, Rudy, the rhino, Mohali the hippo getting to work with them and getting back to them and seeing them really, um, I think helped with the healing process. Uh, my first day back though, it felt like I was working all the top of a 14 or I was so tired.

Speaker 1 00:48:21 Oh my God, I bet.

Speaker 2 00:48:23 But, uh, yeah, today was great. So, um, um, six days back to the zoo. So, uh, I'm, I'm doing well. Thanks for that.

Speaker 1 --

-- 00:48:31 I'm glad. I'm glad. Yeah, no, I was really worried about you because when we connected to do this, uh, you know, this conversation today, you're like, yeah. So I have COVID right now, right. Also has COVID I'm like, Jesus, are you okay? Number one, we can chat whenever later down the road, first of all, are you okay? So that's really great to hear it. Oh my God. I'm glad. I'm glad we're black. And we don't ahead.

Speaker 2 00:48:57 Uh, we don't know how we, we don't know how we got it. Uh, it really, we had shut down socially. We'd done a couple of things right around Halloween and Ray said, Hey, we need to, we need to be better. You know, we hadn't gone to anything crazy, but, uh, we had, we had been to people's house for a dinner. Um, and, uh, and so he said, we should shut this down. And then around November eight ninth is when he started, started feeling sick. But, uh, so yeah, so it's still, still a mystery. How it got us.

Speaker 1 00:49:27 I'm just so glad that you two are okay. The world still need you to still too much to do. I'm still, I'm too spicy to go yet. Yeah. It's not your time yet. No, COVID for you. So how did you meet Ray? I don't think I've ever actually had the opportunity to ask you that.

Speaker 2 00:49:47 Uh, we were all in a friends group. Um, and one of our, one of our friends, Greg, uh, introduced Ray to me and my ex, uh, a buddy and we had about eight guys that all hung out together and did stuff together. Um, and then Ray was seeing somebody long distance in Jersey. Uh, and I, I was seeing buddy and, uh, as things changed, um, you know, I became single and Ray became single and we took our friendship. We would go hiking and stuff together and, uh, and talk about our relationships ending. And we kinda were, you know, kind of on each shoulder, like, God, this is crappy, you know, cause me and buddy had been together I think, uh, for 11 years and it's a long time and it's, it's, it's a tough, it's a tough, you know, thing when you feel like you're, you're pulling apart and everything.

Speaker 2 00:50:41 So, so we would go hiking. It was so funny, Ray back then acted like he liked hiking and uh, Oh yeah, he was, he was, he was definitely when I, when I moved in with him later on, uh, those hiking boots like wet right under the bed. And he was like, Oh, he's like, you're going on a death March. That's what he called my, my hikes. He goes, I'm not going on a death March today, but, uh, but that's, uh, that's kinda how it happened. It grew out of friendship and it grew out of a us kind of being there for each other, um, during some hard times. So, uh, so, uh, so that's, that's kinda, and which is kinda nice. You start off, uh, as friends and, and then it just kind of develops.

Speaker 4 00:51:32 That's awesome. Um, and feel free to, if you're not comfortable answering that's totally. Okay. But how does it feel or what have you experienced to being a gay man in the conservation fields? But since that's not something I've asked you before or nothing that I know for personal hand experience, like what have you experienced in your years in the field?

Speaker 2 00:51:59 Well, I've, I've not really had, um, any real bad experiences, to be honest with you. Um, we, uh, we did try to keep our wedding kind of, uh, under wraps with, uh, our global community. Some of the places we work, you know, um, homosexuality is still illegal and banned. And so we didn't really want, um, you know, a lot of people in some of these other, other countries to know, cause it could be dangerous, you know, for us in some of these, uh, in some of these countries. But, uh, as far as being out in Colorado and, and working in amongst the, uh, conservation community, I have never felt a one iota of, uh, of, of disrespect or, or disregard. Um, I think, I think there are so many gay people in our field. Um, I think the animal field has a lot of very compassionate, um, empathetic people that, uh, that, that really love animals and the horse community, the dog community, the, the zoo community just has a lot of, uh, gay couples, male and female.

Speaker 2 00:53:08 And I think it becomes, you know, kind of the norm that you're just kind of used to, uh, a lot of these partnerships developing, um, between same-sex and, uh, and I've, I've never felt, uh, I've never felt bad. Um, I think that's a lot of the reason I left the South. I, you know, my family and the Caroli --

-- nas and wanted to come out here because Denver was a very liberal community. And, uh, immediately, you know, they had, they had, um, benefits for same-sex partners, you know, marriage wasn't legal then, but they, they let you put your partner on your, on your insurance, you know, with the city of Denver. And I was like, wow, what a progressive way to treat people? You know, it's, it's very, uh, the humanity here was, uh, you know, it was overwhelming. And when I finally came out at the zoo to some of my friends, you know, I thought, Oh gosh, I want to make it through, you know, six months before I start telling people, because I don't want them to judge me.

Speaker 2 00:54:08 And, uh, I ended up telling people like at two months and they were like, so is that, do you know how many gay people work here? It was like such a non, it was a non issue. They're like, Oh my gosh, this person in horticulture, these people, that person that works with cats, that person had primates, you know, it's like, um, there's a lot of gay people here. Why didn't you want to introduce us to your boyfriend? I was like, Oh, I was like, ah, I didn't know how, how people would take it. And coming from the South, you just, you just, you know, very protective, I think, of, uh, of your, of your feelings. And, uh, it was always something that, uh, you know, you're, you're kind of in the, in the closet there. Um, so, uh, but yeah, but this has been, uh, raised bringing me another beer. He's such a good guy

Speaker 1 00:54:56 That looks like the beer. Not, I recognize that not, I give it to Lee all the time. I got the door close or I know he wouldn't refill it for me. He's good at that. No, thank you for sharing that honestly, like thank you. Cause, um, I don't know how many people have had, have heard a story like that and to hear that like, especially in other places, you know, sometimes you do need to move and to hear that. So you did come out in Colorado, like, so you did leave home. And so did you have like girlfriends growing up or

Speaker 2 00:55:38 Friends had girlfriends up until I was about 25. And, uh, and so, um, yeah, so, but it was, uh, it was something that I knew and I was just trying to, to make the rest of my family and the world happy. So I was, um, so I was not being honest with myself. Uh, and so, uh, so I, I changed out. I took Charmaine home, um, to the family. She was a teacher, a really sweet lady. And then I replaced her with Bob. Uh, my father

Speaker 1 00:56:09 <inaudible>

Speaker 2 00:56:11 A boyfriend and, uh, the family just had a meltdown and it was just like, Oh no, he can't come here for Christmas. You. And so I applied for a, for a job and, and got hired in Denver and I left and I was just, like I said, you know, you guys, uh, you guys enjoy, I'm gonna, I'm going to be, I'm going to be gone because you could just tell, you know, from some of the family's reactions and you know, how they treated you after they found out that, uh, that I was with, uh, with a guy, it was, it was a lot different. Um, but to be honest with you, things have, have so changed over the years. Um, and it's been, become so much better, uh, very much, uh, more tolerant. Uh, my family loves Ray. Um, they're there.

Speaker 3 00:57:02 Well,

Speaker 2 00:57:02 You go home together. You know, I think my grandmother was the very best about it, you know, and even her generation, I think she was like, you know, Hey, my love is unconditional. You be who you need to be. Um, even if it's out there in Colorado, far away from, uh, you know, where you grew up. And I think, uh, I thought that made a huge difference. And Brooke, you know, since I've been out and an honest and open, I've had so many zoo crew and explore kids come out to me that just needed somebody to talk to. And, uh, I mean, probably a 10 or 12 now that have come to work with me in packages or had me as a, as a mentor or an advisor. And just, you know, I've wanted to talk with you because, you know, I'm BI or I'm struggling with my identity.

Speaker 2 00:57:54 You know, my parents, you know, don't want me to date a girl, you know, they want me to have a boyfriend and, and so, uh, both sexes and, uh, and I think it spreads around with the kids that I'm, I'm open and honest, and we'll talk about stuff like that with them and, and, and give them, uh, some feedback. And so they it's been, uh, it's been amazing. And with the turnarou --

-- nd with the Scouts, cause our zoo explorers are through the Scouts. You know, my, my boss for years was like, Hey, don't tell anybody. Uh, and it changed over the years to where I was out and, and telling all the kids and never got any trouble from the boy Scouts. And, uh, and I feel like I've made a difference in some of these kids' lives. Cause I, I can't imagine as a teenager, having somebody that could have talked to about, you know, about these, these pains, this anger that you feel when you realize like, Oh crap, I like, I like guys better than girls. I'm dating a girl, but I'm more attracted to her father or her brother,

Speaker 3 00:58:59 You know, it was like, wow,

Speaker 2 00:59:02 Love, you know, I love she's awesome, but Oh my God, there's her dad driving by on a lawn mower

Speaker 3 00:59:09 Shirt off. And I'm like, what's wrong with me? So I would have loved

Speaker 2 00:59:17 Having somebody to, to be able to, to chat with about stuff like, and just, and figure out that you're, you're not broken. You know, you are, you are who you are and you should be able to love who you love. And because of that, what was allowed to grow within me, uh, once I, I loved myself and was able to be myself. That's what led to all this other stuff, all these other doors opening, because I got to Denver and I accepted who I was and I had a wonderful community that accepted me for who I was. And, uh, they love, you know, they love me and re you know, together and, uh, they, they love that we're a union and a couple and don't feel at all, uh, at any unease about us being around. So, uh, I think, uh, I think that's, uh, been very special for me, Brooke, and just another reason that I love Colorado.

Speaker 4 01:00:12 Mm that's so beautiful. Thanks for sharing that. I really do appreciate it. So, any, any advice that you have given to anybody who either hasn't come out or maybe they're scared to travel or anything like that who is in, you know, the LGBTQ community? What is some advice that you have for them either like coming out or maybe traveling internationally, like any kind of advice that you've given before? Kind of, what would you, what would you say to people? Yeah,

Speaker 2 01:00:43 When we went to Tanzania, um, we had, uh, we had a couple of, uh, youngsters that were very outspoken, a very out in the community already, very politically active and had a lot of, uh, very, um, gay, friendly shirts, you know, lots of rainbows and lots of, uh, and I had to talk with them, Brooke, about leaving that kind of stuff at home. Uh, and it was a hard conversation cause, you know, you want people to be able to be themselves. But, uh, uh, I had to, to, to tell them, it's like, this is for our safety as a group. This is for your safety over these countries because we're going to be far away from, um, from a lot of, uh, our kind of political views and are, um, so, you know, and I think they, they took it really well. Uh, but my, my, uh, my advice here is, uh, is for always, um, for, for them to be themselves and that they'll know the right time to come out when it's going to be, um, when it's going to be right for their family and their parents.

Speaker 2 01:01:49 Um, and you can tell the ones that are ready to take that step, and I've always offered, you know, any help if you want me to be there, if you want me to go with you and, and be at the dinner or, or whatnot. But, uh, I think, uh, I think I've really tried to have people understand that, uh, whether they're with the opposite sex or same sex, you know, it's not understand that everything is freakishly, you know, you know, filtered down to, to, you know, scary levels when you're 16, when you're 17. Um, but it just a few years, it's not going to be a big deal. It's not going to be, you're going to be in college. You're going to be out of the house. Um, you're not going to be under this microscope of who are you dating? Who are you seeing?

Speaker 2 01:02:37 And, uh, and, uh, so for me, I think advising them about, um, the timing and about, uh, understanding that who they love is, is, you know, every year that I get older, it matters less and less, you know, to the rest of the world. Uh, people are coming out in middle school now they've got, you know, they've got LGBTQ help groups, you know, in fifth and sixth grade. And I was just like, wow, that is amazing coming from somebody that always knew, but didn't have, --

-- didn't have the power to come out, um, within myself until I was 25 and kind of did it as a drop the mic, you know? Okay, bye. I'm gay moving to Denver. Here's Bob. Okay. I'm peacing out anyways. No, you can't call Charmaine. I'm not getting back

Speaker 4 01:03:48 So funny. No, thanks for that. Thanks for that for sure. Um, just yeah. Having traveled to like international places and just having to walk that fine line. I mean, even just being a woman in other countries, just, just alone, like dressing incredibly conservatively. Like I've been to some places where I stick out like a sore thumb, so like completely understand. I mean, it's just, just noticing that it's not necessarily you, it's like, it's a completely different culture. Like we live in an amazing country, but is so accepting no matter what anybody's political views are, no matter what anyone feels in this recent election or anything, like we live in an insanely amazing country. And I think that it takes traveling to these other places to really see that, to really experience it firsthand what it's like to not be yourself, just because of who you are. Like, just because I am the way I am. I'm not accepted here. And I think that's, you grow a lot as a person when you really see what that's like in other places.

Speaker 2 01:05:04 And I mean, you've, uh, you've, uh, you've experienced that Brooke at a very young age. You've, you've had your eyes opened to that, you know, because you've been out there way earlier than I was. And, uh, you've, uh, you've, you've, uh, you've really had people show you, um, uh, this road that you're on and you're right. Uh, being a woman on the, I see it a lot. You have to be very, very careful and cautious over there. Um, it's a, it's a, it's a big world, but, uh, you're, you're right about a year out about here. Um, for the most part, our, uh, our country is, is very tolerant and loving. Uh, no matter what, your religion or your ethnicity, or I feel a lot of warmth from the Denver community, um, no matter, you know, what, uh, what you bring to the table and that's, uh, that's, that's why I've wanted to stay here. I really have I've, I've wanted to stay here because, uh, working alongside a bunch of different people and realizing that, uh, you know, the, the love that people share, um, is, is just boundless.

Speaker 4 01:06:11 I completely agree. Like the community is so immense. Like if, so, it's really, it's really amazing. It's like, once you get into the network, then, I mean, you're in, then you're in. And, you know, everybody had the opportunity to meet so many people through you and through everyone else. So it's been, it's been quite amazing. Yeah. Yeah. Um, so I kind of, now I really wanted to chat about just so, okay. So kind of makes sense how you said with the Zodiac kids. That's kind of how, at least some of the recent projects that you've done have been born out of, but to come back to Kate AACF, what are some of the projects that you've done and what have you expanded to, what are some of the countries that you work in most kind of, kind of share with that, how you, how you pick regions to go to?

Speaker 2 01:07:02 Well, uh, Nepal was our first, you know, and, and that was because, you know, we talked about that the Asian elephants greater one-horn rhinos. And when we started, um, moving into other areas, um, you know, India, uh, because it was right near Nepal. And, uh, so that was kind of a, an easy and easy move. We did some, uh, uh, we helped support some, some researchers down there that we're working with, uh, working with sloths bears and, uh, and pangolin. Um, and so then I think the Zodiac kids book did help us branch out, but a good story, um, that I like to tell people when they, when they talk about this is, um, I had one of my zoo Explorer Scouts, uh, Keith Erickson, uh, he climbed Kilimanjaro with us for black rhinos. Um, then he went down to Costa Rica with us and he climbed mountains down there for Jaguars and, uh, and, and, and helped start the sea turtle work that we're doing.

Speaker 2 01:08:00 Um, Jaguar is February sea turtle is August. So got, got two animals in. And, um, he came to me and he said, uh, he said, Dave, I love doing this stuff with you. You're so passionate about PACA dorms and, and, and now Jaguars and sea turtles. Cause you know, but, uh, but he said, I love frogs and amphibians and amphibians are getting hit so hard now on the planet --

-- we're losing yes. The kindred fungus. Yes. And we're just losing so many of our frogs and toads and salamanders and everything. And so he said, that's my passion. And I said, well, you, I said, Keith, you know, you you've been right here with us. Uh, for years, him and his brother, Craig, you know, we're zoo explorers. I said, you find something that you want to commit to and bring it to me. And he did, he found some work going on down with Macquarie in Ecuador, and we've sent him down now twice to do some frog conservation work.

Speaker 2 01:08:59 And, uh, and it's, that's how that has grown, just because somebody in our community, you know, brought that up and has, and has their own passion. You know, uh, I had a keeper come to me and she was just so heartbroken about not getting involved with conservation. She had moved from Disney to Denver to get involved and she just kept getting turned down and turned down and she came to me and she had big tears in her eyes. She goes, I just want to go work with vultures and penguins. And I came to Denver to do that. And I've been here like 10 years and I've not been allowed the chance to do it. And so we got to send her down to work with SANNCOB and she got to release African penguins back to the wild. And she gave a presentation to our community, Brooke and, and broke into tears, you know, talking about getting to do that.

Speaker 2 01:09:48 And, and so we sent her down to work with Volpara. So, so she got to work with vultures and with penguins and, uh, that's exactly what she wanted to do. And, and that's what, um, you know, when I have these zookeepers that come to me with the same problems that I had a decade ago, 15 years ago that are struggling with, who am I, what am I doing in this career? Uh, I don't want to just be a shit shoveler. You know, I want to make a difference, help me make a difference. And, and now we have, um, 53 staff involved all around the world that are going all these places that they dream of and we're helping to support them. Um, and that's how this thing is moving out. When I have a primate keeper come and say, Hey, the zoo won't help me with these.

Speaker 2 01:10:37 Um, Viroqua these Willy spider monkeys. There are two female spider monkeys in Brazil, and there are no males at this park. And I need a thousand dollars to get to this organization to, to catch those two female bureaucrats, very endangered primate, and move them somewhere where they can breathe and have offspring. Um, and so we did that together. I gave her a thousand dollars and they moved those female quad, but I said, Hey, this is not just daddy Warbucks, given you money. I said, this is, this is a commitment. This is a, a process, a plan. What are we going to do together? Um, so that thousand dollars to Abby for miracle, I turned into us having a, uh, a comedy event, um, and her all female improv group performed. And we ended up making \$3,000 that night. Um, and that's what Abby brought to the table once we had helped her establish that stuff in Brazil.

Speaker 2 01:11:37 So it, it all just, I think it all just feeds off of positivity. And I would have never thought about Bureau, why I would have never thought about this Brazil work, but she turned us on to something. And, uh, and, and we made it happen. And I think that's what, uh, that's what the K ACF has done for me is to allow me to help others who keepers and, and people that have passion, be able to reach their dreams because it's, it's important Brook. It really is. Um, it's, uh, it changes the way you look about your job and your career, if you're just allowed to do just a little bit, to make a difference, uh, in the positive for the planet. And, uh, that's, that's why I've been really open to all these different, uh, communities and, uh, and who, who wants to do stuff, you know, as long as it's not outrageous and it's going to cost us like \$50,000 or something, but, you know, we gotta gotta say no sometimes, but, uh, for the most part, we've been very, um, very willing to, to get, you know, people, uh, involved in their dreams.

Speaker 2 01:12:49 Uh, got to send some guys down to work with bees and Africa. You know, that our, that our work with bees here in Colorado, uh, sent, uh, some of our staff, we sent some primate keepers and a maintenance guy down to Ecuador to work on some, some primates primates, um, rewilding projects. So getting, you know, Howler monkeys and spi --

-- der monkeys back to the wild, um, and having two primate keepers and a guy that was into fabrication and welding, and could, could help a facility like that. So it's all about, um, taking this big table of a puzzle, you know, to me, this is how my life is now and trying to make everything kind of fit together, cohesively to where everybody's happy and challenged and, and making a difference in the world. So

Speaker 4 01:13:42 That's amazing. Yeah. I mean, being on the receiving end because, you know, I went to Tanzania last year and I was just a tag along. I mean, I had a freaking blast. I had so much fun.

Speaker 2 01:13:54 I love lots of new pants and yeah, of course, according to Judy, both said there were way too much dancing. We had that dance, but every, every women's group for four days, they're all like blowing those whistles and dancing. But, uh, you know, those are the things that just grow out of, you know, Hey, we've got this Diana and Chaba this lady, that's a, that's a chief warden, uh, 30 chief origins in Tanzania, one woman. And I had three really up and coming power women like Courtney. And I was like, Hey, let's elephants are matrilineal. They're girl power. Diane is girl power. Let's do a girl power trip. These women dance in here in their community are all girl power. And so it was all about, about building up women and the women in our community like yourself, Brooke, uh, it's the future of conservation. You know, when I got into this field, it was, it was a bunch of sausage. It was all guys, you know,

Speaker 1 01:14:55 <inaudible>

Speaker 2 01:14:59 All the women are, are taken over and doing such amazing things, you know, so cheers to you guys and for y'all to go to Tanzania as a group of gals together, and we're like, yeah, we're going to go, we're going to go watch some dancing. We're going to go travel around Tanzania together. Um,

Speaker 1 01:15:17 It was, it was life changing that's for sure. It was awesome. I'm really glad I was there. I mean, I've traveled like that before, so it wasn't, it wasn't as much of a culture shock, I think for some of the ladies on the trip, which was, which was amazing Courtney and I bonded very hard on that. She's like, thank God you're here.

Speaker 2 01:15:39 Fine. Somebody else that's been been abroad and can help me. And you know, of course they're crap. Courtney was there with us the year before. And so she got to meet all those players. And so, uh, you know, now she's in Houston, she just won our, our KT award this year for, for all this stuff. She's we were supposed to be down in Houston. Um, you know, working together. COVID kinda stopped all of that, but now she's training tigers and I'm hoping to get her to Nepal working with our tiger conservation community next year. So, uh, let me know if you're free.

Speaker 1 01:16:17 I have talked about you're in the loop that that conversation is, but no, yeah, for real, I was like, I'm not joking. I was like, do you want to do a repeat? She's like, do you want to come to Nepal? And like, we've seen lion cheetah.

Speaker 2 01:16:42 I left her together. So we need to, we need to now go to,

Speaker 1 01:16:46 Well, so now that this trip has sprouted, we'll just, we'll just leave that there

Speaker 2 01:16:55 Because of your, because of your cat passion and your background, you know, it'd be, it would be awesome. We've, uh, you know, we've got, uh, uh, some leopard stuff going on there, some tiger stuff going on there, uh, clouded leopards, snow fishing cats. It's a, it's such a great community. Now we have these three girls that are doing snow leopard work and dopa that, um, Alex Dudley just found, and they are three women that are starting up the snow leopard conservation work. And they are, they are seeing snow leopards and taking people up in the winter and trekking up there and showing them snow leopards. And so it's going to be amazing. So

Speaker 1 01:17:35 That's like the next piece, these, all my list that I'm dying to see, I've seen so many of the big cats, but snow leopards is insanely high on my list.

Speaker 2 01:17:43 Now that's a, that's where we're going to be moving, uh, next and engage those gals, uh, and with our, with our strong women community and help them out cause they started this themselves. So I've just been, uh, the, the main girl shearing is her name. And we've been talking via email, bu --

-- t, uh, but they're just starting this out in, uh, in dopa. That's where the snow leopard, that's where George Schaller, uh, and Peter Matthison kind of did their snow Lippard trekking back in the day. So if you haven't read that book, that is a awesome, awesome read

Speaker 1 01:18:16 Call. It I'll make sure I put it in the notes for this episode.

Speaker 2 01:18:18 It's called the snow leopard by Peter Matheson. And it's a, it's about him and George Schaller. And there's a, you know, just, uh, it, it really made me want to go to Nepal when I read that book back in the day, uh, I was just like, man, that is one country C and Chitwan. And, uh, you know, I haven't seen snow leopards either. We tracked up in the Annapurna is with one of our groups last year, but, uh, but seeing the snow leopard in the wild would also be on my list. So, uh, it may be an all gals team with Dave. I'll have to wear it.

Speaker 1 01:18:49 You're always accepted. You can always come. You will always be the exception, any trips you've allowed burly, hairy woman, she needs to shave in the morning. He'll go get up here. That'd be wonderful. That would be wonderful. And even just them coming on and sharing your story here, like that would be incredible as well. Like anything that we can do as a community to just help out everybody's story, get all that would be incredible.

Speaker 2 01:19:25 I've got a couple of keepers down the Springs that want to do some snow leopard stuff. So I figured they're both, they're both girls. And so they were, I think there, I think it'd be a really great fit. You know, my, my books are, they sell my books down to the Cheyenne mountain zoo. And so a portion of that is going to go to keep her travel. So I told, uh, I told Sarah Basha that we could try to get them over to Nepal, but just fleshing this out. Now it's a definitely a new, it's a new find. Um, our conservation liaison, Alex Dudley. I have known him at the zoo since probably he was in high school. And, uh, he, he found these ladies for us. So he's been doing a lot of work for us, uh, on the side. He's a conservation and everything, I think you've met him at. So maybe the cheetah event, um,

Speaker 1 01:20:12 Um, that name, self insanely familiar. Yes.

Speaker 2 01:20:15 So, uh, so yeah, he's been, uh, he's been working with the fund, uh, since he got out of grad school, he just, he just finished his masters and was in, um, in Uganda work in, uh, uh, uh, around Kabale with the chimps and gorillas and stuff. So, so finish that up. And so he, he found these, these gals and, and we've been chatting, uh, via, via email. Uh, she's out in the field right now. She's going to be away for like a month, but she said, uh, she left me some really positive messages about, uh, about what we could do together. Uh, I think we're both excited. I think we could both, uh, both really, uh, uh, help each other out with this new partnership and, and check those off our lists, bro,

Speaker 1 01:21:04 Here together. We have not, I mean, everything that we've done, we've not traveled together yet. So we definitely got check that one off the list too.

Speaker 2 01:21:12 Oh my God. Uh, we'll have to have a special group of us cause there'll be like, Oh yeah, you can't shut them two up.

Speaker 1 01:21:20 It would just be constant. It would be nonstop. We would just have so much fun.

Speaker 2 01:21:23 Pull the alcohol away from them.

Speaker 1 01:21:29 No, I agree. I've always wanted to ask you this. What is your craziest or funniest travel story? Oh gosh.

Speaker 2 01:21:40 Craziest or funniest travel story. Um,

Speaker 1 01:21:44 This might be the same thing, but,

Speaker 2 01:21:49 Well, um, and I wanna, one of my, one of my favorite crazy stories, uh, in Nepal is, um, uh, Ray's first trip. Um, and there's a bull elephant and bust around the village and around Bardia national park and he's in bust and just hormonally challenged. This destroyed a vehicle by forest hideaway where we were at the night before. And you can smell in Brooke. I mean that, that bull elephant must. I mean, it is just this, this, uh, wreaking, uh, sex smell. And so we're out doing Bardia bootcamp, which is like all day hiking out in the national park, which is incredible. Um, it is hard, you know, you pretty much go out from seven in the morning until seven at night, and you've probably put in 10 or --

-- 12 miles, you know, where there are tiger elephants, rhinos, Cobra. It's, it's amazing, but Ray's first trip there.

Speaker 2 01:22:45 Um, we, uh, we had a hike, unlike one we had ever had before. Um, we, uh, we were, we were trying to avoid this bull elephant, you know, looking for his tracks, looking for his dung, trying to figure out where this guy was. Um, then, uh, uh, rhino was on the trail right in front us and we all stop. And it was just like, like almost like dominoes, like everybody kinda hit and, uh, somebody's water bottle crinkled. And so the rhinos spun around and it ran at us and then ran parallel through all these, all this brush. And so, I mean, talking about changing your underwear, it was like, you know, 5,000 pounds running at you and then decided to veer off, you know, so it was like, Oh my God, that was so close. Uh, wow, that was crazy. That's going to be a story for us when we get home five minutes later, um, our guide just elevates up off the ground and he's taking his stick and knocking it on the trail.

Speaker 2 01:23:46 There's a black Cobra, all the trail right in front of us and Ray hates snakes. And, uh, and so he's like, Oh God, there was a Cobra like right in front of me, the Cobra takes off. So we keep, we keep walking, um, avoiding the bull elephant and we come up through the trees and to these grasses, uh, all this elephant grass is like 10, 12 feet high. And you have to walk through on a path through all this elephant grass. And they've told you that if you have to run from this bull elephant, you have to run and zigzag and make quick turns, cause elephant can catch you. And so they're telling us this, and then we have to walk through this, this line where if you zigzag, it's going to be, you know, you're not going to be able to move at all because all of these grasses.

Speaker 2 01:24:32 So it was like, uh, very, very nerve wracking. We went probably a few hundred yards into the grasses and then smell that bull elephant. Again, everybody stopped and our guides there's one of the back and one of the front, they both have bamboo sticks. That's our only protection. You know, nobody has a gun, nobody has a flare, a fire throw or nothing like that. It's like two bamboo sticks and, uh, we've stopped and all of us are like, all right, we smell it. It's close. Um, where are we getting ready to run to? Uh, and right behind Ray, uh, burst out of the grasses, these three red jungle fowl, um, which are pretty much chickens, but they made the ruckus right behind him. And he, he screamed so loud. Just this high pitched, you know, like a, like a kid, like a kindergarten girl on fire, you know, it was just like, um, and, uh, and there were just jungle fowl. It wasn't an elephant killing him, uh, and, and shut my keeper assistant. He was laughing so hard, bro. He had tears rolling down his cheeks and Ray was like, you know, shut up Chuck. He said they were, they were, they were three chickens. They flew out behind my feet. They scared me. And, and Chuck was like, actually there were four chickens over there.

Speaker 2 01:26:00 So we had, uh, we had some beers back at camp and everybody's heads were kinda shaken from that, uh, from that, from that walk. But, uh, that was probably, that was one of the crazier days in Nepal, out in the field, uh, rhino Cobra, bull elephants and chickens,

Speaker 4 01:26:21 Including your husband, your husband 200 pound chicken. That was good. That was great. Oh my gosh. Thank you for sharing that. Um, yeah, that was a great, so kind of now, what, what asks do you have of anybody listening for next steps of maybe what they can do in their lives, on how they can help the wildlife that you love so much? Um,

Speaker 2 01:26:57 I think, uh, people listening, uh, they can have us out. We're trying to get to, we're trying to get in all 50 States. So, uh, we're slowly trying to go do talks and sell our kids' books, uh, in all 50 States. Uh, so every year we put a few new ones in, we went up and spoke in Minnesota last year and it's ended up, we're going to take some, uh, surgeons from the Mayo clinic to South Africa, uh, with us there. They want to get involved. They want to do some conservation, uh, uh, trips with us. Um, but I think, uh, having us out, um, uh, selling, selling the kids books with us, uh, I'm trying to get schools, Brooke, to sell conservation instead of cookies and candy and popcorn. You know, these kids c --

-- ome to your door all the time and they want to sell candy bars or anything, but books last longer and they don't make your kids fat, you know? Uh, and so

Speaker 4 01:27:52 Yeah, no diabetes, no diabetes,

Speaker 2 01:27:56 So many good things come out of, uh, doing conservation instead of cookies and candy. Um, but, um, that would be really helpful. And we do, uh, we do conservation work with schools to where they get half of the funds. So if you sell a Zodiac kids book, it's \$12. Our K ACF gets six and your school gets six for your soccer tournament for your library for whatever you're raising money for. So that's been, um, that's been an ask for this past year, uh, and I think with the new book coming out next spring, I'll have four books out there. Um, and it's just, uh, it'd be great for people in some of the States. You can look at the States on our map, on, uh, on the website and see if we've been to your state, uh, but maybe have us out. Uh, we were supposed to be in Houston last year, Chicago.

Speaker 2 01:28:44 Uh, we were supposed to be back up in San Francisco. They're selling our, our books, uh, at the three zoos and the Bay area. Uh, and we've got some schools there. Um, we got shut down this year, but, uh, we hopefully we'll be back at it, uh, next year. And so maybe we can come visit, uh, visit. We got a little girl in Ohio that is making bracelets for rhinos. Her name is Harper. And so she really wanted us to come out and see her, um, over, uh, they had a little fundraiser in February, but we were, we were going to Nepal. So I couldn't make to her fundraiser, but Harper has made so many bracelets and she has donated thousands of dollars to the K ACF. And she's seven, she's seven years old and we're highlighting her in December. Now, we're in our rhino month.

Speaker 2 01:29:33 So we're going to highlight her and all of her work and all of her Rondo passion. But, uh, I think those would be some of the things Brooke, uh, and maybe, uh, maybe join us, uh, uh, somewhere on the planet, uh, go to Costa Rica with us, go to, we're going to go reforest, uh, Borneo. We're going to go plant some trees in Borneo next year. We're going to go to South Africa. Uh, we're, we're planning on going back to Nepal. We may have a wedding to go attend. Um, so one of, one of the gals that we helped get through college, uh, we, we put her through college, she's getting married. So, uh, we may all go back next year and go to her wedding. So,

Speaker 1 01:30:11 Gosh, well I said, so I'm turning 30 next year. I just had my birthday literally just on my birthday. So this is like my last year in my twenties. And so next year I was like, I really want to go to Costa Rica. So I'm just going to drop that right.

Speaker 2 01:30:29 Well, if, uh, is your birthday, um, in November or December? November, November 28. Okay. So, uh, you're uh, Orca, you're your, that's your total Manimal? Um, so, so, so we're working with, uh, with a scientist up on a Seattle Dr. Giles and her, her, her dog sniffs out Orca poop. So yeah, the dog finds orchid and they can check, uh, DNA. They can check for, um, cortisol levels for stress and the Orca population. So, uh, so that's your birthday total Ms. Brooke, but of course, but,

Speaker 1 01:31:13 Um, but you know,

Speaker 2 01:31:15 We were supposed to be in Costa Rica in October, um, for, uh, when all the sea turtles come to shore, um, and, and lay their eggs. And they have Jaguars that prey on them. And there were four of us gonna be hiking down with our team and camping out in tents. Um, and, and seeing the Jaguar that are praying on the sea turtles or stuff. So something that might be cool for your 30th. You might have to go with this. You might have to deal with this. So

Speaker 1 01:31:48 I'll just bring Lee along. Like I said, he's, he has muscles. It's great. If you ever need anybody to move anything, he's the guy for you.

Speaker 2 01:31:55 He can carry your pack. Exactly. Hey, Sherpa Lee get over here. But yeah, that, that, that era Bata like hundreds and hundreds of sea turtles are there at that time of year. And, uh, and so we had to cancel, we couldn't go, but that's definitely someplace that I want to be, um, this next year too. So Costa Rica take it off your list and getting to see Jaguar, get to see Jaguar in the wild. They had video Brook like 10 feet away, just them sitting there watching this Jaguar eating --

-- on a sea turtle and they filmed it with their phones.

Speaker 4 01:32:35 It's insane. I mean, I was supposed to be in the Pennsylvania this past September to see Jaguars, but, you know, life had other plans, which is totally fine. So if I get to see him in Costa Rica, which that's even way more rare, so that would be waste more special. So,

Speaker 2 01:32:53 And that would be on foot, on foot instead of on a boat. So, Oh my God.

Speaker 4 01:33:00 Dropping that nugget that might just have to happen.

Speaker 2 01:33:05 Sorry, Courtney Nepal. We'll figure it out.

Speaker 4 01:33:14 That's great, Dave, thank you. Um, so what are some of the ways that people can connect with you? Like what's your website? Are you on any social media platform?

Speaker 2 01:33:22 Yeah, I think the easiest is a K acf.eco, uh, is our website, uh, Katie abs and conservation fund. Um, and then, uh, Heather Schwarz is our social media director. So, uh, she's really active for us on, on Facebook and Instagram. Um, and so we've got a big presence there and, uh, our, our Katie's night event, we had to do virtual, uh, back in October, we moved it a couple times hoping that we could do a live event, but, uh, we ended up having a virtual event. So, and we sell animal art and stuff if his, so we, we, uh, had a Wolf speaker. So if anybody wants to, uh, to get, get up with us for Katie's night, we had almost 400 people on our zoo and we ended up making \$36,000 Brook in one night. So that was pretty, pretty special. That goes so far in all the countries where we work.

Speaker 2 01:34:14 It's just amazing how, how, how that money will be stretched between Tanzania and Nepal, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Vietnam. So, um, so yeah, but, uh, but yeah, so see us on the website and, uh, and, and reach out to me if, uh, if you have some, some kids or schools or any, uh, any type of a partnership that we could do together, that would be great. Um, I'd love to come out and do, uh, do talks for the community. Um, and so, uh, I'm kind of a slut that way. I, uh, I get, I get around I'm off on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, so I can, I can go to schools on my days off, you know, when that was still, when schools were open and, uh, you know, it just, uh, it's fun, juggling all that stuff and, and stay in busy, you know, it's, uh, it's, uh, it's been a pretty exciting run the last few years. So I look forward to 2021 and seeing what's going to open up Brooke for me. And you both may maybe, maybe several trips together. Maybe I love the sound of that. I'm totally down, you know? Uh, awesome. Well, this is great, Dave, and until next time, thank you. Hey, thanks again,

Speaker 5 01:35:34 Listening to this episode of rewild ology, if you'd like what you heard hit that subscribe button to never miss a future episode, do you have an environmental organization travel story or research that you'd like to share? Let me know@rewatch.com until next time friends together, we will. Rewild the planet.

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