

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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MICK KALBER:

I've never been afraid around a volcano. It's like ... looking into the Gates of Hell. You know, there's just something about that, that's intriguing and mysterious.

GRACE ATKINS:

So we want to tell these stories that we think will do good. We both grew up on Geographic, we grew up on all these wonderful natural history documentaries that really had a mission of trying to better our world and better the planet.

PAUL ATKINS:

And then—and then, there's uh, one other aspect, too, uh, that I realized as well, is—the exhilaration of knowing that you were afraid, and you did it anyway.

RON EDMONDS

Part of my job as a photojournalist is to explain to people who can't see it. I was able to be the eyes of millions of people. I mean, there are not many people around who have had the—as many images looked at as me. I worked for the Associated Press, and on any given day, my picture could be on the front of two thousand newspapers around the country, as well as television stations.

They are eyewitnesses to the wonders of the natural world and compelling moments in human history. We'll recall conversations with four visual storytellers next on Long Story Short.

One-on-one, engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people. Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. On this special edition of Long Story Short we revisit our conversations with four people who, sometimes at great personal risk, captured stunning images of stories that shaped our world. Self-described volcanographer Mick Kalber who lives near newly created lava outside Pāhoa on Hawai'i Island, natural history documentarians Grace and Paul Atkins of East Honolulu and Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist Ron Edmonds of Fairfax, Virginia.

We start with Mick Kalber. Since 1984 Kalber has spent many hours in the seat of a helicopter with doors removed to record footage of Kīlauea Volcano for his own documentary series, as well as for news coverage and social media. Kalber followed in the footsteps of his newscaster father and worked as a television journalist in Omaha, Nebraska and eventually as a news photographer and producer for a hit magazine television program in Denver, Colorado. That success though brought brutal work schedules that led to burnout and substance abuse. During our 2016 conversation, Mick Kalber talks about his recovery and building a career by telling a continuing visual story of the world's most active volcano.

I'm in my thirtieth year of sobriety now. I moved here thirty-two years ago, so I lived here for only about two years before I got into AA. Everything was going south. That was part of the reason I moved here, was, I was in Denver, I was drinking, I was using mostly marijuana, got into a little bit of cocaine, I visited a friend of mine on the Big Island. I loved the Big Island. And I said, I'm gonna leave here, and you know, get out of Dodge, and go out and have a great life in Hawaii and live on the beach and get healthy, and you know, da-da-da. But my disease came right along with me, before you knew it, I was doing the same old things again. My ex, we were separated at the time. She actually moved out, and we put the kids in school. My kids were in Waldorf at Mālamalama School in Paradise Park. But I did get sober during that time, and I haven't had a drink or a drug other than the medicines prescribed for me for my throat and stuff since then. What happened in pretty short order was, I got there in March of '84, and Mauna Loa was erupting. And at some point, Kīlauea erupted. It was doing high fountaining eruptions back then, and Kīlauea erupted at the same time. And I went, Oh, man, I've gotta get some equipment. And called up Kent Baker.

At Channel 2.

At Channel 2 and said, I'm here on the Big Island, I'm for real, and I can shoot for you. And lo and behold, one day he called me up and he said, Go get in a helicopter and go shoot the volcano. And I did, and I was totally blown away. Never seen anything like that in my life, coming from Omaha and Denver, and like oh, you know, 1,000-foot fountain, 1,200-foot fountain. And it was amazing. And there were people at that time that had other videos out that had high fountaining eruptions in them. And I thought, you know, what can I do different from that? But eventually, it created a fissure eruption and made a lava lake down the hill, took a couple houses, and went in the ocean. I said, Now I got a story. So, I put together a show. That show was my first VolcanoScapes show, Pele's March to the Pacific. It was about a forty-minute show, and took me a while, but it was very well received, and people were snapping 'em up like crazy.

You don't advertise yourself as a videographer; you are a ...

Volcanographer. I made that up. You know, that's my own creation, because I think it more aptly describes what I do. You know, I'm not a volcanologist; don't get me wrong. You know. I've been around it long enough, and seen a lot of stuff that I kind of have an insight to it. I've made my living basically for the past thirty years, over thirty years, shooting Kīlauea Volcano. It's what I do. And so, yeah, I'm a volcanographer. We fly basically wherever we want to, because we're on a media flight, it's a charter flight, and so we can fly at any altitude. And we do; we go down as close as we can to shoot what we shoot.

Have you ever been in danger? Have you really felt danger? 'Cause where you fall is gonna be into fire.

Exactly; and it's two thousand degrees hot liquid rock with—

And auto rotation won't help you.

With jet fuel. You know.

Yeah; that's true.

Jet fuel and hot ... Not a good combo.

You'd go fast.

There was one time when my pilot, John Greenway with Hilo Bay Air, was flying me over Kūpa'ianahā, which was a lava lake in the shape of key. They call it the key vent as well. And we were flying over the neck of the key, which is probably ... eighty or a hundred feet across or something. And he got halfway across it and he stopped; he hovered, because another helicopter was coming in front of him. And it was early on, this was the first three or four years that I'd been flying, and I didn't know anything about air speed at the time. And so, when he hovered, I looked down below me and I went ... Oh, man. You know. If the engine quits, we're toast, you know. We're done. And yeah, it scared me. Nothing happened, obviously. When we got across that, I said something to him about that, and he said, Oh, we had thirty knots of air speed, and should anything have happened, I could have auto-rotated down to one side or the other. So, it really wasn't a problem. But I didn't know that. And so, psychologically, you know. And it's unnerving. People who go with us, we fly with the doors off.

M-hm.

'Cause you can't shoot through the window, you know. So, we fly doors off, and go close to it, and there's people who can't do that; they can't fly with us. We also stand. I don't stand on the struts, 'cause then the helicopter would be flying too far down. But when I flew in a Jet Ranger, we would stand on the struts. And so, you're basically standing outside of the helicopter.

And you're tied up; right?

Well, I have a seatbelt on. I don't have a harness on; I don't wear a harness. Seatbelt with a piece of tape around it so it doesn't accidentally come off. You know.

You mean, duct tape?

Well, yeah, if we're taped, yeah, duct tape.

Whoa.

Well, it's not going anywhere. You know. Long as you keep the buckle closed, you know.

Are you gonna go up as long as you can, as long as the volcano is willing?

Yeah, I guess. I mean, you know, I'm getting to the age where it's not so easy to hike out like I used to. You know, I used to hike out by myself, four or five miles, you know. And if it comes down right now, it's probably gonna be about a five-mile hike to go see it.

And what about hanging out of the helicopter?

Well, that's easy. No, it is. I mean, uh, flying in a helicopter, we fly for an hour. You know, I can go fly for an hour holding a camera. I love that; that's fun.

Mick Kalber flew nearly every day of the four month long, 2018 eruption of Kīlauea Volcano in lower Puna on Hawai'i Island to provide footage to worldwide news outlets. Later he started working on a new documentary chronicling the volcano's eruption dating back to 1983.

Up next, trail-blazing independent filmmakers Paul and Grace Atkins who trekked across the globe to swim with great white sharks, dolphins and killer whales. They have

spent months and sometimes years at a time capturing the spectacle of the natural world as well as to underscore for audiences the fragility of our endangered environment. In our 2017 interview, these partners in life shared how they created documentaries for National Geographic, the BBC and Public Broadcasting for more than 30 years.

PAUL ATKINS:

I was determined to be a marine biologist, and I was working on my doctorate. I just started to feel that even as much as I loved the ocean, and I loved the people I was working with, I loved scuba diving, and I loved being out in the field, the idea that I was going to eventually end up getting a job and being, you know, on a faculty somewhere was not really my dream of the sort of life that I wanted to lead. And then, I picked up, you know, the department's movie camera, because we used to use the camera to film fish underwater for the research that we were doing, coral reef fish. And it wasn't long before I started to realize that this is what I really want to do.

GRACE ATKINS:

I knew I wanted to do natural history, or I wanted to do science documentaries. And at the time I went to school, there was really no definitive program that taught you how to do natural history films. I think it was Stanford that had one graduate course that I took in science communications, but other than that, it was a field that was wide open. So, when we started, we were really kind of like forging our way into a newer ... world, a new way of making films, and basically had to do it all on our own.

PAUL: And I think it was the combination of, you know, just having the courage, really, to try it. Because now, you were a team. Now, you were two people.

GRACE: M-hm.

PAUL: And Gracie brought in a sense that I didn't really have, which was a business sense, about finances, how to use a credit card. I didn't even have a credit card, or just know how to use one, you know. And about the same time, I was introduced to Arthur Jones, who was a billionaire inventor of Nautilus exercise machines. And he was spending a lot of his money that he was making on Nautilus exercise machines on a television studio in Lake Helen, Florida. He was going all over the world just filming things. And he showed up in Hawai'i, and Bruce Carlson at the Waikiki Aquarium introduced me to him. And so, Arthur hired me for a couple of days to be a grip.

GRACE: M-hm.

PAUL: And I started to learn a little bit more about video cameras, working for him. The name of his company was Nautilus, because it was the cam of his exercise machines, which was based on the spiral design of a nautilus shell. Arthur decided he wanted to mount an expedition to go to Palau to bring chambered nautilus back to be at his studio in Lake Helen, Florida so he could have them in a big aquarium there. I said, Well, why don't you do a documentary about this trip, about the expedition to catch live nautilus. And he said, Fine. And I said, I want to shoot it. And he said, Sure. We barely knew what we were doing, but over the course of a couple of trips down there, we managed to get enough footage to put together, you know, a semblance of a documentary.

Wasn't that an award-winning documentary?

GRACE: Yes.

PAUL: Yeah.

GRACE: Actually.

PAUL: But not until we showed it to Jim Young, who was, you know, the executive director of Hawai'i Public Television at that time. And Jim became a big supporter. There was no model—

GRACE: There was nothing.

PAUL: --having to do this at all.

GRACE: Yeah. There was no YouTube, there was no internet, there was no online courses. And very few productions that were going on, too. Yeah.

PAUL: And there weren't that many natural history films being produced. This was the very beginning. You know, cable had not exploded yet.

What are some of the other adventures you've had together?

GRACE: I think one of our most difficult and challenging films, and yet one of the most satisfying in a long time, because it turned out so well, was the one we did on dolphins for Geographic. We wanted to take a film that looked at the opposite of what the public perception of an animal was. For example, like dolphins. Dolphins are always thought to be sweetness and light, and everybody loves a dolphin. So, we wanted to look at the darker side of dolphins, which meant we were not only just looking at

tursiops, but we were looking all the dolphin family. And we spent two years making this film. So, we went out to this location, and we built a camp there, and the scientist was with us and said, This is the best time of year for you to be able to see dolphins herding fish. And we had never heard of dolphins actually coming and herding fish onto shore, just like the killer whales had done in Patagonia. And for weeks, we were trying to, you know, see this action happen. And it wasn't happening, so the scientist said, Well, something must not be right, we're not at the right time of season. I can't tell you what it takes to get an expedition all the way out to a remote location like that. The weeks and the months of planning, and then also, the physical actual moving out there and setting up your camps, and getting all your gear ready, and then doing the shooting.

PAUL: You need to bring all your food, your water, you know, solar showers, generators, all of that out there, charging batteries, all of that.

GRACE: 'Cause there's nothing out there. So okay, so we're there for two weeks and decide, oh, well, this is not gonna happen this time, so we're gonna have to come back at another time. So we did that, but this time we came very prepared with all the things we needed to survive out there, including tents, which we didn't have before, which we could eat in because there's all these flies out there. We lived out on this location for like, two months. And you become connected with an environment like you never would, because there's nobody out there; just us. And the dolphins sure enough came in, a family of dolphins. And they would come in, and they would herd the fish. And we were on this huge, long beach, maybe three hundred feet of beach. And those dolphins would come in and herd the fish, and Paul would be out there with his camera. Ann Marie, our assistant, who was working with us, she and I would be up on the hills spotting and telling him where the dolphins were coming, and where they were going. And he would run up and down this beach trying to film them, because as soon as he would get up to film, the dolphins would see him and would go to another section of the beach. And so, there would be Paul with his camera gear, humping it all the way to the other side of the beach. And finally, you know, we got the footage.

PAUL: After two trips.

GRACE: After two trips.

PAUL: Yeah.

Had anyone ever gotten these photos?

GRACE: No; no.

This film before?

PAUL: No.

GRACE: No.

PAUL: I'm in love with camerawork and visual storytelling, no matter what it involves. I love working with actors, and I work with a lot of directors like Terrence Malick, who give their actors a lot of freedom both in dialog and in movement. So, as a cameraman, it's not like you have marks on the floor.

Then your background is great for that.

PAUL: My background is like, I know how to do this, 'cause I've filmed animals before.

GRACE: Yeah. Well, you think of it as a risk, you think of the adventure, you think of what you're getting to film, what you're gonna be, you know, making. It's been more about telling a story that will do something better for the world. And it just so happens that some of the things involve a little bit more risky, you know, endeavors.

PAUL: It's the exhilaration of knowing that you were afraid, and you did it anyway.

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: And you came through the other end, and everything's okay. There is an exhilaration to that.

Paul and Grace Atkins continue to shoot and produce documentaries in Hawai'i and elsewhere and are involved in the development of another documentary about a solution to the climate crisis.

Our next guest is Ron Edmonds. He worked for more than 35 years as a news photographer, for the Honolulu Star-Bulletin in the 1970s, and then for news wire services, ending with a distinguished 28-year run with the Associated Press. During our 2012 conversation at his home in Virginia, he talked about his second day on the job on the White House beat covering a speech by then-President Ronald Reagan. Edmonds won the Pulitzer Prize for the exclusive images he captured that day in 1981 during a failed attempt to assassinate the president.

We almost missed the whole event, because at the Hilton, we were downstairs, and they always ask people, Please stay in your seats 'til the President and his entourage leaves. Well, as soon as the President walked out, everybody got up. There were two flights of escalators to get up to the ground floor where the car was at. Well, by the time we got to the back of the room to go out—'cause he goes out a secure entrance, and we go out a side entrance, the escalators were jammed with people, and we were having to say, Excuse us, excuse us, because he won't wait. And he came, he waved, and I made one image and the bangs went off. They sounded like firecrackers. It was over so quick, you did not have time to really realize what went on. He shot six shots in something like one-point-seven seconds, from the first to the last shot it's only one-point-seven seconds. I saw him grimace. So I knew that—I mean, this—even if it hadn't been shooting, this was going to be maybe a humorous—what you call a humorous picture of the President of the United States reacting to this—to this bang. 'Cause I saw him, he squeezed his eyes an—and kinda ... grimaced like that. And it wasn't—I didn't even know they were shots until the limo—limo pulled away, and you could see the people laying—laying on the ground. Because they were out of my viewfinder, all I could see was the two agents through the viewfinder. It wasn't 'til the car pulled away, and that's when I went, Oh, my gosh, because you know, here was Brady laying on the ground, and—and McCarthy the agent, laying there. And of course, then, I knew this was—this is when the adrenalin started pumping. And again, this is one of the situations where I had worked with this crew of agents for many months. And for a while, they allowed me—one of my favorite pictures is of the scene that's got—that tells kind of the whole story is it's got all three of the people wounded laying on the ground, and them wrestling with Hinckley in the background. Well, most of the other photographers, even the ones that had come out late, didn't get that, because they got pushed back off to the side by the agents. And I was fortunate enough that I was off to the far side, and for quite a while, the agents who knew me left me out there. The first agent grabbed me and went, Oh! Just moved me aside, realized who I—well, he was moving people out of the way. So I was able to make those images before they kind of once they get organized and they start making press areas where you have to stand and all that. The biggest thing that happened to me that day, on my luck side, is that when they pushed the President in the car, the motorcade took off and didn't stop for us. Because if the motorcade had stopped, I would have had to get in that van. That's my job to stay with the President. I'd have had none of the aftermath, none of the arresting of Hinckley. And I—I—I know to this day, I—I always tell people, thank God that van didn't stop, because I would have had to make that split second decision. You know, my job is to stay with the President, you never leave the President.

How much physical risk did you turn out to have been during the shooting?

Well, I didn't know this 'til later. Jerry Parr was the lead agent on the thing, and we're pretty good friends, and he showed me some of the diagrams. And fortunately for myself and the UPI photographer who was standing right next to me, the one bullet that didn't either hit the car or hit—hit anybody out there went across the street, and went about two feet over my head across the street. It was an intense few moments. The first time I was ever in gunfire was during the riots in the—in the early 60s in Berkeley in People's Park. And the first time you're around someone shooting and you realize that you can get hit with it, a lot of times you're around those situations, but you kinda stand off, and we all kinda have that feeling, it's not us. That we're kind of—

Right; it's a denial.

—an observer, we're around it. I was actually fairly easy with people firing guns, even though a gun can—can kill you. It wasn't until I was in Iran for—for a short stint, and it wasn't 'til we were coming on artillery fire. And that changed the whole world, as wha—what you think about being a bang-bang photographer for me. In Iran, people there, we were fighting 'em, and thousands died in battles over there, and it was just a total—that was a shocker for me, the first time I dealt with that kind of loss of life, you know, when you're—you're—you're walking over a battlefield where bodies are laying all over. And we're not talking about five or ten, we're talking about fifteen, twenty thousand people who died in some of those battles. And it really opens your eyes to ... to how bad war is. When I won the Pulitzer, the President invited me into the Oval Office, and , so we had a little ten or fifteen-minute meeting, just the two of us, an—and—and aides. We used to call him Governor, an—and—and people would say, Governor, look this way, Governor, look this way. And he said, You know, Ron, he says, I think next time, I'm gonna have a stand-in for this scene. [CHUCKLE] Then he proceeded to tell me a Cecil B. DeMille joke. But he was a—it—it was very, very nice of the President that he invited me in and talked about it. And—and so, you know, I look back, and it was a big day for me professionally, but I also look at other pictures of—of um, you know, the handshake between Clinton, Arafat, and Rabin which was uh, you know, uh, a—a big moment in history. And uh, fortunately, I had uh, a center position, and uh ... uh, ended up on—on—on a large majority of the newspapers around the world was here with my picture of a—of a historical event. I've made pictures of every president since Nixon. Nixon, Carter, Ford. And then, I covered at the White House, I covered I did some photography of—of Carter in his last month, and then I did Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush ... and that's it.

Who was your favorite to cover?

George Bush, Sr.

Because of his personal—

Personal.

—manner.

He—he—he loved everybody, and, he was just—he was fun to cover. There's a work and there's a politics, and we don't always get along politicking wise, he was a very, very, very good person with everybody around him. I kind of felt like I was always the eyes of people who couldn't get there. You know, I've been—moments I was in—in Berlin with—with Ronald Reagan when he told Gorbachev to tear down the wall. I've covered volcanoes on Mount St. Helens, I've covered the war, I've covered the Olympics, I've covered Summer Olympics, the Winter Olympics. I've been to almost all—every—I've covered almost every convention since 1980, and I've got to see things that most people will never see in their lives. You know, traveling down the Nile River with—with the President of the United States chatting with you, or getting a call one morning from President George Bush, Sr. One morning at eight o'clock in the morning, the phone rings, and Grace answers the phone and ... she wakes me up and says, It's the White House calling. I said, What? The White House? She says, the guy on the other end says it's the White House. So I answered, and it was his aide saying, What are you doing today? I said, Nothing. He said, The President would like you to come over and play horseshoes. So I went and spent—you know, spent the Sunday, it was like going to your grandmother's house, you know. We barbecued, we played horseshoes. You know, how many people get to do that? I mean, from the son of a poor truck driver, and here I am sitting and having a drink with the President of the United States. That's a pretty—pretty good, a pretty good career.

Now in retirement, Ron Edmonds enjoys traveling with his wife Grace and indulging his love of bass fishing. He embraces this different life with no deadlines. Mahalo to Ron Edmonds of Fairfax, Virginia, Grace and Paul Atkins of East Honolulu and Mick Kalber of Pāhoa, Hawai'i Island for having shared their stories with us, and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

MICK KALBER:

You know, I tell people all the time that if you move to the Big Island, you know, you're dealing with the fire energy, and it kinda forces your hand. You know, whatever is going on in your life is gonna come to a head because of the energy that's on that island.

GRACE ATKINS:

We were like two people off doing these kind of films together, that if you didn't have the system where you knew exactly what you had to do, how you had to do it, and could rely upon each other completely all the time, you might not even be alive. Because some of the work we did was really dangerous.

PAUL ATKINS:

I used to have a fear of heights. And even today, if I stand on a vertical cliff and look straight down ... it's a mild case of vertigo. And so, to film on cliffs, which I've done a lot of, and to film from a helicopter, I had to get over that. I had to really get over it.

RON EDMONDS:

Most of us do that kind of thing because you want a change. You know, most of the guy—there's—if people think that the photographers are getting rich covering the war, it's just not happening. Most of 'em are concerned about what's going on in the world, and if they're not there, things could happen that will never be seen by most public.

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