



Hello and welcome to Global Sanctuary for Elephants' brand new podcast Global Rumbblings. Global Sanctuary for Elephants, or GSE for short, is a non-profit organization with the mission to create vast safe spaces for captive elephants where they are able to heal physically and emotionally, often from very traumatic pasts.

I'm your host Nadia Mari, and I'll be taking you to the lush jungle of the Mato Grosso region in Central Brazil, home of GSE's initial project, Elephant Sanctuary Brazil, currently home to six female Asian elephants lovingly referred to as "The Girls"

Nadia: Hi and welcome to episode 1 of Global Rumbblings. We are all really excited to be here with you today. The idea for this podcast has been in the pipeline for a little over a year. On today's episode, I am joined by none other than Kat and Scott Blais, co-founders of GSE, and I'll be asking them how it all began.

Hi Scott. Hi Kat. how are you?

Scott: Hi Nadia

Kat: Hey, we're okay.

Scott: We're good. How are you?

Nadia: Yeah, getting through autumnal Germany. What's the weather like in Brazil? Make us envious.

Scott: It is perfect as always; it's stunning today. We're looking out over the valley and down through the middle of the sanctuary, and it's just nothing but spectacular here.

Nadia: Wow, wonderful. So how did it all begin? Why elephants? That's something I've always asked myself. I'm sure that the followers have also asked themselves that. Why elephants? Was there a specific incident? Was it just, I don't know, just by chance? How did you get into your work?

Scott: This is a great question Nadia. How long do we have? You know, we're really excited to have this podcast and opening up talk about the past and be able to bring people along the journey. It's been a long journey. Ultimately the journey for me started almost 35 years ago. And, by chance, working at a safari park as a young kid and interested in working around animals, initially with marine mammals, but I didn't have marine mammals close to me. And I just lucked out and had a chance to start working in the, around the elephant department at a safari park and it evolved from there. Initially just out of curiosity and interest and intrigue, and turned into a passion. A lot of what I learned then was the dark side of working with elephants. Working with you know with training, with shows, with demonstrations, public, you know, education programs and a lot of it was dominance-based with the elephant management. And fortunately the elephants opened my eyes to what their lives were really like behind the facade of education and entertainment. And they are the ones that inspired us to do more. Inspired us to look further and try to create a better life for them. And I don't know how far, how deep you want to go into that?

Nadia: That's a good beginning. And Kat, how did elephant advocacy, your work for elephants start for you? Obviously Scott said that he came from the industry, so he saw the dark side. But why not cats or why not, I don't know, dogs. Why elephants with you Kat?

Kat: Well, unlike Scott, when I was 15 years old, (laughing) I was hanging out with friends and doing much of nothing. Yeah I wasn't an elephant person. You know, I'm not one of those people who's like, "Ever since I was younger I've always loved them." For me it was just kind of a progression. I was in the veterinary field, and true to my nature, just continued to get bored. You know, you can only see so many dogs with ear infections and diarrhea before you want to do something else. And I tried different specialties and was still bored, so I went back to school. And they wanted me to do two internships in an area I had never worked in. So for me, that was pretty limited. I had done a lot by that point with wildlife rehab and everything else, so one was at a wolf sanctuary, and the other was at the elephant sanctuary. And I never left the elephant sanctuary, essentially.

Nadia: So that's the elephant sanctuary in Tennessee, which Scott co-founded in 1995. Is that correct?

Scott: Yeah that's correct. And elephants have a way of doing this. Once they get a hold of you, you just can't get away (laughing).

Kat: Yeah, it's definitely a weird thing. I lived in New York; I had my own life. I didn't expect to move to the middle of nowhere Tennessee to essentially work with elephants. If you had told me that's what I would have done a year before I would have laughed. But there's something about them that I didn't even know was really a thing. You know, as an intern, you do a lot of grunt work and cleaning and all sorts of things, but at that time we were also able to spend time just watching the elephants. And you can see the way they are with each other and their relationships with each other are, they're so dynamically beautiful. They're so, so many of them come from such terrible lives and have so many emotional issues, yet they open themselves up

to each other in ways that it's almost hard to imagine making yourself that vulnerable when you're in such a hurt place yourself. But they're so gracious with each other and, you know, willing to give up their own desires for another and, like you said, it's kind of that thing of you sit there and watch them and at the end of six weeks I was asked if I would stay and essentially said no. Because I liked my life (laughing).

Nadia: In NY?

Kat: Yeah I like being able to get Thai food at 3:00 in the morning, and my friends, and my cute little house. But on my last day there I watched a show called "The Urban Elephant" that National Geographic had done. And it was on two of the elephants there: Shirley and Jenny. Who, when they ended up at the sanctuary together, they initially didn't realize they had known each other in the past. It was only by watching their interactions that they realized that it was very different from all of the other elephant introductions they had done. So when they looked back, they had known each other like 26 years prior when Shirley was older and Jenny was more of a calf, and they had this amazing relationship, and the piece was done very well, of course. And at the end of it I had the thought of - this is something I would watch at home and be like: this would be an amazing place to work. I'm like, and they're asking me essentially if I want to work there, even though I have no elephant experience, and I'm like, no thanks. So I talked to my dad and changed my mind, and that was that.

Scott: And she never walked away from elephants again.

Nadia: And she never walked away from elephants again. So as they say, an elephant never forgets when you talk about the relationship with these two elephants who he knew each other before. We've jumped quite a bit forward.

Scott: We did a nice little jump forward. (everyone laughing)

Nadia: We went from Scott working as a young kid at a safari park and sort of marine animals and then it was elephants. Kat, her veterinary background and then working at TES, that you co-founded TES, which is Tennessee Elephant Sanctuary, for those of you who don't know, in 1995. So what sparked that? We'll go back a bit. What sparked that Scott? Was that because you said you saw the dark side to captive elephants in circuses and zoos, and that it wasn't all it was cut out to be?

Scott: Yeah you know, exactly that. When you start working with elephants, especially at a - I shouldn't say we - when I started working with elephants at a young age, especially a young guy, and you are thrown into this world of working around elephants, the majesty of them and the allure of who elephants are. And a lot of it does get caught up in that entertainment world. A lot of people that would visit the facility and say, "This is the best place to work, and you get to bring elephants in the woods and you're learning from the best trainers available, and you have a breeding facility, it's just one of the best places in the world." And you hear that often enough, and initially it's like, "Wow, aren't I lucky," everyone's telling me I'm lucky. And I was very

fortunate. But when you start to think, look at it from the outside, but you take a half a step back and look in to see what we're doing, and you kind of open your heart a little bit more, it's pretty grim.

It's pretty brutal. It's not pretty grim - it's really brutal what those elephants endure. And then how much is sacrificed. How much they sacrifice for survival in that world that humans have created for them. And start to question if this is the 'best of the best' how horrible must it be everywhere else because this is pretty horrible. You know, this is pretty tragic. And that really started the line of thinking of what else can be done for elephants.

Kat: But then you had a couple of incidences specifically where you realized that they were more than you were seeing through dominance.

Scott: Yeah, I mean this is, you know, for me and my history here there's so many pieces, and I know in this trying to share the stories. I mean, you know, we could spend five episodes of our new podcast on before the sanctuary. (Kat laughing) There's so much that happened in those years, so many details of experiences and, you know, going as dark as being involved with the abusive beatings and the dominance and starting to feel what that feels like. And outside of all the brainwashing that occurred, as a young person in that field, but then there are moments where you know these elephants kind of open up to you a little bit. And it's almost like they see this opportunity, this tiny little opening and they pry it open as quick as they can, and they never let your heart close again.

And that happened a couple of times. One instance in particular, with an elephant named Rasha. And I was encouraged to approach her a little bit differently and just to give her reassurance because she was a very insecure elephant. And so I was, just gave her a little bit of assurance: "Hey Rasha, we're all good, I'm just going to give you a bath, no big deal." And she responded with complete cooperation. Super easy, very gentle, very kind. We did the whole bath routine and I went over afterward just to say, you know, "Hey, good girl. Thank you." And she expressed what I felt as a depth of appreciation that I never imagined would come from them. And it was the first time I had felt anything reciprocal that way. It was always the human side, and the human dominance side, and us dictating all of it. And it was the first time that an elephant had, that I recognized anyway, that an elephant then came back in the opposite direction saying thank you. And recognizing and feeling like she was expressing something toward me and that expression of gratitude: thanks for the reassurance, thanks for the understanding, thanks for just taking a second to acknowledge where I was. And...

Nadia: Yeah, thanks for the respect you showed her.

Scott: Thank you. It was a subtle thing to do, but profound in its impact. And that was really the, again this door got blown open at that point, and then how can you turn back?

Nadia: Yeah.

Scott: How can you then turn a blind eye and then go back to not listening to them again? And it really opened up this corridor of realizing how much we are removing from their lives, how much we are subjecting them to and not giving them any sort of voice. And it started the trajectory, the pathway of: what can we do to give elephants more of a life. When you look at it financially it's difficult. How are you going to support giving elephants a new life? You know, they're expensive.

Nadia: (laughing) They're big.

Scott: There's payments, there's elephant care, I mean, it's expensive. So how are you going to do that? And the first thought was to try to move elephants to Costa Rica where they could have a beautiful habitat and do safari treks for 2 hours out of the day. There was still going to be dominance, and there was still going to be management, but we were trying to remove as much of that as possible, but still find a way to support it. And it wasn't the right pathway forward, but it was the first consideration. Maybe we can do something for 22 hours a day. It can be their life for 2 hours a day after they do treks. Okay, it's a much better ratio than what they had anywhere else, but still not the right answer.

For all the right reasons, that didn't work out. And then we actually decided to try to connect ourselves with a zoo or other facilities that had more space at an established Institution where they had visitations and just to try to amplify the space the elephant had and move away from the close contact and create a space that was just for elephants, where people could observe elephants from a distance. And a lot of the places we talked to just, some said, "Yeah, yeah great, but, you know, I don't think that's what people want," or you know, "We don't know how it would sustain itself in the long term." Until we met up with the zoo in Nashville Tennessee. And at that point my co-founder Carol Buckley, she had an elephant named Tara. She was also working at the safari park at the time when all of this started happening - these changes started evolving, in my mind, in my experience, in my heart, and we ended up at the Nashville Zoo. And with Tara, who was owned by Carol, and Tara was also pregnant. And the idea was that Tara was going to have her calf at the Nashville Zoo and then we were going to develop more of an open space for the elephants.

And the zoo, after the calf was stillborn, the zoo quickly closed their mind on that door. They closed the door very quickly because they saw the loss of the revenue that they had hoped to have by a baby elephant. The lack of that did not allow them to move forward. But it was there that opened our eyes to so many things, not only during all the tragedy of the the calf being stillborn and all of the unknowns, and kind of a slap in the face when people immediately after this calf was stillborn, our colleagues would say, "You have to breed her back right away again."

Nadia: So the cash cow - baby elephants, baby animals in zoos are the magnet.

Scott: "She's primed for it, she's ready for it, let's breed her." This is of the utmost importance. Having no consideration for what could have happened to Tara. She could have ruptured her uterus, she could have had many other complications. We could have lost Tara in the process.

And no one cared about that; no one saw that. It's just the cash cow, just a baby elephant and it's all about prestige, not about saving the species. It's just about another elephant in captivity to bring more money in.

The other thing that happened was during our time there, because Tara was the only elephant, we were available to the public quite a bit. And she was an exhibit animal and we were there to hang out with Tara but since we were hanging out with Tara we would answer questions from the public. And that was really another slap in the face because the first two questions that were asked by visitors were "Can we ride her," and "Does she do tricks?" And that was the value that people had or saw in an elephant: it's what can they do for us? It wasn't this beautiful, amazing elephant in front of us. It was: "what can she do for us?" Same elephant, same facilities, same guests, when we would take Tara out of her exhibit, and she was in a picnic area, grass area, and it was just surrounded by sidewalk, and we would ask all of the patrons to stay on the sidewalk. And Tara would be grazing, just methodically eating grass, doing what elephants do 20 hours out of the day, and then the number one comment was "I didn't know elephants eat grass."

Nadia: So it's education? People, I know I grew up and I think I did go to a circus. I think my parents did take me to a circus. I can't remember seeing elephants, I remember seeing lions jumping through a fire ring. So in the end, I mean that is, I mean I'm born 1969, yes everyone knows my age now (chuckling), and so that is how we were brought up. Animals for our entertainment, exotic animals, you know, in a circus, exotic animals in zoos on display. So, that, at that point then, I presume people saying - yes an elephant is there for our entertainment. For riding. It's sad but yes.

Scott: This is a value that we have created. You know, those that are responsible, we're the ones working with these animals. We're creating this space for this false education.

Nadia: Yeah

Scott: We're sacrificing who these elephants are for false education. We're not even sacrificing them to better our world. We're sacrificing to destroy it, because people would learn more about them through documentaries, through nature films, through all of these other sources than what we're doing in this captive scenario. So that was a big push forward again because we're realizing how wrong this environment is, not only for the animals, but for education value as well, for conservation, I mean everything is completely false.

Kat: I mean at this time there wasn't, you know, we talked about working with elephants dominance based. There was no protective contact management of elephants at that point.

Scott: It was just beginning.

Kat: They started it with marine mammals but at that point it hadn't shifted over to elephants. Elephants was as a male dominance-based position. It was a bunch of men who seemed very

pleased with themselves that they could get this large animal to do what they wanted. And it's the same thing with zoos. It was tiny little enclosures that didn't allow them to express any of their natural tendencies. You know, enclosures that we would later on learn that damaged them not only emotionally but physically. But that was what it was at the time and, as is often the case, pushing forward through that is uncomfortable.

You know, nobody wants to be the person to do something different because it's not easy and you're met with a lot of resistance. I mean the zoos community said elephants would become rogue, and you wouldn't be able to handle them, and they would kill people, and so on and so on. But at some point you have to try to do something.

Nadia: So I would just like to pick up on two words. I can hear, you said, it was the dark side of the safari park, you've mentioned dominance, and you've mentioned beatings. Maybe for listeners who do not know - there is a misconception that elephants are, I'll say, "domesticated". Just like I ride a horse, a horse has to be broken in as well, but I can ride a horse, so I could ride an elephant. So with this myth that elephants are domesticated, so it's okay to ride them, and to have them do tricks, that is something which the zoo and circus world still then use as their excuse?

Kat: Yeah, but domestication by definition...

Nadia: It's is not

Kat: It's breeding for specific traits through many, many generations to create a specific being. And that has not been done with elephants at all. They are still very much so wild animals. Most of the things that you see, like riding an elephant, being able to bathe an elephant, being able to stand next to an elephant and take a selfie, that only happens through dominance management. I mean this elephant doesn't want you on their back; this elephant doesn't want one person every 15 minutes that they don't know in their face, touching them, standing next to them, taking photos. I mean it's just like people, yes, maybe I hug one person or two people but if somebody that I didn't know, came up to me every 20 minutes and just walked up, invaded my space, hugged me regardless of what I wanted, you know, I wouldn't be very pleased. And it's the same thing. You're putting them in a scenario where they're forced to allow touching and affection. Even if it comes from a good place, where people don't realize, you know, or don't think about it, it's just not accepted unless there is dominance behind essentially forcing them to allow all of these things to happen.

Nadia: Yeah, so all this then culminated and came together and you decided then, how was then the sanctuary in Tennessee then founded? Obviously, in the end, it comes down to money. How do you, as you said, how do you pay for such a, to keep an elephant? You know they're large, they eat a lot, so you need land, minimum requirements. So how did you then get around and how did you then decide to Scott to co-found with Carol Buckley, the elephant sanctuary in Tennessee? Then you just said okay we're going to go nonprofit and raise funds?

Scott: It wasn't quite that easy (him and Nadia laughing).

Nadia: Just like that.

Scott: It's like magic. You know, sanctuary is a pretty magical place but not that kind of magic. No, it was still part of a journey. There were a lot of discussions that took place. And again those several realizations that something needed to change at all levels, and the final straw for us was actually an elephant named Tyke. She was traveling on circus in Hawaii. She killed her trainer, ran out in the street, and then was gunned down with I don't remember how many hundreds of shots.

Kat: 97 bullets

Scott: 97 bullets, shot her down in the street. We're watching, actually on Dateline NBC one evening, we're watching this unfold and watching this video take place.

Kat: And she's so scared and it's so clear in the video that they show how frightened she is. She's not being aggressive, yes with her trainer she finally lashed out after who knows how many years of dominance and abuse. And she was known to be a skittish elephant. It was recommended that she not be taken on the road but that's always ignored because they do what you tell them to. But she was so, so scared, and it was, it was horrible.

Scott: In that moment is when we looked at each other on the couch and said "We have to do something now." We don't know how it's going to happen, we don't know how to do it, but we have to do something now because these elephants have no time left. Elephants like Tyke who have shown over and over and over again "I don't belong here, I don't belong here, I don't belong here," and she stays on the road because no one else wants her or the circus doesn't want to get rid of her. Even if the USDA confiscated somebody they have nowhere to put them. You know, so we said we need a solution. That's when we, prior to that we had been looking for potential private investors that could help us raise the money to buy land, not even thinking about the nonprofit aspect of it. But when this happened we had said, we just need to do it. Let's pool our savings, let's buy a small piece of land, and let's see if we can help four elephants.

We started looking at land and found a piece of land in Tennessee. It was 110 acres and we decided to go ahead and put an offer on the property. Of course, it wasn't so simple either. We looked at multiple, many pieces of land in many different areas.

You know the little bit longer story was Carol had gone to look at a couple of pieces of property, had gone to look at this one in particular. And she came back she said it's not right for all these reasons. And I said let me go look at it also, so at least we had the same foundation, the same benchmark, so we know what didn't work for you there. So if we go and, looking in different directions, because we still had an elephant to take care of, we couldn't go at the same time. And I came back and as I was going back to the elephant enclosure I had one of the keepers at the zoo said, "Carol said you found a piece of property that was amazing," and I said, "That's



not what she told me yesterday. She had told me that it wasn't right". And I was like "Which Carol are you talking to?"

So I actually went to the enclosure and she looked at me and said "It's perfect, isn't it?" and I said I don't see anything wrong with it. You know, so we started moving forward again. We're still looking for other lands to make sure we're making the right decision, but as we moved forward, we decided to put an offer on that property. And as fate has a way of working out, the day we put an offer on the property somebody had contacted the zoo because they saw also the incident and Dateline at some point and they contacted the zoo to say, "I don't know what I need to do, but I want to help elephants."

And actually, the zoo didn't even know what we were doing at that time. Most of it was still very private, still very confidential with some of our close colleagues and friends. And we decided to, the zoo put this person in contact with us, and we told her what we were doing, we ended up meeting with her family who had a lot of influence in Nashville, Tennessee. And we told them what we were doing and they said, "Great, we want to join you." We want to get you started as a nonprofit organization. We have a lawyer, we have a doctor, we have a communications expert, and we want to bring these people together to help start this organization, help co-found this organization with you. And it just took off from there. There's a lot of pieces in between all of this, there's a lot of time, a lot of heartache, a lot of stress, a lot of questions - are we doing the right thing? But you know, this is, sometimes you got to pull the plug and run forward.

Nadia: There was some magic involved after all? And when you say "perfect," I mean I visited you, I was lucky to visit you in October 2018, in your pilot project in Brazil. We'll be getting on, we're really jumping here, but we'll go back to Tennessee. I mean, that was in Brazil, your property is magnificent, perfect. But what is perfect at the time, what was perfect for you in Tennessee? Like in Brazil you've got rivers, you've got mountains, you've got grasslands. What were you looking for in Tennessee, which was also affordable? I mean after a zoo I presume everything is perfect for an elephant. But what specifically were you looking for for your first property or was it just: we need a big field and a river, and that's it, that's fine? So what is perfect?

Scott: So you asked a good question about what was perfect at that time? So at that time in our trying to figure out what's next for elephants, we were breaking the mold at that point. No one had ever given elephant space in captivity. No one had ever thought and never moved forward this idea of giving them a life that is their own. Again, when you're breaking mold, when you're doing something different, there's a lot of resistance, and every time we talked to one of our colleagues they would say, "You're crazy. It's not going to work." The elephants are going to become rogue; they're going to destroy the property, you know, you're not going to be able to manage it, and I mean everything that you could think of that was a negative view of what might happen. But where we were at that time in our heads is, you know what? Nobody knows. It may be that that's what will happen, but let's give it a try because everyone just is sharing their belief of what will happen, their theory of what will happen, without having ever done it in captivity before.

So when we were looking for land, of course there was no set size, no benchmark to look for of what's going to work for elephants. How many acres does an elephant need? How will the land sustain itself with elephants on the property? All of that was completely unknown. There was nowhere to look that would give us any indication of what happened in a captive scenario. We kind of randomly picked about 100 acres is what we were looking for. 100-150 acres. We had based that on the money we had available for the land purchase and what we could sustain, what we thought we could sustain with loan payments. We were looking for something that was secluded, that was private, that had hills, trees, pastures, ponds. Springs are ideal. But that was primarily it. We wanted trees for them to explore, pastures for them to graze, and we wanted water sources for them to be able to play in and drink from. And then it needed to be secluded. What we found was exactly that. It was at the end of a little half-mile road, and access was very good at the time. We weren't even thinking about access. We weren't thinking about electric. We weren't thinking about any of those things. We were trying to figure out what was going to be the best for the elephants. And what we found was really idyllic. Near a small town. We were only about 5 km or 3 miles away from the little town center. But it felt like you were a lifetime away once you entered the property because of the seclusion that the property offered.

You know, from there everything changed for us. This idea - what could be or what should be, or what you know might be. I mean we didn't even touch the surface in our dreams of how profound it ended up being. And the land started it but, from there, you know, the elephant showed us the rest of the way.

Nadia: Well I'm looking, I'm looking at the clock and I know you do have to go because you do have a sanctuary to run in Brazil. So I think I would say we'll wrap up for this week. And discuss more about how the change came from Elephant Sanctuary Tennessee and how you both ended up in Brazil. And so we'll talk about that in our next episode. And I would just like to say thank you very much for your time Kat, and your time Scott. It was really lovely talking to you, and I could, yeah I could listen to you for hours, but unfortunately we don't have that much time this week.

Kat: Lucky for you Scott can talk for hours. (All laugh)

Scott: And lucky for you all, elephants are calling so we have to go. Nadia, thank you for this introduction and we look forward to talking next time.

Nadia: Okay great, have a good week. Take care. Bye

Kat and Scott: Bye

We hope you enjoyed the first episode of Global Rumbings. Don't forget to subscribe to make sure you never miss an episode. See you next time.

