



Hello and welcome to the Global Sanctuary for Elephants' brand new podcast, Global Rumbblings. Global Sanctuary for Elephants, or GSE for short, is a nonprofit organization with a 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: 00:57

Hello and welcome to episode six of the Global Rumbblings podcast. I am again joined by Kat and Scott Blais from Brazil at Elephant Sanctuary Brazil. Hello, you two. How are you?

Kat: 01:12

Hey, Nadia, How are you? We're pretty good, I think.

Scott: 01:14

We're doing well, how are things there?

Nadia: 01:16

Yeah, well, it's cold in Europe, isn't it? I mean, it's wintertime. Is it wintertime with you guys as well? Or is it a warm winter or don't you know the word winter anymore?

Scott: 01:26

Winter? cold? It does get cold, but not your kind of cold.

Kat: 01:30

It's the rainy season. That's how we know things now. Dry season and rainy season. And right now everything is beautiful and green because it is the rainy season. Happy elephants. Happy grass. Oh, happy birds, bugs. Everybody's happy.

Scott: 01:43

Today is, we've seen, they've all been grazing quite a bit with the grass coming, starting to be very, very lush. But it's really cool to see Guillermina today. She was just, you know,

ripping up all kinds of grass and, you know, shoving it in her mouth. It's just, you know, again, it's, it's what makes this all so incredible and amazing to these elephants that have 23 years of never even knowing what grass was. And now she's able to do this thing that is the most natural and simple for them, is just walking and grazing. It's what they do for so many hours out of the day in the wild. And it's just, it's just a beautiful sight. It's sanctuary.

Nadia: 02:22

Oh, lovely sanctuary heaven, elephant paradise. But before this paradise has actually, well, came to, came to exist. We left the last episode with the piece of land that you looked at falling through, the money that was promised, I would say, or at least, you know, you thought you were going to get the \$100,000, I think, which, as you said, was a great start for a young nonprofit, wasn't there? You had to swerve off the road to miss the near head on collision, but luckily you weren't injured. You've got somewhere to live, although you do share it with a lot of mice who aren't very hygienic. (everyone laughs) Haven't got the car, the money's gone, and the property is gone. But you're not giving up because you know the, you know, you came over for Ramba, who is better now? Her health is better? You know, she's being cared for, that she's still in Chile, you're in Brazil and you haven't got any land. So what happened then?

Scott: 03:14

You make it sound so lovely. (Kat laughs)

Nadia: 03:16

Yeah.

Scott: 03:17

Well, you know, let me say before we carry on is a huge part of this and a huge part of why we're able to push through all that came up. And there's still a lot more to come before we even got to found the land. But one of the only reasons why this has been able to be as successful as it has is because of the partnership that Kat and I share. You can't do this alone, and there's no way that either of us would have survived alone out here (Kat laughs again) or with anybody else or with anybody else that I've met in my life. You know, there's no way. It's just there's so much that you endure. And to be able to share it with somebody that is equally passionate and equally committed and fully invested to giving elephants a better life, because none of these projects are easy.

You know, a lot of times people learn about, have learned about our project or whether it be any other sanctuaries around the world, you know, whether it be, you know, those in Asia with, you know, Boon Lotts, Elephant Nature Park, you know, Elephant Haven France, you know, PAWS, TES in the US. All of those were exhaustive, exhausting processes to get to the point where people actually started to know what they were all about. So, you know, none of these projects are easy.

Nadia: 04:40

It's not a 9 to 5.

Scott: 04:42

It's not only not nine to five, it's (laughs) it's not even 24/7. I mean, the emotional investment is I mean, it's, it's 128/7 if that's possible. There's just so much. To be able to share this with somebody. And that's when we start telling these stories about what carried forward. I mean

Kat: 05:00

Why we were laughing instead of crying. Some of the times it was, yeah, because we had each other and it kind of just is, you know, we do, like everybody, we all have our moments. And I think the benefit of having two, one of the many benefits of having two people is that generally when you may be at a low point, the person that you're with isn't. So you're able to sort of find a middle ground and carry on.

Scott: 05:29

We got this.

Nadia: 05:31

Yeah, both being at a low point isn't good.

Scott: 05:33

No. There was a couple of times that we looked at each other with doubt in our eyes: what are we doing or what are we going to do? But we weren't there yet. You're right. We had no money. We had the promise of money, we had donated land, both of those fell through. The car, and right around this time is when they told us, you know, you we can't even think about giving a car until the financial I mean, until the formation of the association in Brazil is finalized. And you have, I think it was two years of a history of the organization before the city could donate the car the way they wanted to be able to donate it. So around this time, also, no money, no car.

So now we're in Guaranta do Norte, which is middle of nowhere Brazil, a city that was, again, Wild West just a few years before. Speaking very little Portuguese. We did have a roof over our head. We had a house and that was quite nice. We had good friends from the English school as Kat introduced before, and they were really, they provided a lot of sanity for us, you know, they really helped us.

Kat: 06:46

They're a reason that we ended up staying there and kept pushing forward because, I mean, at that point, as Scott is gently saying, we were kind of on our own for the most part. And, you know, it is as you mentioned, it's a different well, it's a different continent. It's a different culture, it's a different language. And we didn't really know much about any of it because we were going to be surrounded by an organization and trying to push forward as quickly as possible, you know. So we didn't study Portuguese at home for months or years.

Scott: 07:26

We didn't have that. We were building a new nonprofit in the United States and selling our stuff. There was no time to study.

Kat: 07:33

So we were in a relatively awkward situation. But again, just figuring out ways to move forward.

Scott: 07:42

And not to add more darkness to the scenario.

Kat: 07:47

There's light at the end.

Scott: 07:48

Where we were living, there is light at the end. It's beautiful at the end. So where we were living again, this is a house that was loaned to us by the city. It was next to an elementary school and it was actually next to the gymnasium of the elementary school. And you have to realize that construction in this part of Brazil doesn't contain solid walls. Even in the most of the houses, things are open. There's no seals on any of the doors, most windows don't have glass. It's just a shutter type system that closes. Sometimes they close, sometimes they don't. No screens, no screens. You know, bugs are everywhere just because it's just, I mean, you're living basically in nature and even in the city, you're still surrounded by, you know, just living within the elements.

No air conditioning, no heating, not that it's really required. It does get hot. I mean, it got really hot in Guaranta. It was much hotter than it is here. So next to this gymnasium, at this gymnasium, the kids would arrive at 6:00 in the morning. And it seemed like it was always time for physical education class. (Kat and Nadia laugh) And they're always in the gymnasium and screaming and balls bouncing. And it's just from that. And the school day was actually short for these kids. The school day is until about 12:30, I think. But after the school day, they're allowed to play in the gymnasium still. And it's loud. I mean, it is really like, deafening, sometimes.

Kat: 09:11

Oh, but that wasn't even the worst.

Scott: 09:13

And then after they go home because their parents are done at work, they go home, then they come out for band practice.

Kat: 09:20

That was the worst.

Scott: 09:21

It's a drumline.

Nadia: 09:22

Drum practice?

Scott: 09:23

Band practice. It was mostly drumline. You couldn't think because there actually was a relatively solid concrete wall for the most part in between that and our house. But they would practice in the street in front of the house. Oh, my lord Nadia.

Nadia: 09:43

Sorry, I don't know why I'm laughing.

Scott: 09:48

There are times I still have that fricking drumline in my head still.

Kat: 09:50

I can totally pull it up. I could absolutely do it.

Scott: 09:53

I could absolutely do it. I don't want to because it would just haunt you at night. It was so loud you couldn't write, you couldn't talk, you couldn't do anything. It was so it, I mean, it just vibrates through every fiber. (everyone laughs) The cats would run away. I mean, everything from it was so loud. And there is nothing you can do. I mean, it's just, it's you're in a different culture again, and it's just the way it is. And the parents are there and kids are there and they're all excited because they're practicing for the next festival or the next fair.

Kat: 10:24

And we're just laughing. Just laughing.

Scott: 10:26

It will stop. 5:30 is almost here. And it was almost like, oh, later on, actually, we're going to fast forward a little bit and give you a sneak peek because at some point they'll be a documentary coming out about Ramba and you get to see a little bit about the dinosaur and the dinosaurs that were part of an exhibit, a dinosaur exhibit. And it was so invasive. They're also in...

Nadia: 10:49

This park where she was.

Scott: 10:51

Yeah, in the park where she was. So you get a feel for it in this documentary, which is really a beautiful documentary. We're so excited about it coming out. And hopefully sometime this year it's going to start hitting festivals in the United States. But there's a scene in there where we turn off the, the, the audio and it's like you can finally breathe. Is this, it's so invasive. And that's what it's like. It's like, when are they going to stop? Are they going to stop? And when they decide to stop it's like, ah. Oh, God, thank you.

Nadia: 11:19

Oh, so was only drums or was it trumpets as well? Or was it like a band?

Scott: 11:25

Yeah, it was primarily, it was just a drum corp.

Kat: 11:29

They didn't play other instruments.

Scott: 11:31

Initially, we thought we knew there was a festival coming up and it was a big agriculture festival or something like that, and we thought it was going to be preparing for that. And then we realized that after the agricultural festival there was about a week off and then they started preparing for the Christmas festival or whatever it was it was going to be next. And then the next holiday festival. It's like: Oh my God, they're always going to be practicing the same song all year for 5 hours a day. It was nuts. It was crazy.

Nadia: 11:56

Okay, well, what song was it? (laughs)

Scott: 11:58

It was just, it was just a drum beat. It wasn't. It was just the drum, the bass drum line. Right. It was wild. It was again, it's still in our hearts somewhere and embedded in our memory. (Scott and Kat laugh) So there we are, Guaranta, trying to make phone calls, trying to make Internet work. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, and trying to communicate with who we can, trying to see what was available for land auctions. The city. The mayor was still very interested. The vice mayor was still very helpful. We started looking for lands and they connect us with different realtors.

And one of the amusing, entertaining stories is they would say, Hey, meet me at 5:30 sharp. It's going to take 3 hours to get to the property and 3 hours to get to the property from the city is actually considered relatively close. You know, 5 hours from the city is, well, that one's a little bit far away, but 2 to 3 hours, that's super close. So we're going to look at it and there's lands all over the place. I speak almost no Portuguese at that point. And we, meet me at 5:30. Okay, I'm out at the front of the gate 5:30, nobody shows up. 5:45 no one. 6:00 no, 7:00 no, 7:30 no 8:00 Oh...

Nadia: 13:10

The kids have shown up. (Kat laughs)

Scott: 13:12

Yeah, the kids have already started playing. So I'm working on the curb because I don't want to miss them either. So I'm working on the curb, sitting on my computer and everyone is staring at the white guy who's working on his computer on the curb in front of the school. So the...

Kat: 13:27

Stranger danger! (laughs)

Scott: 13:29

At some point we get a call saying, oh, by the way, they didn't have your contact. They contacted me in Sao Paulo. And, you know, I forgot to message you that they're not coming today. Well, they did have my contact because last night they told me what time they were coming. So then the next day shows up, you know, the same sort of thing. And sometimes they show up on time, sometimes they don't. But I'm always there waiting on the clock. Except for one day. I was 10 minutes late to get there and they were so pissed off at me. You know, this is realtors that I waited for forever. And like, you know, you have no respect for our time. And it's like, what are you talking about? It was like, okay, I'm in a different world. I'm in a different world, soon the music will stop.

It was, it was interesting getting used to the culture and again, going back to our friends, you know, the English teachers. Paolo and Natieli, they were so helpful to help us understand, you know, this is normal, whether you are Brazilian or Argentine or American, you're going to have the same type of treatment. It wasn't because we were foreigners. It's just how things are. It's just the culture. So we're starting to understand more about the culture. People are still asking us, why are we still staying here? You know? But the motivation is for elephants. We found some lands that were really interesting.

Kat: 14:45

We found some lands that were pretty terrible. The amount of properties that we saw and all the ridiculous stories are way too much to go into. But I mean, we were essentially, this guy was taken to a cattle graveyard for one property. It was a place...

Nadia

What?

Scott: 15:01

This is an important one, actually. You know, this is after we looked at, we named them after things that we could remember. One was hungry cows, because the cows followed us the whole time we walked the property. The cows were like ten meters behind us.

Kat: 15:14

Yeah, they were a little ominous in the way they were following. So I was like, okay, we're going to be killed by cows.

Scott: 15:20

We had another one was called Fruit Filled Confusion because we couldn't tell which roads were where and where their property line. But there were fruit trees everywhere. It was actually really, we actually tried to buy this property. We were really close to signing a contract and when they were doing the title search, they realized the person selling it to us actually didn't have or it wasn't the rightful owner. The person he bought it...

Kat: 15:42

Minor detail

Scott: 15:43

Yeah, minor detail, the person he bought it from and spent his whole investment to buy this property. Life investment to buy this property was not the legal owner and it was a, it was a falsified document. And this guy was genuinely mortified. He invested everything he had into this property and he had no recourse to get it back.

Nadia: 16:04

Oh Gosh.

Scott: 16:05

I mean, another one. Beautiful birds that we were going to buy. That was stunning. It was a lot smaller. It was about 100 hectares, I think, going way small because we were really getting desperate to move something forward. A lot of properties that we looked at didn't have any land documents similar to or had the same type of land agreement that the first donated land. And then the day we were going to sign that contract, he showed up and said: Sorry, I can't sell it. My brother doesn't want to do this. He wants to keep the land. So that one fell through.

Kat: 16:29

And poor Natieli, as a side note, she was pregnant with twins at the time. And at this meeting she literally started to cry and walked away and said she was going to punch him in the face. So she had to get up and walk away. (Scott laughs) She was so tired and she was so pregnant at that time and so hormonal. She literally wanted to kill this man.

Nadia: 16:50

Oh bless.

Kat: 16:53

So she walked away. So she didn't punch him and get arrested, which was kind of charming.

Scott: 16:55

And it was this week because we were going back to United States for a conference and we're going to be meeting some folks that were following us and supporting us, and we're going to give them an update of what we were going to be doing. It was actually a conference at PAWS, and give an update about land, hopefully. And that's when, after six months of being here, or five months of being here, no land, not even a promise at that point because everything was falling through.

And I met with the vice mayor and some other folks and they said, no, we have some options. And during that meeting is, we had some options for you. This land is great. It's not far from the main highway. It will be amazing. We can put a gas station, a restaurant on top of the hill so we can see the elephants. I'm like, No, no, no, no, no, no. This is not what's going to happen after many conversations. And this is another realtor that was talking about land development, because they're trying to pull people in from all sides because they know we're getting frustrated in the city. But the city still wanted the project, desperately wanted the project. So the mayor says, hey, I have an idea. Let's go to this property. We can actually give this land to you. It's 250 hectares. It's a way to get started. And so as we're driving up,



there's clear cutting on one side pasture on the other side. And we drive into the land and there are hundreds of carcasses of cows. And I...

Nadia: 18:11

Oh gosh.

Scott: 18:12

So I'm like What is this? Oh, no, don't worry about it. We can dig it. We can dig a hole. We can just push them all to the side. It was like (Kat laughs)...

Kat: 18:20

I'm not laughing because it's funny, I'm laughing because there was just no comprehension that this was not okay.

Scott: 18:26

And I'm not talking, I mean, I say 100 - there may have been thousands in various states of decay. And he said, what happens was when farmers, cows die, they know this is the property of the, the, the city. So they used to go move them and dump them on the city property. And it is I mean, you, you drive in, in a car and you just have this dread, I mean this overwhelming feeling of just death. And it was.

Nadia: 18:54

Oh my gosh. That sounds terrible.

Scott: 18:55

But I'm trying to be the, you know, hey, you're still trying to help me. Let's see the back of the property. Let's look. It is really, really pretty forest, gorgeous trees. And we walked back there and somehow in this lunacy of my mind at that point, I'm thinking, well, maybe, you know, I was like: No, this isn't going to work. We have thousands of dead cows in the front of the property, and then it was, we're on our way out. He says to me, You know what's really nice about this property is that I know the guy that owns across the street and he's ready to put up a hotel to receive guests. It's like, you still don't fricking get it. No one gets it. So we drive a little bit more in front of this property and it's slash and burn, completely slash and burn Amazon forest, and they're putting in soy fields. So if it wasn't enough that we had a cow graveyard, you know.

Kat: 19:46

Hotel across the street

Scott: 19:48

Hotel across the street and then you go forward and the next.

Nadia: 19:51

Amazon deforestation.

Scott: 19:52

Yeah, the nextdoor, that person is going to have a soy field. And we already know the, the, the, the toxic effect of the soy plantations with the incredible amount of agro toxins that they use here. We drove a little bit further, looking further because he wanted to talk to another landowner that he knows. We drive down there and somebody had diverted a river, about three kilometers of a river to make the river go through his property. I said, that can't be legal. He said, That can't be illegal. He said, No, it's not, he said. But there is never an authority that will ever come out here so they can do whatever they want. Like, wow, we're in the wrong place.

And we had already started looking at land in other places and looking all over, talking to people with, using land through carbon offset up in the Amazon forest. We had been looking up in the East Coast in the northeast of Brazil by the entrance at the mouth of the Amazon. We had looked all over the place and online, had looked at hundreds and hundreds of properties. And at that point we really I think it was, we looked at one more property there. The day we're supposed to be leaving to go to United States, the day before we found this property and it is stunning. And it's people that are friends of Natieli and Paolo.

Nadia: 21:04

So we know we can actually trust them because we would trust Natieli and Paulo with our lives.

Scott: 21:08

They're very, very honest. They basically said you can start using the land at no cost. Pay us later. Pay us once you get started. We'll work that out. So we go to the United States super excited about. We actually have something positive going on. And that night the vice mayor shows up and tells us we have to leave our house starting now. (Kat laughs) We're supposed to leave and go to the airport at five in the morning and this is 8:00 at night and he shows up and I'm supposed to be going on the way to meet with the landowners of this property that I had seen.

An interesting side note, because throughout this time I'm trying to practice more Portuguese. And when we talk about the positive people that, you know, the positive energy around the project, there is still a lot of movement, a lot of enthusiasm. And I got in the car that morning with a different realtor to go look at this property. He actually owned the farm next door to this particular land, the one that is the friends of Natieli and Paolo, and on the way back he pulled the car off the road and he said, I have to tell you, he said, I am now going to be an advocate for elephants. He said, what you have told me has completely changed my perspective on what we need to do. And that was my first. Okay, maybe I got this Portuguese thing going on (Kat laughs) because we're using charades, I'm making helicopter noises about elephants being culled in Africa, you know, and making, you know. But he got the point and for him to stop that, he, and we got back to the city and he gave me a hug and he just said, thank you. He said, anything you need, I'm here for you.

This person, a little bit later on, to fast forward. It was a few weeks later after the trip to the United States and things started falling through again. He said to me, he called me to, I went to his office to see if he had anything new. And he said, look, he said, I love what you're doing. He said, you're in the wrong place. This is not where you need to be culturally. You're

going to end up with a lot of roadblocks because this is still the Wild West and it's very much pro agriculture.

So to backtrack a little bit on this land of Natielia and Paolo's, it ended up in the same policy, the same group that the first land in it had been given to them for land use and they still had another four years before they could transfer it. But they also, in our process of investigating that title, they also discovered a problem that they had to resolve and it was going to take another three to four years for them to get that resolved. So again, this very promising land fell through for us, and that's what we started looking more seriously everywhere else.

Nadia: 23:43

Oh, no.

Kat: 23:44

It was a little sad.

Scott: 23:46

So Guaranta de Norte, to end this on a good note. We stayed in Guaranta, we started looking all over the place even more thoroughly and continuing conversations, and we found this property that we actually are living in right now online, randomly. That's when I started reading more about Chapada dos Guimarães, which is the municipality where we are. And it was interesting because people kept saying it's cold. It's cold, it's way cold there. It's like, how can it be cold? It's in Mato Grosso. It's here in the south, you know, the southern part of the Amazon, the northern part of the cerrado. How, though, how can it be cold? But indeed, the city itself can get down to three or four degrees Celsius at times. Although it's rare, it can happen. And for folks that are living in Guaranta de Norte where it never gets below, you know, 25 degrees, you know, it's always hot in Guaranta, for them to think about three degrees a no. There's like, no, you can't live there at all. But we did a lot of research and we ended up coming down to explore and then started the next layer of land exploration in Guaranta - in Chapada dos Guimarães.

Nadia: 25:01

So we are going to end this episode on a happy note, although I must say I must just quickly go back. Not some of our listeners are a little bit disturbed about the cow graveyard.

Scott: 25:13

Basically, is they don't know the cause of death. You know, you don't know is it a toxin? You have no idea - a disease, venomous snake. I mean, you just don't know. And for them to then take a risk to eat the meat after a cow is generally not a practice. I mean.

Kat: 25:32

That's not something we see here, though. I mean we have, you know, we have one of our neighbors has cows, but he doesn't have a lot of cows. He has a very small herd of cows that actually we always know they're his cows because they're not the typical colors, but also they're very social. They come to say hello versus running away from you, which is what most cows do that aren't kept super well. But yeah, we've gone to his property to help lift a cow. They were just there the other week when one of his cows had a problem standing up

after giving birth. But yeah, we don't see that sort of mass dumping ground in this area. Thankfully.

Scott: 26:13

No, it's very different culturally. You know, you're 10 hours away in the same state, but this is a different world. Very, very different world here. This is the episode of traumas we had, that we had the music or the drum line and the cows, and the multiple properties.

Kat: 26:31

We didn't even talk about living at the House of Fish.

Scott: 26:34

Oh yeah, we didn't get there. That'll have to wait for another episode.

Nadia: 26:37

That will have to wait, ok.

Scott: 26:39

Stay tuned for house of fish, episode 7. (Nadia laughs)

Nadia: 26:43

Okay. Then we have ended on a happy note because you said that the property that you are actually at now, you sort of found that online or at least parts of it you found online. So we'll touch base again next week or in two weeks when you have time? So thank you very much for, for joining us again and taking time out of your busy schedule. Just briefly, what, what are you going to continue doing today?

Kat: 27:14 Oh, it's we've got 30 minutes before elephant dinner time. So we have to wrap up and then it is time to feed elephants.

Nadia: 27:20

Sounds good.

Scott: 27:21

We know the story is challenging at times, but, you know, again, going back to the very start of watching these elephants graze and, you know, when we get to share what actually happens, it's really a remarkable end to the struggles. And, you know, the reality is the sanctuary is still just beginning, you know, on the property is developing, elephants that are just doing wonderfully. But it's just beginning for, for this project and now for many more elephants to come.

Nadia: 27:52

Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time and enjoy elephant dinner time. So catch up next week or the week after that whenever your schedule permits. And thank you very much and take care.

Kat: 28:06

You too, Nadia. We'll talk soon.

Scott: 28:07

Take care Nadia, stay warm.

Nadia: 28:08

I will. Okay. That wraps up episode six. Thank you very much for listening and joining in. Our wonderful producer Amie is going to put everything in the show notes, but do send us an email at [podcast@GlobalElephants.org](mailto:podcast@GlobalElephants.org). And yeah, ask me any questions that you'd like me to ask Scott and Kat. Take care and see you in the next episode. Bye.