

Portland filmmakers hope to build on success at Sundance

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By Ray Routhier

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Filmmakers Kaitlyn Schwalje and Alex Wolf Lewis outside their Portland apartment. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

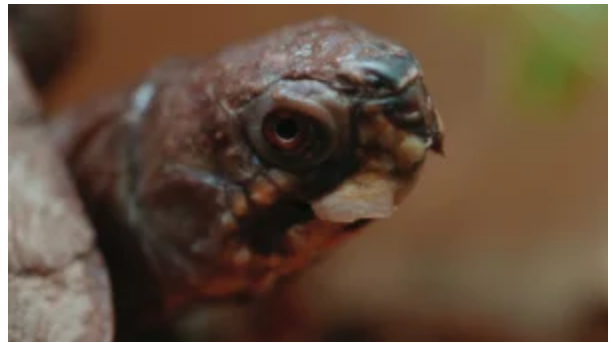
Alex Wolf Lewis and Kaitlyn Schwalje are hoping a 25-year-old box turtle named Snowy will help them with their next two film projects, including one about the havoc wreaked by squirrels and another about the “unsung heroes” who process our wastewater.

Lewis and Schwalje premiered their turtle documentary, “Snowy,” virtually at the Sundance Film Festival in late January. It’s arguably the country’s best-known and most prestigious film festival and getting selected as just one of the dozen documentary short films to be screened – out of thousands submitted – was like “winning the lottery,” Lewis and Schwalje said. The Portland filmmakers set out to find if Snowy – who lives in the basement of Lewis’ uncle’s house in suburban Philadelphia – is happy and if anything can be done to make him happier.

As a result of the Sundance screening, they've gotten more than a dozen inquiries from other film festivals that want to screen "Snowy" in the coming months. They hope the contacts they've made and attention they've gained through the festival will help them as they develop and pitch their next documentary projects.

"We've been told by other filmmakers that you have about a six-month window to make things happen (after Sundance), after that, you're last year's news," said Lewis, 31. "We met a lot of amazing short filmmakers on Zoom calls, and got some advice. That has helped a lot."

People can see "Snowy," which is about 12 minutes long, online at upcoming virtual film festivals, for various fees at each. The film is currently screening online as part of the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, which ends Feb. 28. It will also be screened online during the Americana Film Fest, March 1-13. Other festivals showing "Snowy" will be listed as information becomes available at snowythefilm.com.



The star of "Snowy" by Portland filmmakers Alex Wolf Lewis and Kaitlyn Schwalje. The film premiered virtually at the Sundance Film Festival. *Photo courtesy of A. Lewis and K. Schwalje*



Filmmakers Kaitlyn Schwalje and Alex Wolf Lewis want next to pursue films about squirrels and wastewater treatment workers. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

ROAD TO PORTLAND

Lewis and Schwalje met through mutual friends on a vacation in Spain more than five years ago and lived in New York City before coming to Portland to live about two years ago.

Schwalje, 33, grew up in New Jersey in a family of engineers. She went to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh to study science, but started to realize that physicists and scientists were good storytellers. So she became drawn to the story side of engineering and design, studying abroad at the Copenhagen Institute of Interactive Design. She worked for a while for the Walt Disney Company, in the research division, helping design prototypes for rides and other devices used in theme parks. She also worked in radio in New York City.

After deciding she really wanted to pursue storytelling as her job, Schwalje studied documentary radio at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies at Maine College of Art in Portland in 2018 and returned to New York.

Lewis grew up in New York City. His mother was a pianist, and his parents encouraged his interest in theater, film and music. As a teen, he made videos with friends. He studied film at Columbia, then worked on film crews in New York, retrieving coffee at first and eventually becoming a camera operator. For several years, he traveled around the world working as a

camera operator for the popular food exploration show “Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown.” He started out by buying his own ticket to the various shoots, in places like Madagascar and Hungary, before being hired as a fully paid crew member.

Lewis also has worked on shows and projects for Disney+, Netflix, PBS and others.



Their Sundance-selected film “Snowy” – about a turtle – has given Portland filmmakers Alex Wolf Lewis and Kaitlyn Schwalje momentum to work on other projects. *Photo courtesy of A. Lewis and K. Schwalje*

Lewis and Schwalje knew about Portland’s charms and its artsy vibe from Schwalje’s time at Salt. They had also visited [Zach Zamboni](#), a Portland resident who was director of photography for Bourdain’s show.

They moved to Portland a couple years ago, partly because of high rents in New York, and partly because their work as documentary filmmakers allows them to live where they want and go to wherever they need to film. They’ve also been happy to find other people who work in film living here and willing to share stories and advice.

“Everybody here seems to have more time, and everyone feels more human,” said Lewis. “In New York, you can go to the same coffee shop for a decade and not know anyone. It’s very different here.”

They ended up having a fellow Portlander, filmmaker Filipp Kotsishevskiy, work with them on “Snowy” as the colorist, making post-production tweaks to the look of the film. They filmed “Snowy” before the pandemic but were still finishing it up when COVID-19 began shutting things down last March.

So even though Kotsishevskiy lives near them, Lewis and Schwalje didn't want to be standing right next to him while he made his changes. So they set up collaborative monitors in Kotsishevskiy's apartment and on a screened-in porch just outside it. So they saw the same thing, in two different rooms, and shouted instructions to each other.

STARTING WITH SNOWY

The idea to make a movie about "Snowy" came from a couple places. First, Lewis had known the turtle all its life. It belongs to his cousins in suburban Philadelphia. Lewis would see the turtle, alone in a tank in the basement, at holidays or when he visited. His uncle Larry Wolf took care of it, and that was about all he knew.



Larry Wolf and Snowy in a scene from "Snowy."
Photo courtesy of A. Lewis and K. Schwalje

Schwalje had experiences of pet neglect growing up, something that seems to happen to every child who is given a pet that's not a dog or a cat.

"As a kid, I had a terrible track record of keeping small animals alive. There was Budweiser the bullfrog that suffocated in a plastic bag before I could get him home from the pet store. Unfed sea monkeys, fish killed by a malfunctioning tank filter and a bunch of newts that escaped and I suspect were eaten by my dog," wrote Schwalje about her desire to make a film about "Snowy."

She said making the film was her way of "working through some bad house-pet karma."

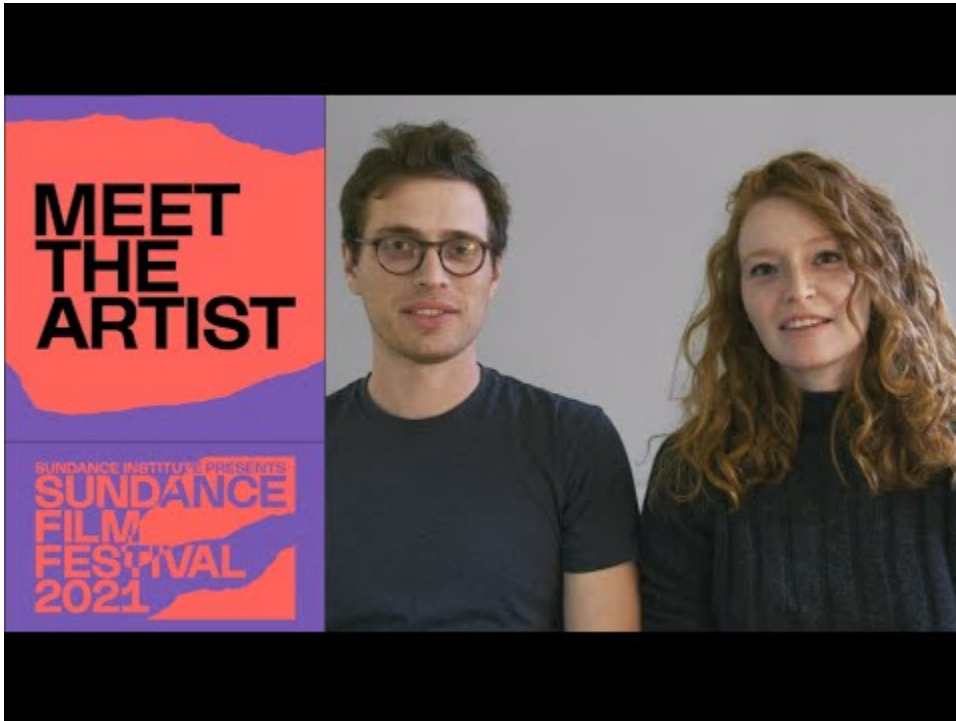
The couple traveled to Philadelphia to interview Lewis's cousins – three young men on a basement couch – as well as his aunt and uncle, about Snowy. The short film is light and funny at times, and soul-searching and heart-warming as well. The filmmakers traveled all the way to England to talk to an expert in turtle behavior, to learn as much as they can about Snowy and his pursuit of happiness. Snowy is about 25 years old in the film but has a life expectancy of 50 to 60.

"We knew that if we were going to elevate the inner world of a turtle, we couldn't do it by just staring at him," said Schwalje.

The projects they are working on next include a film about the tension between humans and squirrels, especially when squirrels cause power lines and computer networks to go down from all their nibbling or nest building. The other would look at people who work in wastewater treatment plants, and literally keep the rest of us out of the muck.

"They can't take a day off. They are unsung heroes," said Schwalje.

Until, perhaps, Lewis and Schwalje tell their stories in a documentary film.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/HvFg5sFtSgg>

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