

# Indie Film: Snowy the turtle, and his documentarians, are going to Sundance

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By Dennis Perkins

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“Snowy” tells the story of a box turtle who was abandoned by the filmmaker’s cousin and has since been living in a basement. *Photo courtesy of Alexander Wolf Lewis*

Imagine you’re trapped in a too-small room, at the mercy of forces outside your control, and you’ve been in there for what seems like forever. Oh, right, that’s all of us for the last year, and we don’t have to pretend anything.

Well, this story’s about a turtle.

The little guy is named Snowy, and the long-suffering reptile is the subject of the short film of the same name from Portland-based filmmaker duo Alexander Lewis and Kaitlyn Schwalje. The 12-minute short documentary was filmed right before we all went into lockdown last February, and follows the plight of Snowy – a softball-sized box turtle of indeterminate age (but at least 20-plus years) – as he, thanks to the filmmakers’ efforts, gets a wary glimpse of a better life. (The film’s press materials list Snowy’s gender as “undetermined,” but it feels wrong to call the little guy “it,” so I chose their best guess.)

Now, we’ve all made innumerable home movies of our pets during our homebound pandemic downtime. My cat, Cooper, may have more headshots than Chris Evans at this point. But for Lewis and Schwalje, Snowy’s journey (a necessarily slow and deliberate one) was less about simply filming a cute (if rheumy-eyed and broken-beaked) family pet at the home of Alex’s

extended family in Philadelphia, as it was the sort of inexplicable epiphany filmmakers sometimes get that something – even something as seemingly unremarkable as a barely moving little turtle – contains multitudes.



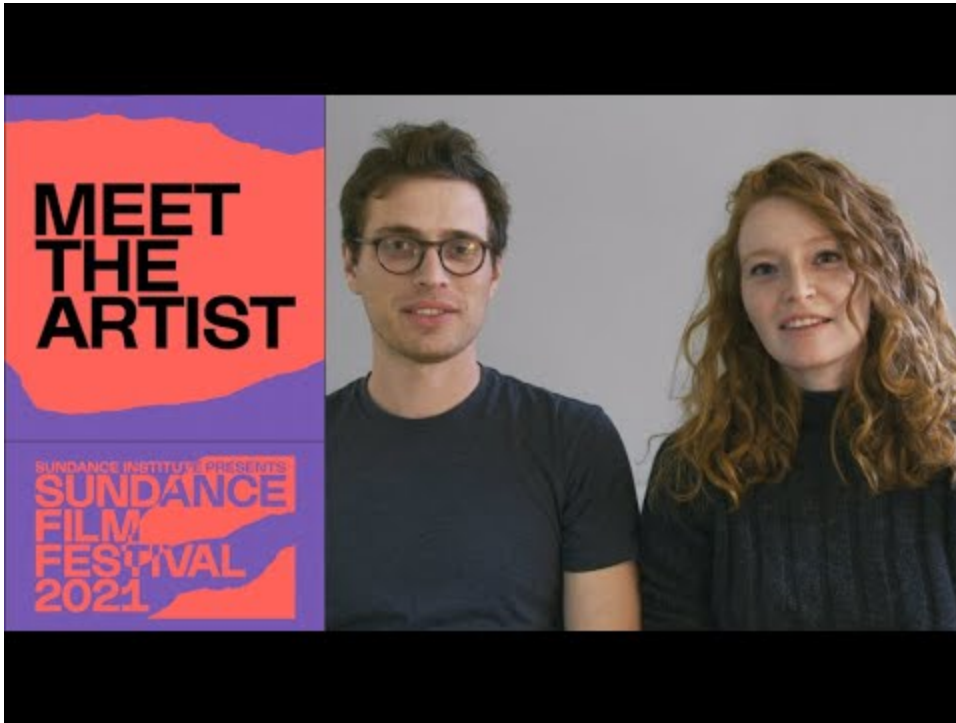
Snowy the turtle is the star of a 12-minute documentary premiering at the Sundance Film Festival this month. *Photo courtesy of Alexander Wolf Lewis*

“I’ve known Snowy since I was 5,” explains Lewis, “and every year, I just felt horrible for him, this living creature seemingly just hanging onto the will to live.” Says professional and life partner Schwalje, “I just had this image of Snowy roaming the basement, eating crumbs and cardboard.” And while Snowy did have a home of sorts in a 10-gallon aquarium in the corner of the cellar, the turtle we see at the beginning of the film certainly doesn’t look happy to be there.

Abandoned by a cousin who lost interest in the pet decades ago, Snowy’s care fell to the family patriarch, Larry, who, to be fair, is obviously quite fond of his charge. (We see him digging unsuccessfully for tasty garden worms before calling around to procure a tin of juicy nightcrawlers for Snowy – who has some icky trouble corralling one.) Still, Larry didn’t exactly sign on for a literal lifetime of turtle duty (box turtles can live a century without breaking a sweat). And “Snowy” sees Lewis and Schwalje gently prodding Larry to take a greater interest in his pal, providing insight into turtle behavior and happiness thanks to everyone from a pet psychic (not all that helpful) to none other than Dr. Anna Wilkinson, the head of the Cold Blooded Cognition Lab in England, perhaps the world’s authority on tortoise understanding. And, yes, the couple did fly all the way to England to secure an interview and get advice, because that’s filmmaking, people.

Not to give too much away, but “Snowy” ends on the sort of happy, hopeful note we can all use right about now in our own versions of a too-small world. Says Munjoy Hill residents Lewis of their film, “We wanted to sort of zap my uncle into seeing his turtle in a sort of different way. Less of a chore and more of a living being,” a process Schwalje jokingly terms, “a very elaborate peer-pressure thing.”

And it worked out great for everyone involved, honestly, as Snowy’s got a new, bigger, more nightcrawler-crawling habitat, Larry’s got the satisfaction of knowing he’s done right by the impassive little creature he’s been sharing house with for half his life, and – oh yeah – “Snowy’s” going to Sundance. As to their film’s acceptance into the prestigious (as hell) film festival – happening Jan. 28 to Feb. 3, during which it will be available to stream anytime – Lewis and Schwalje are as happy as two turtles unexpectedly turned loose in a sunny backyard.



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

“We did a lot of rereading emails,” says Schwalje, with Lewis joking about their acceptance possibly being from some soundalike festival in the Ukraine. But, nope, “Snowy” is a Sundance selectee for 2021, with the two filmmakers beaming with pride that their lovingly made paean to a turtle is itself about to see the larger world. The pair, who moved to Portland a few years ago (Salt graduate Schwalje claims to have convinced Lewis that “Maine is better than New York”), have quickly found a home among the local filmmaking scene, a collaborative (and more affordable) place where, as Schwalje says, “We can spend more time actually making films than hustling for a living.”

That’s Maine for you. We might move a little slower here, but, like Snowy, we bide our time until we make our move. Then, watch out, world!

*For information about the Sundance Film Festival and to find out more about Snowy (oh, and the filmmakers, too, I suppose), check out [alexanderwolflewis.com](http://alexanderwolflewis.com).*

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