



The Genesis of Finding Your Voice

Interview with questions by FYV founder Beth Armstrong, answers from Susie Louis of Conservation Fusion and Jessie Lowry (then of the Blank Park Zoo). Jess is farming her on her family's homestead, and writing a nature column for the Madison County paper in Iowa.

Background

Beth: I was inspired to create Finding Your Voice because I believe that it is in the everyday ordinary that the extraordinary emerges. Because of my work initially with captive gorillas and then in the field conservation arena I have had the privilege to know and work with extraordinary women who are doing amazing work. I feel that as a society especially in these times, these women can serve as examples of inspiration to others to get on with the much-needed work of protecting and conserving wildlife and wild places. We are truly at a turning point; we depend on the intrinsic natural beauty and bounty of the earth for everything that sustains us – clean water, fresh air, food, and inspiration through the astonishing colors, shapes and sounds of the natural world.

My grandmother, Pauline Shuler Authenrieth was a storyteller – illuminating in me a love of ancestry, of family history, populating my mind with the quirky characters of my relatives and their complicated lives. And I come from parents who were reading

constantly and I have always read. Weekly trips to the library were magical because I think stories are transformative. And to this day I truly feel a bit lost if I am not in the middle of good book, an all-consuming story.

Professionally I have always believed that the individual stories of the animals I worked with, most particularly gorillas, were powerful tools to inform, inspire and affect change in people's perceptions. That if I along with my fellow keepers could shine a light on the gorilla's unique personalities; their often times difficult past and their current lives that we could then change stereotypes and the often inaccurate and insensitive perceptions of them.

In the case of Finding Your Voice I wanted the next generation of conservationists working at zoos or in the field to understand that there was and is no perfect way to get to their goal of becoming a proactive conservationist. All of our FYV speakers have their own journey that is exclusive to them and that by sharing their individual stories they could encourage and inspire others. These women of conservation share their vision, motivation and commitment, the setbacks and accomplishments, and the everyday arduous ordinary work that eventually triumphs both for them personally but as importantly for the people and animals they partner with and protect.

There are two people that can offer a unique perspective on FYV and are perfect for this interview: Susie Louis Founder and Executive Director of the NGO, Conservation Fusion, Madagascar and Jessie Lowry, Director of Conservation & Research at Blank Park Zoo. Both Susie and Jess were a part of the original group of women who were asked to participate in a conservation weekend at my home in early 2014. From that inaugural "Conservation Mentoring" weekend the seeds of Finding Your Voice were planted and began to germinate. Both Jess and Susie participated in the first 2016 FYV as well as the second one hosted by Denver Zoo in 2018. They will both be

sharing their stories at the 2019 FYV on March 9th & 10th once again kindly hosted by our partner, Otterbein University in Westerville (Columbus) Ohio.

Q & A

Q - Beth: I was so blown away by all the participants of the first FYV in 2016 – that all of the speakers were not only willing to give of their valuable time but were willing to pay their flights (although we remedied that after I was able to find funding!). Why did you agree to participate?

A - Susie: Wow! How could I say no! ~ I was honored to participate. I was compelled to participate because I feel strongly in mentoring and sharing not only our successes, but also our failures- so that next generation conservationists don't have to tackle those same hurdles, and if they do have challenges, they realize they are not alone. One of my goals as a conservationist is to help as many people as I can to find their own passion, talents and path to be the best version of themselves and apply those gifts to providing a happy healthy future for people, animals and our planet for generations to come.

A - Jessie: As the idea began to take shape, I knew it was something unique. We work on campaigns, write grants, answer floods of emails - and we get caught up, losing focus of the big picture. FYV is about finding your tribe. Taking a moment to take stock...to have an honest look at your life and career and meet others who share these passions for wildlife. I knew all the right ingredients were there to make this summit memorable and I was honored to be a speaker. As I prepared my presentation – it forced me to reflect, take a pause and be grateful for both the ups and downs of my journey. And, I always jump at the chance to spend time with my friends and colleagues that are involved in FYV - they are my tribe.

Q - Beth: Because FYV was so experimental I was surprised at the impact it seemed to have on the students and zoo personnel that attended. Otterbein University

actually offers an undergrad degree in Zoo & Conservation Science so we had many of their students in attendance. What were your impressions of the first FYV?

A - Susie: I believe one of the things that made FYV such a success was the way the speakers interacted with the audience on a level playing field. So often speakers, Directors, and CEO's are "untouchable". Their busy schedules and prestige often do not allow for face to face meetings with students or start-up conservationists, or dreamers, who are not even sure what path they want to pursue. The FYV offered a safe atmosphere where there was a lot of interaction between the speakers and the participants. It was a way for everyone to see that although the speakers seem to be these "superstars" of conservation (which they are!) they are also human beings, and they make mistakes and had to take many different paths to find their own voice. It makes the dream of becoming a conservationist not so much a dream- but a reality.

A - Jessie: That first day, we really didn't know what to expect. We fluttered around the room, hanging quotes and artwork and constructed mock 'campfires' made from tissue paper and battery-powered candles. We agreed that the room should look very inviting. Any trepidation we had earlier in the day disappeared when the students starting filtering in. Some were shy, some were talkative, all were EAGER. As the presentations started, the speakers and participants seem to quickly find a place of familiarity and ease. Barriers fell away, leading to open, honest conversations. My respect and admiration for my fellow presenters grew as I heard their stories. There were common threads in each of our journeys...similar successes and failures amid backdrops of small towns, bustling cities, prairie pockets and impenetrable rainforests. Looking around the room at our participants, we could see emotions, revelations, and their own unique stories bubbling to the surface.

Q - Beth: On the second day while on our drive over to the meeting, the three of us were discussing what was on the schedule for that day but you two began making suggestions, then I just turned it over to you guys to organize. It was exactly the injection that the particular timeframe needed and it turned out fantastic! To me that is what FYV and actual conservation work is all about – the sharing of info, the ability to adapt and be agile and fluid when needed. What are your thoughts on that?

A - Susie: I loved the way that all came together. One of the things that were most difficult for me was to learn how to listen. I am always so excited about sharing my own stories, info, advise- I have struggled to learn how to become a better listener. Working on the break out session with Jessie was incredible. We opened up the conversation to the audience, asking them what they wanted to hear, learn and discuss, and then moderated the session to give each panelist a chance to share their voice. In our fast-paced world, it is often difficult to be present in the moment, this session allowed for that to happen. Everyone’s voice was heard and we all learned from the discussions. With the guided brainstorming at the beginning- it opened people’s minds to a new thought process and gave audience members a safe space to share their voice and to be acknowledged.

A - Jessie: We felt that we had opened a ‘door’ for many in the room - to talk openly and honestly about dreams, careers, and relationships in a way that most don’t get the chance to do. We needed to create space for that to further develop on day two. We set out to hear more from the participants and to let the conversations evolve organically with what the participants were experiencing, right now, in their own lives. Sometimes we gave advice or shared a story about our experiences. Sometimes we just listened...and that was enough.

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**Q - Beth:** In October of 2018, our colleague Erin Stotz of the Denver Zoo hosted the second FYV. My hope when we hosted the first FYV was that it would go regional – that others would pick up the thread of sharing stories that could inspire the next generation. We had a lot of grad students at the Denver Zoo FYV as they offer a graduate program there. We also had undergrads and zoo personnel but this audience was a little older and I was really struck by their reaction. It seemed as if we had struck a chord, that perhaps we filled a much-needed niche that many people seemed to be looking for? I felt that the Denver FYV confirmed what I had always hoped – that FYV could be both useful and effective. I was struck by the strong emotions it elicited. What were your impressions – especially since you were at the first FYV. How did it (or did not) differ?

**A - Susie:** There is no doubt in my mind that FYV is powerful. I thought both conferences evoked a strong emotion and conviction amongst the participants. I believe it is also always a place of growth for all the speakers. We all recognized after the first FYV that it put us a bit out of our own comfort zones- to reflect upon our own journey- how DID we get to where we are? And how can we help others to find their own path? I have made connections at both conferences, and perhaps that is one thing that I feel was the same at both- a feeling of belonging, that none of us are on the same path, but, none of us are ever alone again...we have this huge family of advocates cheering us on. I also believe there is this realization that no one is perfect. We live in this world of sharing our lives on social media. From the outside, it appears to be perfect, but that is because we are not all sharing our trials, challenges and failures, those happen behind the scenes- but they do happen and FYV in both instances was so powerful because it showed the vulnerability of people who we may have put on the pedestal as perfect, successful people. It allowed us all the opportunity to embrace our shortcomings, band together and never, never give up!

**A - Jessie:** Yes, the second FYV was very different from the first. Many participants were further along in their career or education and the group was larger. I

wondered if my story would resonate with the room like it did at the first FYV. Erin incorporating her unique style and vision into this event. Brightly colored cloth adorned the tables and Motown filled our ears as the summit got started. And, just as before, barriers began to break down. Presenters were engaging, honest and sometimes, raw. Participants came to the breakout sessions with fantastic tales of their own stumbles and triumphs. My favorite part was on the second day...Corrin and I talked to a group about the importance of “finding your tribe.” An hour later, after some great conversation amongst the group, they decided to create their own tribe to support one another. It was something I will never forget.

**Q - Beth:** We will be hosting the third FYV in March of 2019 once again at Otterbein University. Where would you like to see FYV to go?

**A - Susie:** FYV has really become one of my favorite activities and something I am so proud to be part of. Helping others find their way is at the core of what I hope to look back and reflect upon at the end of my life. I would love to see the expansion of FYV – to regional, even international audiences. I have seen the incredible impact it has had. Finding Your Voice is the spark that has the power to truly change our world. I believe in it so much and hope to be part of bringing it to more places because I see that it fills a much needed niche for women in conservation.

**A - Jessie:** I am lucky to continue sharing my journey through FYV. Each time I share it, my reflection evolves. It’s a process I’m truly grateful for. We are creating space to encourage reflection. Finding your tribe and surrounding yourself with those who are also driven to create change is a powerful thing. My hope is that people will continue to walk away from FYV with a refreshed outlook on their life and career... and with a few more kick-ass conservationists to call up when they need a hand.