

LSS 1014
PAUL & GRACE ATKINS

PAUL: Many times, I've been filming something, and especially if you've got a wide angle lens, 'cause that something, if it's a shark or if it's wave, it's usually very close to the camera, and you're inside this movie, and suddenly you take your eye away, and you go, Whoa!

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: I'm doing that? You know. Suddenly, reality hits you. There's a desire to get images that no one's ever seen, there's a desire to tell a story.

You're very goal-oriented.

PAUL: Which is very goal-oriented.

Outcome-oriented; right?

PAUL: I'm not an adrenalin junkie. I wouldn't be climbing mountains or diving deep, without a camera in my hands. I wouldn't do it, normally.

GRACE: I would think also, too, it's not that you also, too want to tell a story that's gonna have an effect on the planet. Because, I mean, both of us really have a science background, so we want to tell these stories that we think will do good. We both grew up on Geographic, we grew up on all these wonderful natural history documentaries that really had a mission of trying to better our world and better the planet.

Paul and Grace Atkins blaze their own trail as filmmakers with their natural history documentaries. The duo has delighted a global audience with rare footage of exotic and often dangerous environments, and the forces of nature. Paul and Grace Atkins, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. For over three decades, filmmakers Paul and Grace Atkins of Honolulu have traversed the globe, documenting breathtaking natural events, little-known rituals of wildlife, and spectacular imagery for National Geographic, the BBC, the Discovery Channel, and PBS. Paul and Grace, affectionately known as Gracie, are not only a team in filmmaking, but in life as well. This married couple discovered they had a common passion for natural history documentaries, and set out together to follow their passion.

Paul Atkins was just five years old when he first got interested in nature while watching fishermen pull up stingrays, crabs, and eels from the muddy waters of his hometown of Mobile, Alabama. He pursued his interest in zoology, which took him to the University of Hawaii at Manoa in the 1970s.

PAUL: I was determined to be a marine biologist, and I was working on my doctorate. I just started to feel that even as much as I loved the ocean, and I loved the people I was working with, I loved scuba diving, and I loved being out in the field, the idea that I was going to eventually end up getting a job and

being, you know, on a faculty somewhere was not really my dream of the sort of life that I wanted to lead. And then, I picked up, you know, the department's movie camera, because we used to use the camera to film fish underwater for the research that we were doing, coral reef fish. We were like, doing research on what happens on the coral reef when it changes from the day to the night shift. 'Cause there's a whole switchover underwater that happens with the fish. So, we were using lowlight cameras and a lot of cool technology to study that, and I started taking some of these cameras and just training in on grad student friends of mine and getting them to act, and making little home movies, and then, I got an editing table. And it wasn't long before I started to realize that this is what I really want to do. And actually, I remember the moment when I decided, because ... I cut together a film that I'd shot with the department's Super 8 camera, and we had done some shark fishing off Waikiki as a part of a research project. This was back in the 70s. And I was intending just to document it. And then, I recreated some scenes, and recreated some dream sequences and turned this thing into a movie. And I took the sound track to Jaws, the movie which had just come out, and I took that music, and I cut it up into this dramatic music, and I made something else out of it. And I showed it to faculty and grad student friends of mine at a party we had. And I showed this, and I got this amazing, you know, enthusiastic response from my grad student buddies, and faculty. They were like, Wow, can we watch that again? [CHUCKLE]

That's what creates a career. [CHUCKLE]

PAUL: Until that moment, I had no idea that something I'd created was gonna have that effect on an audience, and I was just hooked. I was hooked.

Filmmaker Grace Atkins grew up in Oregon, California, Virginia, Austria, and Hawaii. Much like her husband Paul, she was fascinated with anything outdoors, the ocean, and animals.

Your father was a fisheries biologist.

GRACE: Yes, he was.

And your stepfather knew the ocean, and he was an expert diver.

GRACE: Yes, he was. He was a Navy SEAL. And my real father was a fisheries biologist who actually worked here in Hawaii for a number of years. I'd been mostly a university student. I'd been seven years at San Francisco State University studying, was a pre-med biology major. And then I got very interested in broadcasting, and so, I went through the whole broadcasting undergraduate program as well as the master's program there. I knew I wanted to do natural history, or I wanted to do science documentaries. And at the time I went to school, there was really no definitive program that taught you how to do natural history films. I think it was Stanford that had one graduate course that I took in science communications, but other than that, it was a field that was wide open.

Before they met, Paul and Grace Atkins both dreamed of creating natural history films. Their chance encounter at Hanauma Bay, Oahu in the 1970s would launch them into their field of dreams.

PAUL: I was actually at Hanauma Bay scuba diving with a woman. I wasn't dating her. I'd just met her, and we decided to go scuba diving together. And I had come out of the water, and so, we had our scuba

gear, and we were starting to trudge up that hill. And then, the woman I was with saw the lifeguard and said, Oh, there's—what was the lifeguard's name?

GRACE: John.

PAUL: John; John. She said, Oh, there's John, I want to go say hello to John. And I thought, Oh, no; come on, really? And so, I followed her back over, you know, to the lifeguard stand, and then, I saw this beautiful blond in a yellow bikini there at the lifeguard stand. And ... that was Gracie. And so, we put our scuba tanks down, and the woman I was with started talking to John the lifeguard, and I struck up a conversation with Gracie.

GRACE: M-hm.

PAUL: And I was startled, because we had a lot of the same interests. So, we started talking about making films together.

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: You know, from the get-go, we just started talking about how this is kinda what we wanted to do. And the conversation just kept going on, and it went on so long, you know, that the woman I was with wanted to leave, and she was getting sort of irritated. And so, we traded uh, phone numbers. And then, the funny thing was, is after that, after we traded phone numbers, I'd give Gracie a call, and we'd have like a forty-five-minute conversation on the phone. And I would go, Well, this is going really well. And then, at the end, I would ask her out. She would always be busy. She'd say, Well, no, I'm sorry, I can't, I'm busy. And then [CHUCKLE] ...

What's the story there?

GRACE: That's true, actually. [CHUCKLE]

Because you were busy?

GRACE: I was busy. Yes. I really enjoyed talking to him, too. We had some of the greatest conversations, and then all of a sudden, he stopped calling. And I just thought, Wait a second, Paul hasn't called. And I went to look for his number to call him to say, Let's go out. And I couldn't find his number. And the next day, he called. And I was so thankful he called, because I would never have been able to reach him, 'cause I didn't know where he lived. I just knew his name and his phone number, and that he lived in town. So, we went out, and that was it. We went out on a date, and we actually haven't separated since, except for when you've gone on shoots. [CHUCKLE]

And you did exactly what you talked about doing.

GRACE: Oh, yeah; we did.

You started a wildlife film company.

GRACE: We did.

And did documentaries.

GRACE: Yeah.

The relationship of Paul and Grace Atkins blossomed, and they pursued their passion for each other, and their dream of producing natural history documentaries. They began their filmmaking partnership with Paul as the cinematographer and director, and Grace as the producer and sound recordist.

GRACE: At that time, there just was nothing that really would define how one made these kind of films and went about creating a career in that. So, when we started, we were really kind of like forging our way into a newer ... world, a new way of making films, and basically had to do it all on our own.

PAUL: And I think it was the combination of, you know, just having the courage, really, to try it. Because now, you were a team. Now, you were two people.

GRACE: M-hm.

PAUL: And Gracie brought in a sense that I didn't really have, which was a business sense, about finances, how to use a credit card. I didn't even have a credit card, or just know how to use one, you know.

GRACE: [CHUCKLE]

PAUL: And I brought in this desire, you know, and vision about shooting and making films, and I was sure I could do it, even though I barely knew what I was doing.

GRACE: Our first shoots were in Palau. And that's when we were starting to evolve our career. We figured that the only way we were gonna get our career started was to make a film and present it to somebody to see.

Find a client later; right?

GRACE: Yeah; find a client later. And so, we raised money to be able to go to these places that we wanted to do films.

PAUL: M-hm, m-hm.

GRACE: And basically started—

PAUL: But a lot of things during this period kind of came together and happened.

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: You know. I was dreaming about doing this, I met Gracie, and we talked about being a team. And about the same time, I was introduced to Arthur Jones, who was a billionaire inventor of Nautilus exercise machines. And he was spending a lot of his money that he was making on Nautilus exercise machines on a television studio in Lake Helen, Florida. He was going all over the world just filming things. And he showed up in Hawaii, and Bruce Carlson at the Waikiki Aquarium introduced me to him. And so, Arthur hired me for a couple of days to be a grip.

GRACE: M-hm.

PAUL: And I started to learn a little bit more about video cameras, working for him. And so, Arthur ... the name of his company was Nautilus, because it was based on the cam of his exercise machines, which was based on the spiral design of a nautilus shell. Arthur decided he wanted to mount an expedition to go to Palau to bring chambered nautilus back to be at his studio in Lake Helen, Florida so he could have them in a big aquarium there. And expense didn't matter. He would pay whatever. And so, I got to know him, and I talked him into—I said, Well, why don't you do a documentary about this trip, about the expedition to catch live nautilus. And he said, Fine. And I said, I want to shoot it. And he said, Sure. [CHUCKLE] We barely knew what we were doing, but over the course of a couple of trips down there, we managed to get enough footage to put together, you know, a semblance of a documentary.

Wasn't that an award-winning documentary?

GRACE: Yes.

PAUL: Yeah.

GRACE: Actually.

PAUL: But not until we showed it to Jim Young, who was, you know, the executive director of Hawaii Public Television at that time. And Jim became a big supporter. And he became, you know, a believer before we had a lot of footage, when he saw the first footage. And he basically said, you know, I will donate editing facility and services to you to edit this show, and we'll make sure we get it on Public Television and broadcast it. So, that was a great deal.

Because you had a billionaire in your pocket.

PAUL: Yeah. Well—

GRACE: Actually, at that point in time, no.

PAUL: He abandoned us.

GRACE: He abandoned us.

Oh, did he?

PAUL: He abandoned.

GRACE: He gave us the footage [INDISTINCT].

PAUL: After the first expedition, he said ... You'll never make anything out of this footage. That's what he told us. He said, Nobody wants this kind of documentary. He said, But, he said, I'll give you the rights to this footage. He said, I'll have the rights, you have the rights to see what you can make out of it. And so, we took that, and then got KHET's support.

GRACE: And some more grants.

PAUL: And then, we wrote some more grants and went back to Palau, and embellished it and shot more of the expedition, and actually did a better job. You know, that film was like our film school. We were learning along the way.

Learn by redoing.

GRACE: Yes.

PAUL: Learn by redoing. Oh, that didn't work, let's reshoot that. You know. And then, a good friend, Mike deGruy, who's also a resident of Hawaii, you know, he several years ago was killed in a helicopter crash. But he did a lot of films for KHET as well during that period.

GRACE: M-hm.

PAUL: And he was our partner, and we were—you know, some people called us the Three Musketeers. We did a lot of work together.

And you were just feeling it out as you went.

PAUL: Oh, we totally were.

GRACE: Yes.

PAUL: Oh, yeah.

GRACE: Completely. [CHUCKLE]

PAUL: There was no ...

GRACE: That's an understatement, to say the least. [CHUCKLE]

PAUL: There was no model—

GRACE: There was nothing.

PAUL: --having to do this at all.

GRACE: Yeah. There was no YouTube, there was no internet, there was no online courses. And very few productions that were going on, too. Yeah.

PAUL: And there weren't that many natural history films being produced. This was the very beginning. You know, cable had not exploded yet.

Through the success of their award-winning nautilus documentary, filmmakers Paul and Grace Atkins of Honolulu continued their journey into documentary filmmaking. They traveled to little-known locations across the world, capturing forces of nature never seen before on film, such as the feeding rituals of great white sharks and killer whales.

PAUL: Killer whales feeding on seal pups, actually. Yeah; and yes, we shot this. Mike deGruy was involved in this, too. We shot it in Patagonia, Argentina for a BBC series, a David Attenborough series called Trials of Life. Which back in the 90s, that was, you know, the Planet Earth. You know, that Planet Earth is still well-known today, but that's how well known Trials of Life was in the 90s. Anyway, we were there for five weeks in Patagonia, Argentina on a beach, and the killer whales would slide up the beach and grab sea lion pups off the beach, and then wiggle, and back into the water.

What are some of the other adventures you've had together?

GRACE: I think one of our most difficult and challenging films, and yet one of the most satisfying in a long time, because it turned out so well, was the one we did on dolphins for Geographic. When we started that film, we wanted to take a film that looked at the opposite of what the public perception of an animal was. For example, like dolphins. Dolphins are always thought to be sweetness and light, and everybody loves a dolphin. So, we wanted to look at the darker side of dolphins, which meant we were not only just looking at tursiops, but we were looking all the dolphin family. And killer whales are a part of them, and certain kind of whales and things. So, this allowed us to expand our stories that we wanted to tell. And so, we started making this film. So, we went out to a location called—what was that place?

PAUL: Cape Peron.

GRACE: Cape Peron.

PAUL: We camped out.

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: Camped out for weeks with the flies.

GRACE: And that was ...

Waiting for a scene.

GRACE: For the scene of the dolphins.

PAUL: M-hm.

And that's really part of a documentarian's life, isn't it?

GRACE: Yeah.

Waiting.

GRACE: Waiting; waiting.

PAUL: Yeah.

Just waiting.

GRACE: So, we went out to this location, and we built a camp there, and the scientist was with us and said, This is the best time of year for you to be able to see dolphins herding fish. And we had never heard of dolphins actually coming and herding fish onto shore, just like the killer whales had done in Patagonia. So, we set up our camp and our tents and everything. And for weeks, we were trying to, you know, see this action happen. And it wasn't happening, so the scientist said, Well, something must not be right, we're not at the right time of season. I can't tell you what it takes to get an expedition all the way out to a remote location like that. The weeks and the months of planning, and then also, the physical actual moving out there and setting up your camps, and getting all your gear ready, and then doing the shooting.

PAUL: 'Cause there's not power.

GRACE: M-hm; yeah.

PAUL: You need to bring all your food, your water, you know, solar showers, generators, all of that out there, charging batteries, all of that.

GRACE: 'Cause there's nothing out there. So okay, so we're there for two weeks and decide, oh, well, this is not gonna happen this time, so we're gonna have to come back at another time. We lived out on this location for like, two months. And you become connected with an environment like you never would, because there's nobody out there; just us. And the dolphins sure enough came in, a family of dolphins. And they would come in, and they would herd the fish. And we were on this huge, long beach, maybe three hundred feet of beach. And those dolphins would come in and herd the fish, and Paul would be out there with his camera. Ann Marie, our assistant, who was working with us, she and I would be up on the hills spotting and telling him where the dolphins were coming, and where they were going. And he would run up and down this beach trying to film them, because as soon as he would get up to film, the dolphins would see him and would go to another section of the beach. [CHUCKLE] And so, there would be Paul with his camera gear, humping it all the way to the other side of the beach. And finally, you know, we got the footage.

PAUL: After two trips.

GRACE: After two trips.

PAUL: Yeah.

Had anyone ever gotten these photos?

GRACE: No; no.

This film before?

PAUL: No.

GRACE: No.

In 2003, Paul Atkins used the skills he honed shooting documentaries to work on a Hollywood feature film, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, starring Russell Crowe. The film's director, Peter Weir, wanted authentic footage of stormy seas. So, Paul Atkins boarded a ship for a forty-two-day expedition around the treacherous waters of Cape Horn to capture storm footage.

PAUL: We were on a replica of Captain Cook's ship, which was built in Australia. It had been sailing around the world in various places, but it'd never sailed around Cape Horn before. It'd never been to these kind of conditions. We were with an Australian captain; his name was Chris Blake. Great guy. But he had never sailed around Cape Horn either. So, we're sailing around the most dangerous waters of the world, and we're approaching them, and no one on the ship has done this before. So, it was really scary.

I mean, they were huge waves; right? I mean, what about keeling over?

PAUL: We were in the open ocean, and the swells were about fifty-foot swells. And some of them were breaking. And there's no land out there, there's no rocks, but they were breaking on the open ocean. And the winds got up to about seventy-five knots. And the ocean, I've never seen anything like it; it looks like just sculptures, it's foam-swept, it's just foam everywhere.

Okay; what is there about you—and you too, 'cause you were ready to go on this trip, that would submit to that risk?

GRACE: Yeah. Well, you think of it as a risk, you think of the adventure, you think of what you're getting to film, what you're gonna be, you know, making.

But then, nature; I mean, there's some factors you can't plan for or control against.

GRACE: Well, that's true, too. But you try to plan for everything that you can, and over-plan. You know, so far, we've been always pretty successful, 'cause no one's really ever gotten hurt.

PAUL: Ooh, wow; that is hot. It's like hot water to my hand. Let's get suited up.

GRACE: For our science documentary, it hasn't been this thrill-seeking thing, it's been more about telling a story that will do something better for the world. And it just so happens that some of the things involve a little bit more risky, you know, endeavors.

And I think you're curious, too.

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: You're curious.

GRACE: Yes.

So, you want to follow that thread.

PAUL: You're definitely curious. And then, there's one other aspect to it that I realized as well, is the exhilaration of knowing that you were afraid, and you did it anyway.

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: And you came through the other end, and everything's okay. There is an exhilaration to that. It might be dangerous exhilaration, but there's a feeling of, you know, like for example, I used to have a fear of heights. And even today, if I stand on a vertical cliff and look straight down ... it's a mild case of vertigo. And so, to film on cliffs, which I've done a lot of, and to film from a helicopter, I had to get over that. I had to really get over it.

Master and Commander won an Academy Award for cinematography in 2004. At the same time, Paul and Grace Atkins began to expand their work beyond documentaries to commercials and narrative films. The pair struck up a relationship with acclaimed film director Terrence Malick, and Paul worked with him as a cinematographer on films such as The Tree of Life and the IMAX film, Voyage of Time.

PAUL: I'm in love with camerawork and visual storytelling, no matter what it involves. And I did at one point in my career, you know, get a little ... I don't know if tired is the word, but I needed to expand beyond just doing wildlife and sitting and waiting, and that kind of thing. But now, I enjoy flipping back and forth. I think it's good. You take lessons from one discipline, and apply them to the other. It's great; I love it. You know, I love working with actors, and I work with a lot of directors like Terrence Malick, who give their actors a lot of freedom both in dialog and in movement. So, as a cameraman, it's not like you have marks on the floor.

Then your background is great for that.

PAUL: My background is like, I know how to do this, 'cause I've filmed animals before.

[LAUGHTER]

Paul Atkins says that film director Terrence Malick shared one of the most important lessons in his life, telling Paul not to play it safe, and to give yourself permission to fail. Otherwise, you'll never rise above mediocrity. As for overall wisdom, Paul credits Gracie as the most influential person in his life.

PAUL: In our personal relationship, you know, Gracie, I always say, taught me how to argue. I'm born and raised in the Deep South.

GRACE: Very non-confrontational.

PAUL: And very congenial sort of social structure there. People don't argue, in public at least. They want to put on a good impression.

They refer to the war as the Great Unpleasantness.

[LAUGHTER]

PAUL: Right; yeah. Yeah; exactly.

GRACE: Exactly. That was your mother.

PAUL: Yeah. M-hm; yeah. And I didn't know how to argue, and also, if somebody got angry with me, I kept it bottled up.

GRACE: M-hm.

PAUL: And I retained it, and I resented it for a long time. Even the next day, I'd still be like, angry or hurt about it. And Gracie, you know, I don't know how, just beat that out of me.

GRACE: [MIMICS WHIPPING SOUND]

PAUL: 'Cause we would get into an argument, and Gracie would be very direct about the way she was feeling at that moment. And then, it could be over for Gracie, 'cause she's finished with it. And then, she'd try to move on to something else, and I'm still like, Wait a minute.

And you haven't really spoken about it yet.

PAUL: Yeah; exactly.

GRACE: But maybe that's the artist in you, where you actually are still thinking about it, while I'm more the action person. I get in there, and I figure out what has to be done, do it, and move on to the next.

PAUL: M-hm; m-hm.

GRACE: And that's just the way of a producer, I think. You're the creative type, and you sit and you think about things. The years that we worked together doing the kind of films that we did and how

we did it; everything he was really good at, I was not good at. And everything I was really good at, he was not good at. So, we were actually really a perfect team.

Do you ever think about how lucky you are?

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: M-hm.

GRACE: I think about it all the time.

PAUL: Oh, yeah.

GRACE: Yeah.

PAUL: Definitely. Yeah. You know, I definitely feel that way, and then again, you know, as we all like to talk about a lot, it was meant to be. So, is it luck, or is there something guiding us?

GRACE: Was this something that was meant to happen? Were we meant to meet, or was it just happenstance? I like to kind of think that we were somehow meant to meet, and that we created this life because it was meant to be together.

As of this conversation in December of 2016, Hawaii-based filmmakers Paul and Grace Atkins were gearing up to work with an environmental foundation called Global Mana to educate people about the effects of global climate change. Paul and Grace feel this is likely to be one of the most important stories of their careers. Mahalo to Paul and Grace Atkins of East Honolulu for sharing their story with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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PAUL: I hear so many couples say, We never argue. And I just think ...

GRACE: Ah.

How well do you know each other?

PAUL: Sorry, I do not believe that. [CHUCKLE] Or, you should.

Or you suffer in silence.

PAUL: Or you're suffering in silence. What's going on there, you know.

GRACE: No, but I think also, too, however you communicate, if you communicate through love and quietness, or through more emotional, passionate and argumentative ways, each has their own purpose in how a relationship goes.

[END]