

Snap Judgment - Birdzilla Transcript

Glynn: In sixth grade. We move, yet again, to a new town. Another new school. With more new kids. Who promised me new beatings. But this time. My parents took pity on me. Since I don't have any friends. Or prospects of friends. They say I can get a pet. And, I want a parrot. Because I like pirates. But they don't have any parrots at the Kmart. Instead, I get a pretty blue parakeet. So happy. We take her home. But every time I put my hand in her cage. She bites me. Hard. Angry. Ouch. Hey! Hey! I give her food and she bites me. Trying to gently stroke her she bites me. And I know. How hard it is to move to a new place. And not know anybody. I know. So I place my open palm in the cage. Outside biting range. Get a garish multicolored bed sheet. Drape it around the cage. Around us. Scary. Scary. And don't you know, she pops over and sits on my hand. The devil you know. So happy. I can barely breathe. We sit like that. Together for a while. Eventually, I stroke her feathers. She lets me stroke her feathers. And when I take the sheet away, she doesn't fly off. But stays perched on my hand. And later on my shoulder. Everywhere I go. My little buddy. And magically. The kids on the street. They want to talk to me now. She's so cool. Can I pet her? Birdie makes it plain. Just because I can touch her. ****Sound effect**** Doesn't mean they can. Today on Snap Judgment. A love story like no other. We proudly present Birdzilla. My name is Glynn Washington Ask first. When you're listening. To Snap Judgment.

Okay, you're gonna want to get cozy with someone for our next story. If you don't know who that person is yet, just wear Snap Judgment gear next time you're out and about -- the person will come running. Yes, Sensitive listeners please be advised, this episode does contain some strong language and discusses the subject of death. I know. But this is Romantico... For real. No fooling. Snap Producer Nikka Singh takes it from here...

Nikka: Well, what does it feel like to hold a bald Eagle?

Murdo: I get asked that question a lot. What it's like to hold a bald Eagle. And I usually say it holding a bald Eagle is like holding a toddler, having a tantrum with a festival of steak knives.

Normally you were never this close to a wild animal like this, a top predator like this, and you'd never, you'd never hold on to it. You'd never grab a hold of it and hold it tight to your chest. So close that you could feel its heartbeat through your, through your clothing.

you know, If you've seen the movie Jurassic park, they say that, uh, dinosaurs didn't go extinct. They just became birds. And I would say that's a hundred percent correct.

It's exactly like the dinosaurs were in the movie. the scaliness of the legs and the sharpness of the talons, the way they articulate, the way they grip the strength within them, the way the bird looks at me. So they must have used Eagles or other birds of prey as an analog for their dinosaurs, the way they move And the way they behave, because it's identical and

This is an animal you're trying to help, but you also realize that it's not asking you for your help and it doesn't want it and just wants to get the fuck away from you.

So you've got to respect that, right? You got to say, okay. Yep. We gotta, we gotta, we gotta fight. And, but I gotta wait because otherwise I'm going to get hurt. You're going to get hurt. Somebody in the room is going to get hurt. So, uh, let's, let's get it on.

Nikka: Murda Messer was not one of those animal lovers who was destined to save wildlife, who applied to a million veterinarian schools back in the day. He was just a college student who studied a little bit of everything and who liked to play Nintendo.

That's actually how we met Helene. She was the veterinarian that had just moved into the upstairs apartment

Murdo And I remember one day that I was, I was lying on the floor playing a Nintendo video game, and I hear somebody coming down the stairs and I look around and it's Helene and she goes, Hey, what are you doing? And I said, Oh, I'm just playing a video game here. And she asked if I minded if she played. And they said, no, come on over. So I handed a controller to her and we just played Nintendo together for a while.

So that was our first introduction to each other. Playing Nintendo. And I later found out that Helene wasn't interested in video games at all, though. She was actually interested in me, but I was so dazed. I didn't even notice it. I thought she thought she enjoyed playing games. So this is kind of funny.

Nikka And at some point they put the controllers down and started taking long drives around Newfoundland together. And one in particular stands out.

Murdo You're driving across pretty much barren landscape and really Rocky Cliffs, uh, coastline and looking out across the Atlantic ocean and beautiful sunny blue sky day. Experiencing being away from home, uh, With this woman that I really liked listening to new music, enjoying this person's company, it was a magical time. It was fun. Uh, I felt, I felt very, very alive.

Nikka: Well, is there a song that, from that moment that really sticks out to you?

Murdo: I think it was, I think it was a solo album from one of the Eagles guys, it was the last lonely evening you'll ever spend, whatever that song was. That one Helene played a lot.

It was a subtle hint from Helene that she wanted me to be with her. Right.

“This is the last worthless evening That you'll have to spend”

Nikka: Yeah, you get the point. They moved in together and then there was that one morning. The first time Helene asked Murdo, if he'd come help her out at the clinic.

Murdo: So I said, sure, no problem. I thought it'd be kind of cool to go in and see the backside of a, of a veterinary clinic. You know, you don't often get to see the surgery suite and all the stuff that goes on.

It was Canada day, which is similar to July 4th for sure. Uh, United States. And, um, Helene had to go in for an animal that had been a small dog.

That'd been bitten by a larger dog. And she said, you know, can you come in and be with me?

Cause I, you know, sometimes it's helpful to have somebody else there in case the animal needs to be held or just to just. Another body around to grab something.

You get to see all the behind the scenes medical equipment, the anesthetic machine, the X Ray machine, the, the ultrasound machine and the blood work labs, all that sort of stuff.

So I was just. Really excited and fascinated by all of it. And it was kind of fun to, you know, help my girlfriend at the time who was doing this really cool work to be a veterinarian to me was like being a surgeon or being an astronaut. It was a cool job, right. For this, this ordinary guy. Right.

Nikka: Murdo watched transfixed as Helene carefully, put the mask on the tiny dog, cleaned and flushed its wounds with syringes, and then began to stitch it back up.

Murdo: The way Helene worked, she was always very calm and she was speaking a soft voice and she would ask me to. Uh, handover gauze. So I take some gauze and pass it over our handover, a forcep, and I'd be like, well, what the heck is that? And she'd just point to it on the table. Pass me.

That is that okay, here you go.

To watch a professional at work and see them methodically and slowly going through steps that are necessary to do, what's gotta be done while you're thinking. No, no, you gotta, you gotta move faster. You gotta, you gotta make this happen now. Right?

Because, uh, this animal is hurting, but you know, that's not the right response. The right response is to do exactly what she did.

She was a little sweaty from having worked under the heat of the lamps in the, or for about an hour.

So we were both looking a little bit bedraggled at the time, but, uh, she looked pretty hot to me having just, you know, washed her, saving a little animal's life. So I. I think, you know, it elevated her as a girlfriend, multiple steps in that moment.

I bought a ring. It wasn't, I didn't have a lot of money. It wasn't, I still didn't have a good job. But it was all I could afford.

So, uh, uh, uh, my, my guess my worry, was that the ring wouldn't be good enough for her or she wouldn't like it, or I would, you know, be not what she had expected

so I had the ring, I had a suit. I was going to wear a picked out.

Nikka: And he made reservations at the hungry fishermen. Everything was set.

Murdo: And I said to Helene, Hey, let's go for a nice romantic dinner on February 14th. Right? It's Valentine's day I booked the hungry fishermen. Are you interested in going? And she said, Oh yes. Yeah, that sounds great.

Nikka: But unfortunately it wasn't meant to be,

Murdo: It was probably in the afternoon when she got the call the day before Valentine's day, um, for the 13th. I could tell right away from the. Her tone that it was probably something serious because you know, she's normally pretty jovial on the phone.

And she said, Hey, there's an oil spill in Placentia Bay. And, uh, they're asking if I can come help. Uh, coordinate some of the effort to look after the wildlife. Uh, I know we have something planned for tomorrow. Do you mind if I go

So I'm in my mind, I'm going, man, we got plans for tomorrow night. This isn't going to work. Right. But I kind of set that aside because I knew obviously what was much more important was her, uh, Helping out with these animals. and I said, hell no, go, definitely go. And so G then continued our conversation and, uh, hung up.

Nikka: She was coming back the day after Valentine's day and he was all set to try again. So he called up the hungry fishermen.

Murdo: And it's one of those restaurants. That's really cool. It's kind of like a cavern. It's got these, these, um, old stone archways that are alcoves with candles lit in them. So it's really. Well, mood lit a cool kind of space

so I started to feel a bit nervous as the time came up. so once the table was cleared from the main meal, I slipped my hand into my jacket pocket.

And pull that little box and kind of then got down on my knee beside her and looked up at her with the ring, opened it and said, Hey, Helene, would you marry me? And she was, she was quite surprised. I think she was generally, you're not expecting it at all. So that was kind of fun to see her reaction. And then she paused a moment and then said, yes, I'd love to.

Nikka: So it was just the two of them, kind of actually. It was never just the two of them because they did have the one dog and the two birds who were their pets, but then they also got the seven baby starlings that needed constant feeding and then a few baby squirrels and also a hairy woodpecker or it could have been Blue Jay or a Robin.

He wasn't totally sure.

Murdo: I remember one night we're after a long, busy day. Uh, Lee and I are lying in bed. She would say, uh, there are nine heartbeats in this house. Yeah. And so I mentally do the math in my head. Yep. You me, the dogs overwrite the Starling, the Bluejay, the Groundhog, the squirrel.

So it was, you know, it's like, like somebody who brings home one cat and then brings on another and then brings on another it's all of a sudden you have seven or

eight cats in the house and it's like, Holy crap. Where were the cat people? So we became, uh, the wildlife people.

So we wouldn't be in separate til 10 30, 11 o'clock at night going to sleep around midnight, getting up sometimes five in the morning because that's when the sun gets up and that's when the baby starts screaming their heads off to be fed baby birds, especially.

And after a while, you're starting to feel like a zombie

so I would be up before her and then in bed before her. And she would be up after me and in bed after me. So often sometimes, you know, it was, uh, it was almost like ships passing in the night. It's like, Oh, nice to see you. Okay, let's go. It was a very busy time and very exhausting, um, um, uh, sometimes I wonder how we managed to make it through that.

Nikka: It was a very busy time, because so often when Helene would be treating a wild animal at the clinic and she knew it could be euthanized, she brought it home. If she thought they had a chance she was going to give it to them.

Murdo: She always said that If the bird has a will live. If it shows improvement each time we look at it, then we'll keep going

She stood her ground every time and she was right. She was totally right and good for her.

Nikka: But the house wasn't going to do it. You can only store so many animals inside your basement.

And so they decided to turn the bottom of their house into a staging area and started to build out the rest of their property.

First, they built a songbird enclosure, eventually a nursery and even a giant flyway for birds of prey. At the most, they had nine structures on a one acre plot. They called it the Cobequid Wildlife Rehabilitation Center.

It means the coming together of two rivers.

Murdo: It was kind of like jumping in feet first into the deep end when we first started, because neither of us really had a lot of experience with large birds of prey.

There was one time where We had it actually under anesthetic and somehow the auction got turned off on the anesthetic machine

So the birds started to wake up on the table. And when I saw that I reached over to grab a hold of his legs. And, um, I got ahold of one of them, but miss the other one and one talent punctured a blood vessel, I actually heard it go pop. And it was, it's a surprise to me because I didn't think blood vessels would do that and blood stuff coming out of it.

And I like, Oh shit, but I didn't. Oh, the bird I grabbed the whole, the other leg until we were able to get it back under anesthetic and then look after myself and take care of the puncture wound.

So yeah, an Eagle is a dangerous thing to look after and if you don't know what you're doing, it could latch onto your arm, for example, with his talons. And those talons would go right to your bone in your arm and you can bleed out pretty fast. So these animals are dangerous to handle and you have to know what you're doing when you handle them.

Nikka: But it was working. They pinned a fractured leg on a great horned owl, splinted a broken wing on an Eagle, and then one day a large plywood box arrived at their door and in it was the biggest flying creature they'd ever see

Murdo: And, um, I, you know, I'd done my, my safety gloves. We have these big leather gauntlets that go up to your shoulders. Uh, they're designed for handling birds of prey. So their talons can't. Go through them. And a face shield.

And then I stepped into the little box you know, normally when I hold a bald Eagle, uh, I've been told it in front of me, legs down and the head would come up to maybe in the middle of my chest and the tail feathers would maybe be down to my knees.

This one, the tail feathers are down two machines and the head was almost just below my chin. It was a massive bird. It's the biggest bird I've ever handled.

Nikka: But he also noticed something else while holding her,

Murdo: I can yeah. Kind of read the bird's body by holding it.

And, um, this one, I felt had very little life in it at all.

It was so listless. It was like limp, ragdoll. just completely out of it.

So, you know, I didn't think it had a chance. Um, so picked picking her up and putting it on the exam table. I was on the fence about this, uh, chances for survival.

Helene on the other hand. Said that if it shows improvement each time we look at it, then we'll keep going.

So we started treating it for lead poisoning right away

Nikka: Helene gave it medication that would bind to the lead, allowing the body to pass it out through the kidneys so that in the end, the bird would excrete it. But you can only really reverse lead poisoning to a certain degree.

Murdo: After a certain level, it's the damage to the, all the tissues and the brain and the organs is probably permanent. And it's not possible to bring it back from that,

we've seen one in the, this condition before and is likely no, it was going to go the same way.

Nikka: They can't be sure, but when a hunter goes out and kills a deer with a lead bullet and goes ahead and field dresses it, so they remove the parts of the body that

they want and then leave the rest of the parts there for nature, it's kind of like closing the circle of life and theoretically, it's a good idea, but the problem is that lead is a really soft metal.

And so microscopic bits of that metal are left inside of those animal remains.

And when an eagle comes to scavenge on it, they end up becoming poisoned by those little microscopic pieces of lead and it doesn't take a lot to kill them

And one time that stands out a lot to Murdo was during this particular hunting season when they got five bald eagles.... in one weekend.

Murdo: Uh, you know, after the first. Couple of Eagles that came in that were poisoned and we were hopeful that we could save them. I remember just looking at the last one that we had and just looked at me and said, It's sled and I can't save it. I have to euthanize it because it's going to die.

And she kind of just threw her arms up, like, fuck this, and I held it and I could feel as his body went limp.

And it goes from this, this tense, sometimes angry creature that you're trying to hold on to because you want to, uh, help it to a limp sack of. Like potatoes, it has this dead weight in your arms and has zero life left in it. And they're eyes cloud over.

And it's just sadness as this life ends.

Nikka: As Murdo stood there holding yet another badly poisoned eagle, he was pretty doubtful. They were both doubtful actually. But Helene was also quietly adamant that as long as it wasn't going to degrade the next day, they'd keep going.

Murdo: The second day, where she was not responding very well to the fluid therapy and it was still lying down, uh, uh, on the floor of the enclosure and had the raspy breath that we see in all the light poisoned Eagles

Nikka: On the third day, when Murdo was getting ready to move the eagle for her treatment, he thought that since she was so subdued that perhaps this could be a teaching moment.

Murdo: I thought, okay, here's an opportunity for one of the volunteers to learn how to pick up the bird from the box, rather than just having it handed to them by me. it was like picking up a pigeon or easier than picking up a pigeon. It was so I thought, perfect. This will be a great bird to learn on.

As soon as we approached the box, The bird was nuts. It was a completely different bird.

It went from the day before where it was, we can have his head hanging down, like it had no energy whatsoever to like a Tasmanian devil wanting to get the hell out of there as fast as possible.

feeding sound calm down buddy. not yet. Wow.

Murdo: She was literally banging around in the box, jumping up, knocking her head off the lid. Uh, banging around the heat lamp. It was literally ringing around, like it was, it was a ruckus and I thought, okay, this is gonna be interesting when I grabbed this bird because it is so big. It is totally pissed off right now.

It sure as hell didn't want to come. And once I got ahold of it, The difference in strength in that bird from the day before was incredible.

Murdo: there was this fear, worry that I had never experienced before in handling a bald Eagle.

It just was, I felt anger and rage in this animal. It was. It was doing all it could to get away from me. And it wanted absolutely nothing whatsoever to be done to it or to be held. And it was all I could do with my own strength to hang on to her. And you can only do that for so long.

And eventually you have to yield and she was starting to wear me out. I could feel the intensity of her breathing through my chest, cause her. The her back was right up against my chest. I could feel her heartbeat through my chest. It was pounding.

She was trying to escape and she was giving it everything she had.

That's when I called her Birdzilla like, okay, this is a big bird.

It's insane. This is, this is totally Birdzilla. Um, and from that moment on, I was the only person who could really handle that bird. And it was always a fight. Every single time I took it out of an enclosure, it was a fight.

there's a lot more to an Eagle flying than just being strong. And I knew that that, uh, Birdzilla was strong. Um, but I wasn't sure if that, um, maybe she had some other. Damage from the lead, maybe some issues with her vision uh, their ability to under, uh, to know their balance balance is extremely important. And one of the things that led can do can really disrupt. And Eagle's ability to balance and ability to see.

So it was also vitally important to make sure that she was able to, to fly and fly coordinated in the big, easily. So that's why we decided to take her down to, to the flyway and see what she could do.

Nikka: So he wrangled Birdzilla from her cage and along with Helene and some volunteers, they entered the Big Jeezly, a huge barn shaped building constructed specifically, for birds of prey.

Murdo: The first impression of walking into the flyways, kind of like, um, it's kind of like the impression you get when you walk into a cathedral, it forces you to look up right away. There's lots of light, light spills in through all the, the vertical slats that encompass the walls. and there's a stillness that envelops you I've I often call it the, the, the big, jeez Lee, the Eagle cathedral, because it's got that feel to it.

-Nikka: And it's huge

Murdo: Uh, you could easily fit a double Decker bus in there multiple times. It's a very large building.

when we were thinking about the design for this place, We wanted to build it such that two Eagles could fly side-by-side down the flyway and an Eagle, uh, the largest wingspan of an Eagles, roughly eight feet.

So we calculated 16 feet would work pretty well.

Nikka: It's basically an oval shaped racetrack for eagles.

Murdo: Everybody stood with their backs to the outside wall on the bottom end of the building.

And I slowly lowered Birdzilla to the ground and lifted the blanket off of her and stepped back. And immediately she took three steps forward and kind of looked around. And then took off, came down the other side of the flyway and immediately grabbed a hold of, uh, a small hatch. We had put in one of the walls. Uh, Thinking that, you know, if we could never catch a bird in the big Easley, then we can open this hatch and the bird find his own way out.

And she grabbed a hold of that and was shaking the crap out of it. And it was like, ah, I can't remember how well I secured that. Did I actually make sure that that can open and further for a few days? Seconds. Uh, we were all like, Oh my God, I hope she doesn't pop that open and get out. Cause that would be awful.

But, uh, she shook it for probably about five seconds

Murdo: and then let go of it and then drop down onto the ground and kind of looked back at us like, okay, here I am.

Nikka: In a few days, it was clear that Birdzilla was ready to go back home. So they set their sights on a Saturday. And when they got up to catch her for her release, they saw clear skies, a great big sun, and they were greeted by a fresh blanket of snow from the night before. The world looked brand new.

Murdo: So as we, as we got closer to the release location, um, which was a town called new Glasgow, uh, just North of our center here in Nova Scotia. A Birdzilla who was initially pretty quiet at the beginning of the journey, start to become more active in the cage. So Uh, Helene is driving. I'm in the front seat.

And in the back of the car is the, is the crate in which Birdzilla is in. And every once in a while, you'll hear the thump as she jumps and you hear and feel the cage rattle in the back of the car. So as we get closer, this is happening more often.

Helene and I noticed when we were taking animals for release, as we got closer and closer to where they were to be released, if it was, if it was where they came from. They would become more and more agitated in the, in the cage as we got closer.

And we make our way to the property where Birdzilla was found. And it, uh, basically is opposite.

The tree, which is across the river, where, uh, Birdzilla and her mate have been seen quite often in the past. So it was a great location for a release because it was wide open from the property out over the river,

And there was quite a few people, uh,

The people who found the bird have joined us there and the wildlife officer who, uh, who had caught caught it and brought it to us, plus the volunteers who had helped, uh, work with this bird. And so those probably about 15 people. And normally our releases are fairly quiet affairs often. It was just me and Helene

So it was a beautiful Vista. It's a really nice spot.

And as soon as we put the candle down, Birdzilla was already rattling the door and jumping around, like she sensed the change and movement and the sense, and probably the change in the air.

Is very similar to that opening scene to Jurassic Park where the animal is banging around. Right. It's I'm trying to get out it's you can see the eyeball looking at you through the slots.

And we had everybody gathered behind the, uh, the kennel so the only thing Birdzilla can see is the open space in front of her. She doesn't see people because, uh, of course, uh, people are a threat. And she may fly away from her, which would be towards the property or towards trees or power lines, which we don't want that to happen.

I'm not usually behind the candle. I'm usually off at a diagonal so I can see the front of the candle and I can see the people who are behind it, the person about to open the doors, to release her. And I can see Helene as well, quite clearly.

As I'm waiting for the kennel door to be opened, I glance over and see Helene... And I see her tension in the way that she has her hands clasped in front of her chest

There's always that. Doubt that little doubt in her mind that maybe something is different when we released the bird.

Because until it actually leaves the crate and takes flight. She's always, uh, Always nervous and prepared for what if that scenario ever happened? Because she's ultimately responsible for it.

Go Pro video sounds: Scott grab him now. Oh my God. Oh, isn't that nice? She is. She knows exactly where she is.

Murdo: She knew exactly where she was and exactly what she was doing.

Yeah, Birdzilla was out like a rocket. She barely had the door open when the bird was already stepping through the doorway, one foot on the ground, wings beat down and leaped straight into the air and just. Took off like a rocket. She just made a beeline for the tree across the river, as fast as she could go.

And it was a perfect release. It was beautiful.

And when the bird comes out and takes off and takes flight, I can just see this, this release and this relief on Helene's face.

And she likes to go over her hands and she does this little kind of jump and clap. Like, yes, it worked. The bird is flying free. Uh, so it's a really nice moment and I can really see the happiness on her face and the joy.

So the really cool thing that happened after that was

We saw another Eagle kind of flying, uh, along the river, uh, high above, and slowly making his way over.

And so some of us were thinking that it was her mate because, uh, Birdzilla had been seen with another Eagle before she got sick, uh, by the people who watched them.

And, uh, we thought, yay, look, her mate, come back to join her.

This is the first time we've seen a mate come back and see the Eagle that we had just returned.

Who'd been sick, can be gone for several weeks. And so we're pretty excited about that.

But, uh, it sweet Birdzilla a couple times.

And then Birdzilla took off and went after that bird. And was basically telling this other bird and in no uncertain terms too. Fuck off to put it plainly she just, obviously it wasn't her mate. And, uh, this was something, some other bird encroaching on our territory and it looked like they were going to get into a fight.

And they started doing aggressive maneuvers towards each other, and oftentimes, um, when Eagles fight they'll lock talons and they'll spiral down towards the ground and sometimes they'll let go before they hit the ground. But other times they don't and often they can. They can die from crashing into the ground or get injured from crashing into the ground. And we sure as hell didn't want to see that happen to Brazil. ah, come on.

No, no. Now, right. Don't after all we'd done for you don't get hurt. Don't get hurt.

So it was a bit of a. Nail biting moment scene that's happened, but the bird, she, she went after just left the scenes.

I don't care. I'm not having anything to do with this massive, uh, angry woman, angry female Eagle. I'm taking off. I'm out of here. So she flew away and Birdzilla settled again on the tree.

Yeah. And then, and then shortly afterwards, another bird showed another Eagle showed up and uh, circled her around for a little bit and then slowly landed on the branch that, uh, she was sitting on ~~and~~ and this one was clearly her clearly her mate, because the, a, that Brazil let this bird land so close to it, and it was smaller than Birdzilla. So we assumed it was the male and just their behavior and the way they,

they kind of stood next to each other, quite comfortably on the same perch um, it made a good me for a good guests that they were mates

The kind of, sort of. Would turn heads towards each other. And you could, you got a sense of somebody saying, where the hell have you been? And, and somebody else was saying, who the hell was that? So you wondered if they were talking to each other in terms of husband and wife, right? Like, okay, what's been going on while I've been gone. And the other one's saying, well, where the hell have you been gone?

It was, it was fun to watch, uh, this little, this little moment between two birds that were obviously, uh, well connected with each other.

I don't think I've ever seen another, uh, another reunion of that kind, either Eagle or otherwise. I think that's the only one we've ever experienced in person. I don't think I've seen it before or since.

Nikka: They drove home together in a quiet joy and Murdo didn't know it at the time, but it was the kind of moment they wouldn't get many more of. In all of their long days and nights caring for the health of these birds and these animals, they didn't realize something was also wrong with Helene.

Murdo: So it was kind of a really bad day. Cause you know, I, I was at work and, um, I got home and Helene was not where she normally was. She was upstairs in bed and that was unusual.

And I asked, I could tell right away that something was wrong, but she didn't want to tell me because it was my birthday, of course. Right. She was always thinking of others. Um, but she, so the first, yeah, the 1st of May in 2017, she was diagnosed.

When Helene was diagnosed with it, it was not, it was probably sold the first stage, but with ovarian cancer, it's really, um, a crap shoot because it could, it could develop really quickly or could take its time as it spreads to other, other parts of the body.

Uh, but she is also a determined person and an optimistic person. So, uh, whatever treatment options were available, she was going to take them if she could.

Nikka: Helene had a rare form of ovarian cancer. She tried chemotherapy. She underwent an experimental trial, but nothing was really effective.

Murdo: It was basically slowing stuff down, but it wasn't killing any of the cancer cells and the cancer that the tumors that she had, uh, were in places that were not operable.

And so they couldn't do surgery to try and remove them. Right.

All the while she was going through these treatments, um, you know, and losing her hair and all the crap that goes along with.

Uh, chemotherapy and cancer treatment, uh, Helene continued to drive to distant locations and do led presentations to talk to hunters and anglers about lead poisoning. Continue to look after the animals at the center and to do the

examinations and all the treatments required. Uh, you know, I think that's that helped keep her going.

Nikka: And in July of 2018, she came to speak before the board of the wildlife center, she helped start

Murdo: I think that was the first time I'd actually heard her speak. As if she wasn't going to get better?

She knew she was dying. She knew it was, she knew it was her last meeting.

And one of the things she asked him is. If at all possible, if we could keep the center going. Cause she was really the driving force behind it. She was the, you know, she was the chief veterinarian. She has all this experience and knowledge to put towards it. And, and that was her passion, her life. It was everything to her.

So she asked if we could make it, if we could keep it going. It was a surprise because we never talked about it between ourselves. Um, we were always positive with each other and, uh, You know, even though I'm sure both of us in our own minds, we're thinking this isn't going well. Uh, neither of us was going to admit that to the other. Right. Cause you don't want to let your partner think that you.

That you don't think they're going to survive. Right. You always want to be as positive thinking and as strong for them as they are trying to be for you.

Nikka: Did, did you ever feel upset that she was, you know, still focusing so much on animals?

Murdo: Yeah, I think, um, I know it was a mixture of frustration for me to, to bring things to her in bed one, uh, you know, I wish there that she could just focus on herself and not be. So worried all the time, but the animals that were in her care, but that was her disposition. And that was her nature. She was always animals was always her concern first, no matter what.

Um, but also to, you know, I could see that, you know, um, when she was in bed and that her sickest. And feeling her lowest. When I brought an animal in for her to look at, it kind of gave her, uh, energy, it gave her purpose and she would fight through the nausea and the drowsiness of the drugs to, to look at the animal and, and decide what needed to be done.

And it was yeah. Remarkable to me that, you know, someone facing such a life threatening illness would continue to do that kind of work.

And I think if we, you know, we try to make her stop or take it away from her. I don't think she would've let us. And I think it was probably, uh, what kept her going on most of the time.

Nikka: I'm wondering, did you, you, um, did you get a chance, and if you did, how did you say goodbye?

Murdo: What's the thing, right. I don't think we actually did say goodbye to each other and in some ways, uh, looking back on it, um, you know, it was like, well, why

not? Why didn't we, you know, I, I like Helene was a journal writer and she wrote lots of journals and there was tons of them left around the house after she died.

And I've looked through them looking for some kind of message from her saying goodbye, but we never discussed it. We never talked about it. We never, ever once spoke in terms of that, knowing that she wasn't going to make it, that she wasn't going to S to beat the cancer.

And I didn't want to be the one to let her down. I didn't want to be the guy who said, you know what, Helene, maybe we should start. Uh, thinking about what might happen if you don't make it. I never want you to do that. I probably should have, because you know, afterwards there's a lot of unanswered questions.

Like, well, what's the fucking password to the bank account. I don't know what it is or how do I do this? Where did you hide the passports? Right. Whole pile of stuff that you should probably prepare for, if you think you're going to die, but we never did. Um, but I wouldn't change any of the, anything that we.

Any of the way it transpired. She was strong and resilient up to the end and determined up to the end. And, uh, I hope I helped her feel that strength as well to keep going. And Helene was the keep going kind.

And I was, uh, as I always have been, uh, the guy behind her, helping her making sure that she could do what she wanted to do.

Yeah. You have a mixture of, of images of Helene when I think of her, uh, yes, definitely. Uh, Uh, looking after some Eagle or some other animal, like one of our favorite mammals is porcupine. So I can picture her, uh, talking to the porcupine as she fed it milk through a syringe and the smile on her face. When we released the bird from, from a kennel.

But also just her laugh or sense of humor and, um, her smile and the way she would always flip me the bird it's very, just jokingly her way of basically saying fuck off or in a polite, possible way.

Wildlife was always Helene's passion... and helping her was mine.

Glynn: A very big thank you to Murdo Messer for sharing his story with the Snap. And I know all of us here are thinking fondly of the late Dr. Helene Van Doninck, wherever you are -- thank you. If you'd like to see pictures and videos of Murdo, Helene, and Birdzilla or are interested in the Cobequid Wildlife Center, go to our website [Snap Judgment dot O R G]. The original score for this story was by Renzo Gorrio, it was produced by Nikka Singh.

Oh Yes. It happened again. And if there is someone special in your life who might like this story. Romantic! Give them the gift of Snap. Just make sure it's not the only gift you give them, playa. The Snap judgment podcast, hours upon hours of amazing stories. Take out your phone or their phone, subscribe to the Snap Judgment podcast. You'll get so much back in return, I guarantee it. And if you want to hear the story behind the story, follow us on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter... And share a picture of you in one of these fucky Snap T shirts. But where do I get a t-shirt that

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Regina Bediako

Well, this is not the news. No way is this the news, in fact, as a little child you could become enamored with Big bird from Sesame Street, and later with after-school Godzilla movies, and not understand then, that these two disparate forces would one day crash into each other and result in the Birdzilla radio hours, that could all go down and you would still not be as far away from the news as this is.

But this is... PRX.