



Dennis Aig, Sheli Smith, and Andy Hall

Andy Hall: [00:00:00] What PAST innovated, what PAST created, which prevented a lot of challenges to convincing others of its value, has now become very standard and very, very commonplace, interdisciplinary. That was not where education was. That was not where anthropology was 20 years ago.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:23] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:58] So, today on Learning Unboxed, we have a very special treat. PAST Foundation, as you all know, has recently celebrated 20 years in the midst of a global pandemic. So, like so many of us around the world, our plans were derailed, we were going to have an epic celebration trying to figure out what that was going to be, and then something else comes along. And so, it gave us a lot of opportunity at the PAST Foundation to think about a lot of things, including what was the next 20 years going to look like for us.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:28] And it got the staff collectively getting very introspective, I guess if you will, and asking a ton of questions about sort of the PAST Foundation's origin story. And on this program, we're always talking about best cases and we frequently talk about how things get started and why starting matters so much. And so, we thought this would be a great opportunity to actually revisit the origin story of the PAST Foundation.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:55] And for those of you that might not be overly familiar, what we stated on our website is that 20 years ago, two anthropologists, a documentary filmmaker, a graphic designer and historian, along with an international team of research scientists, launched the PAST Foundation. And so, today, those four individuals are the conversation that we're going to have. And I cannot tell you how excited I am to have this group together, because these are the folks that launched a grand adventure, a true journey. And so, joining us today is Sheli Smith.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:35] Sheli is from the Napa, California area, a maritime historian, a legend in the field of underwater archaeology, and has spent day in and day out for many, many years with me living the everyday components of what it takes to build an organization like PAST Foundation. And she is currently the Executive Director of the Napa County Historical Society, which is a research center and museum concentrating on bringing history alive for technology exhibition and innovative programming. It's really exciting for Sheli to get back to those museum roots. So, Sheli, welcome to the program.

Sheli Smith: [00:03:14] Hey, Annalies. Good to hear you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:15] And joining Sheli is Andy Hall. And Andy Hall is the maritime historian component of that original group of four of us. And Andy has actually worn so many hats over the years. It's really hard for me to kind of keep up with all of that. But I suspect that one of the things that are near and dear to Andy these days is that he currently serves on the board of directors of the Texas Navy Association. And as chairman of that organization's effort to locate the remains of the Texan schooner Invincible that was wrecked in Galveston in 1837. And so, again, you're going to see a lot of similarities in these stories. So, Andy, welcome.

Andy Hall: [00:03:58] Thank you. Glad to be here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:00] We are happy to have you. And rounding out our little band of four warriors, so to speak, is documentary filmmaker, Dennis Aig. And Dennis is currently in Bozeman, Montana. And just like Andy and Sheli, numerous, numerous accolades in their chosen profession over the years. So, Dennis has been involved in everything from natural and documentary filmmaking to crazy adventures to trudging along a variety of different places in the early years with Andy, and Sheli, and I. And he is also a long time board member of the PAST Foundation. He's now an emeritus board member. So, Dennis, welcome.

Dennis Aig: [00:04:47] Thanks, Annalies. I'm always happy to be here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:49] So, it's been a journey as we think about all of these different pieces. And when we sort of talk about origin story and the importance of origin story, it gets really interesting when you sort of start diving into that. And actually, Sheli, I'm going to toss this first one to you, because the staff reminded me that every time we got stuck, Sheli, on a project would always ask, well, what's the origin of that thing or what's the origin story? Do we really even understand why? An organization, a group, a school, a set of teachers, a community partner, why they are where they are? So, as the anthropologist, put that hat on, Sheli, and help us understand the context for why origin is so important. And then, we're going to get into the weeds of the crazy cast, PAST staff question.

Sheli Smith: [00:05:43] They just asked me that, because they knew I was the provocateur.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:47] That's right.

Andy Hall: [00:05:50] Always been the case.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:51] Always.

Sheli Smith: [00:05:52] Always, yeah. I think the why, because if you can answer the why, as Steve Jobs once told us, if you can answer the why, what you create is secondary, but the why is the real heart of the matter. The why is also going to show you all the obstacles and all the stumbling blocks. So, it gives you kind of a navigational kind of cool way to look at the world. We often had teachers who, if we understood the why, we could actually get them to make a change. So, I think the why in PAST was always extremely important to us.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:35] Absolutely. Still is. I would agree with that, which I think gets us directly to that first question from the staff, which actually starts with why? Why the four of you? Why this? Why then? Right? So, Sheli, you were right. And so, I think that that's really important. So, just for our listeners, sort of setting a bit of the stage, so Dennis and I got together around some of that crazy idea. We'll get into some of the weeds with that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:07] And very quickly, very shortly on the heels of that, started working with Sheli and with Andy on the first set of projects that will really sort of set the foundational piece for PAST. So, it was really critically important. But I guess I want to toss this question to each of you. Dennis, I'm going to start with you. Why PAST? Why this thing? I mean, all the things 20 years ago you could have gotten involved with, why on earth would you get involved with this crazy idea?

Dennis Aig: [00:07:32] I mean, I still remember the first time I met you. You came in. I had this basement office for my production company. And we had just finished this absolutely hellacious project with National Geographic about K2, where we sent a crew to K2, but the India and Pakistan had declared war on each other. And we're fighting over Kashmir, which if you know the geography, right, Andy?

Andy Hall: [00:07:59] Yeah.

Dennis Aig: [00:08:00] They're all on top of each other. So, Annalies, so this young woman comes into my office and lets me know that she was referred by my sister-in-law, I think, and via her fiance at the time, Chip. And she outlined PAST to me in like two sentences. And I do remember that I think there's a mention of Red River, and sunken boats, and this kind of stuff. And I thought, well, that sounds like a nice change from a big international project and should be very simple. So, I said, yeah, I'm interested. And then, she sat down, and we talked for a while, and here we are.

Dennis Aig: [00:08:44] So, that's how I remember it started. And I mean, the idea of PAST was really what hooked me, was the idea that where there is an archaeologist, it was in a lot of ways with some other things I've done since then, both with PAST and with Montana State, where I teach, is like, you understand the present and future by understanding the past. And even though that's not what PAST means, that it was going to involve technology and expeditions. And I think the whole thing was that Annalies was so enthusiastic and just had that vision, and I just said, sure, yeah, let's do this. And that's it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:28] You're a glutton for punishment. You had no idea what you were signing on for. I just want to be really clear.

Dennis Aig: [00:09:31] Of course not.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:31] None of us knew. Not a single one of us really, really knew what we were doing.

Dennis Aig: [00:09:38] I mean, here's the thing. Sydney Pollack had this comment about film making, the decision to make a film is the decision to have a train wreck. And then, the second decision, to control the train wreck. Okay? So, when I'm going to feel that thing is like that anyway, PAST has not been the worst train wreck I did. And it's not a train wreck at all.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:00] Awesome way to qualify there, Dennis.

Dennis Aig: [00:10:02] Right. So, just saying, there have been bumpy, bumpy times.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:08] Okay. Moving on from Dennis. Andy, save us.

Andy Hall: [00:10:13] My introduction to PAST was very similar to Dennis's. You and I first met at Shipwreck Weekend at Texas A&M in College Station, I think, in 2000.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:25] Yeah, that sounds about right. Yeah.

Andy Hall: [00:10:26] And as I recall, that was right about the time PAST was either first organized, or incorporated, or very shortly after.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:35] Yeah.

Andy Hall: [00:10:36] And then, I thought it was a really exciting thing, because your focus was public education, especially with kids, and young adults, and young people. And the thing that I have always been interested in is the public education side of stuff. It's wonderful what anthropologists do, what other scientists and researchers do, but the critical piece is getting that material to a wider audience and to get those things is appreciated by a wider audience. So, that's what excited me about PAST. We continue that conversation later at SHA with Sheli in Long Beach. And then, we really got going with Red River in 2001.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:22] Yeah, absolutely. Sheli, same question to you.

Sheli Smith: [00:11:27] I remember the bar conversation.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:30] Awesome. Share it.

Dennis Aig: [00:11:35] The train wreck sounds like that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:38] Full disclosure, right? Sheli and I, we share this all the time, the best ideas on the planet happen at your professional conference, whatever your profession happen to be, often at the bar, where people are just brainstorming and letting loose on the wild, crazy ideas, because you feel like I'm unfettered in this environment, right? I'm allowed to say the crazy thing and it might be okay.

Sheli Smith: [00:12:00] Yeah. I remember that we were all talking about—we were really challenged at the time in the '90s to bring the passion of archaeology to the forefront that most were written then. We're still in that paper mode at the time, that the paper, when it finally got to paper, it would bore your grandmother. And so, it was just like, oh, God, we got to get out of that. We've got to break this habit. Look what Indiana Jones, literally raised enrollment in colleges by 20%. And so, we've got to figure this out. We've got to figure this out. And I remember, we're all sitting there drinking, we turn around, we go, you just got your PhD, you could do it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:46] Yes, I do have often said, I drew the short straw, literally.

Sheli Smith: [00:12:51] Yeah. The real problem was that she remembered I was in that conversation, and called me later, and said, you said, oh, God. So, it's one of those few times. I mean, in the 40 years I've been at those conferences, and all of the brilliant and wonderful brainstorms I've been privileged to be part of, I think that was the one that I think we all thought, we could do this, we can do it. And so, I mean, kudos to Annalies for actually not just throwing us off, but actually picking us up.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:31] You're going to make me cry. Do not do that.

Andy Hall: [00:13:36] Yeah.

Sheli Smith: [00:13:36] That's good stuff.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:37] It was a team effort and it always has been this team effort, because it takes all of these folks thinking really creative and unfettered, as you guys have said. And it takes the other piece to the

launching of something like this, I think. Back to Sheli's point, hey, you just finished this thing, this PhD, and oh, by the way, you don't have a job, which was true. So, hey, we have this idea collectively, how about you go see if you can launch this thing?

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:12] It'll give you something to do while you're looking for other things, right? But there's a really important truth in that, because you have to have the time, not just the idea and the support structure around you to be able to do a thing. But you have to have the freedom and the latitude to also then be able to do that. Andy, you wanted to add something. What was that?

Andy Hall: [00:14:34] No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I was just going to say, to Sheli's point about being caught in a paper world where you're mostly communicating with your fellow professionals. A colleague of mine around that same time said, oh, I just got a paper published in prestigious archaeology journal. And I said, really? How was it received? And he said, both people who read it really enjoyed it. So, that gets to the idea of wanting to go to a much larger, much wider public audience.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:14] Absolutely. It's the same, I think, across all the applied research sciences, a variety of descriptions, right? However you want to put whatever labels you want to put on those. That's a whole another conversation. Very quickly, we started with what we knew, which was archaeology. And back to the point being made, look at Indiana Jones, as Sheli said, because it was all around that spark, that spark for others, it had really nothing to do with us in our own love for the field that we have.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:49] Obviously, that was a contributing factor, but at the end of the day, back to what Andy was saying, that public outreach and engagement component was about, can we spark others, no matter what the topic is? And ultimately, we very quickly branched out from archaeology into tons of other things, but we came to all of those other things with that same sort of drive and desire. Can I make this thing?

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:11] Can I make this chemistry experiment, or this archaeology experiment, or this physics problem so exciting and so intriguing to others that they will latch on? And I think that was a challenge for us, right? I mean, I think that the other thing we haven't really talked about here, which gets me to my next staff question, which was around, hey, who are the naysayers? I mean, I think part of it was, hey, could we actually do that? Can we pull this off?

Sheli Smith: [00:16:34] Well, yeah. Remember Scrunch? I mean, what did we know about that other than we were scuba divers? I think that we brought that archaeology. And I was going to say that when we wanted to reach beyond paper, it was Andy and Dennis who brought the tools to the game that I certainly didn't possess. And I'm still in awe of Andy's talent and Dennis's talent. I mean, we just like, we brought stuff to the game that nobody had ever seen before. And so, it makes a really cool thing. And then, we were just fearless. I mean, let's put a bunch of coke cans at 4,000 feet and see what happens.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:19] Yeah. Hence the name Scrunch. For those of you that are listening, you can go to the PAST website and find that, the early sets of modules. So, yeah, we were fearless, but it wasn't easy along the way. And so, like I said, one of the other questions the staff has is, was there, and it doesn't have to be an individual, but what were all the sort of the naysay or the negatives around not doing this thing?

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:48] And ultimately, how do you then balance that or counterbalance that with the primary motivator that actually got us to launch? I mean, this was an interesting one when the staff asked me to ask this question, because I had to step back and think about it. And don't get me wrong, I know it's been a journey, as Dennis points out, it was a journey all along the way. But maybe you just forget the naysayers along the way. I don't know. I'm curious, from the three of you, do you remember?

Dennis Aig: [00:18:20] I mean, I think-

Sheli Smith: [00:18:22] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:22] Sheli says yes. Like, oh, yeah.

Dennis Aig: [00:18:26] No, I remember. I mean, yeah. No. Well, here's what I think was the strength. I never remember any of the four of us ever saying, let's not do it or we can't do it. It's just that we dealt with each problem and solved it the best we could. And coming out of filmmaking, that's really the attitude you have to have or you never get anything done. And I think it's true of a lot of things. So, yeah, remember, Red River had a lot of politics.

Dennis Aig: [00:18:57] We had a lot of bureaucracy sayings. We had definitely money issues. I mean, they are normal. If you look at that era as PAST as kind of not for profit startup, those are things every entrepreneur has to deal with. And Annalies, as our leader, never really faltered. And I do not ever remember any of us talking about not doing something, or stopping it, or whatever. And I think that's really what got us through it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:29] It was because I was so naive. I had no idea what I was doing, way over my head, or when you say no, and I fully stepped up to that. I was like, oh, my gosh.

Dennis Aig: [00:19:39] But that's sometimes what you need. You just don't know that, no, you can't do it, so you actually do it. It's the NASA thing, failure is not an option. And I don't think we ever said that, but we acted that way. It's just like, no, here are the issues. How are we going to deal with them? Let's do it. And that, as far as even when PAST was more established and we had other kinds of issues, when I was on the board, that has always been PAST's attitude. And I think that's one of its strengths.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:15] Yeah, I would agree with it. And I don't know what Andy-

Dennis Aig: [00:20:18] Am I remembering it right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:19] Andy, did you notice that he compared our journey and our success to NASA? I'd like to point out NASA just managed to land on Mars again. So, that's some pretty darn good company.

Dennis Aig: [00:20:33] And as I said, they could land on Mars, but they couldn't keep the power on in Texas. I mean, not NASA. As a country, we go to Mars, but we can't get the power in Texas.

Andy Hall: [00:20:46] NASA has been doing their thing for longer than PAST has. So, check back with PAST in four years and we'll see where we are then. I would just say, I was a little bit removed and didn't have to deal with the naysayers as much as you did, Annalies, or Sheli, or Dennis, but I agree with Dennis. And then, I think a lot of PAST's success and the reason there still is a PAST is largely because Annalies was very, very good at presenting the idea and convincing folks, who might otherwise have been naysayers, that it was doable, because it was really innovative and unusual. And it seems to me everybody got caught up in that enthusiasm. It was infectious. And that was a key to the early success.

Sheli Smith: [00:21:47] I think we ignored a lot.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:47] Yeah.

Sheli Smith: [00:21:47] To be honest. I mean, just a statement came to mind, as you all were talking about that, well, I understand the ballet, but I'm really not sure what you do. And I remember Annalies kind of coming off her seat, like levitating, and I think your hands were kind of stretching to the woman's neck. And I think that I didn't understand the moment for years, but much later, I was in the presence of a really famous underwater archaeologist named Pilar Luna. And I asked her like, did you undergo discrimination when you were trying to set up underwater archaeology in Mexico? And she looked at me, and she goes, duh, she goes, but I ignored it. And I thought, ah, that's what we were doing, we were just ignoring things.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:43] Yeah. And I think that's a really good point, Sheli, and I was laughing when Andy was talking in part, because part of it is you can go and tell a great story, and the reality of it is you have to utterly believe it, but that doesn't mean that it's easy to convince others. So, on the one hand, the excitement, the enthusiasm, but then when it really came down to what Sheli was talking about, funding and sustainability, the figuring out how to go from the excitement and the enthusiasm of the idea, and even, quite frankly, the application when it came to—so everything was so field-base-driven, hands on, let's get people out actually living and trying whatever that thing that we're talking about is.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:31] But that's not the same as being able to actually run, and sustain, and develop, and grow an organization. That's a whole another ball of wax. And from my own perspective and point of view, it was nothing that I was ever trained in or even contemplated doing. And so, I think, Sheli, you're right. I mean, I think you ignore a lot of things, because you have no idea what to pay attention to some days, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:05] And I think as we shifted into STEM, and more and more complex applied sciences, not that our own fields were not complex in many, many ways, but because we were anthropologists, or archaeologists, or filmmakers, or web developers, or maritime historians, or take your pick, the other folks that joined the original board and sort of helped us in those early years, when it came time to say, hey, but we can take the exact same way we build these programs and apply it to chemical reactions, or material science, or coding and computer science, or take your pick, the things over the years that we engaged in, that's a harder sell.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:48] Because the conversation Sheli was referencing, which did in fact happen, that is a true story. And I did come off my seat and Sheli kept me from having to go to jail, I suspect. But the reality of it is we encountered that numerous times in that early journey. And to some extent, from time to time, we still encounter it, but not the same way. It's like, okay, what is it that you bring to this table that's different than other things? Right? And I always thought that that was our unique value proposition, is that we are not the same group of thinkers that are typically sitting around this table.

Sheli Smith: [00:25:29] Very true. I think we also, like Dennis would say, we're missing this, or Andy would say, we're missing this. I mean, I remember the huge conversation about Red River, Andy, when you were like, well, how do people understand that this boat is nine buses long, or something like that? And then, you went out and drew the thing. And everybody went, oh, yeah, that's exactly what that is. And I think that because we came at it from different perspectives and we really could bring our own thinking to the table, we could apply it in so many different ways. It was just quite wonderful to me to be part of that, I think.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:11] Yeah, I think that, in many ways, that's the part that's the most enduring, right? There's the day-to-day and there are those moments of excitement. You got a phrase for that, Sheli, over the years, right? Something about boredom and moments of something.

Sheli Smith: [00:26:31] Oh, yeah. So, I always described my job as hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:42] And that is not a reflection on PAST, I just want to put that out there.

Sheli Smith: [00:26:47] But it works in whatever job I've had, it seems.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:50] Yeah. So, there's no question about that. One of the other questions, though, that some of the staff had, they really would love us to have a conversation about our individual aha moments, something in those first few years that was so profound to you as an individual that it made it worthwhile, and exciting, and compelling to be part of this journey. Beyond just the excitement of startup, we had a number of really exciting projects. Those first five years were really, really foundational in more ways than one, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:32] Because we actually did a variety of things, and I just want to make sure that our listeners and viewers understand, those first five years, we all had day jobs. We had other jobs. This was a part-time organization. It had no funds for operating, quite frankly, really paying people. None of those luxuries existed in the early years. And as a result of that, you sort of had to come to it with some passion.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:04] And we went to Yellowstone. We did Red River. We were in the outer banks. We were in the Gulf of Mexico with the U-166. We were in California. And I mean, just some really cool things. So, Andy, I'm going to hit you up first. Was there an aha or something that we did that to you was incredibly meaningful? And of course, everybody's getting the same question. Andy is just on the hot seat first.

Andy Hall: [00:28:36] There were multiple aha moments for me. One of them, you just mentioned U-166. One of those was in doing the web stuff for that, in going through some of the historical records that had been recovered and preserved, and are now in a private collection, and they're now archived, was going through and looking at the crew members and sort of developing profiles, because that made them, you had Kuhlmann, who was the commander and all the other else.

Andy Hall: [00:29:13] Going through that really sort of humanized that and made it an important story. And then, going through the accounts from the Robert E. Lee, which is the ship that the U-166 sank and the patrol craft that ended up sinking U-166, but was never given credit for it. Getting into the depth of that story and the personal experiences we were able to reconstruct and present, that was an important moment for me. Wasn't a single moment that it wasn't important. It was important across history.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:48] One piece of the story, because, boy, did we learn an awful lot on that project. [Making sounds]. Yes, indeed. Yeah. Yeah. What about for you, Dennis?

Dennis Aig: [00:30:00] I mean, like Andy, I had a lot of them. I mean, first of all, I really had to learn how archaeologists work, and what they do, and what the field is. So, part of my doctoral training was in folklore, because I was doing films in an English department and they didn't know where to put me, which was great. And there's some similarities, but there's a lot of differences, too. And so, I wasn't totally unfamiliar, but starting with Red River, and how you actually do this kind of expedition, and along with all the other things like meeting people who eat squirrels and that kind of stuff, that was part of my education.

Dennis Aig: [00:30:44] I said, okay. And not seeing a green vegetable between like Oklahoma City and the river, the thing is along with that. And then, I had the other thing, which was really, to me, a very interesting challenge is, how are we going to film this? And we never had the same conditions twice. The Red River was not like Yellowstone and it was definitely not like the U-166. And the U-166 really has to stand out. You have the first five years, that is one of the high points, because it was a very original research.

Dennis Aig: [00:31:19] We were working with the two archaeologists, who actually, Rob and Dan haven't figured out where the boat was, they have been looking for it for decades. And I actually got to go out twice, right? The first time where we have that interesting conversation when you were pregnant with Jack and they wouldn't let you on the boat, because of insurance. And the first time I ever used ship-to-ship phone, that stuff, that's still out of my memory, seeing Annalies like far away.

Dennis Aig: [00:31:47] And then, just documenting it. This 24 on the second year when they were doing the multiple ships and the U-166, where we just got into it. I was with I guess three of my students, one has almost graduated. So, three of my students, and we had to figure out what to do. You're on a ship. You don't realize how noisy ships are. You don't realize all this stuff. And I can still remember the first time seeing the U-166 when the camera's on the bottom, and it goes, and there's the conning tower.

Dennis Aig: [00:32:28] And yeah, that's what it is. So, it's a little bit what Andy was saying. We really, along with what we did on the boat, documenting it, and what we all were doing with research and learning about the crew, you really got into the lives of the U boat, and the ships that they sank as well. So, that really, I think, highlighted for me the importance of what PAST was trying to do on a broader basis and where it went eventually in the future.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:02] Absolutely. Sheli.

Sheli Smith: [00:33:05] Wow. I don't know what to say. There's just so many, although I think what kind of percolates to the top for me, and it's not really condensed into the first five years, but I was trained to be a four-field anthropologist, and by the time I kind of got to PAST, I'd been a museum director, and I had been an archaeologist, and I taught genetics, but I knew that I wasn't really a four-field anthropologist. I didn't really perceive myself going out in cultural anthropology, and linguistics, and all that.

Sheli Smith: [00:33:40] And as PAST developed, it made me a four-field anthropologist. And that was really, really cool, because then I was pulling on all the strings of my education, and my passion, and everything to do everything. And so, yeah, those were great moments. And then, I think just the kids, the kids made it, the aha. There are a lot of kids that still write me all the time. And it just was like, wow, we impacted another generation. That's cool.

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:16] Yeah, I can definitely echo that sentiment. People ask me all the time, what do I do? I will tell them that I'm an anthropologist. And prior to really digging into here, I would have said, I'm an archaeologist. And it seems like a small distinction, but it's an important one. And it's not that one is better than the other, not by any stretch of the imagination, but to Sheli's point, this organization allowed me to hone and develop skills that I had just barely touched on.

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:48] And I think just from a professional sort of growth standpoint to sort of feel like you're capable of being able to do more than that, right? And like all of you, there were so many amazing moments along the way. Certainly, the pieces with the U-166 Dennis made reference to, not letting me on a boat, I would like to point out, I ultimately did get on the boat, right? And that is thanks to a man by the name of Thomas Chance, who at the time, I think it was President and CEO of C&C Technologies, which is not even a company that exists anymore.

Annalies Corbin: [00:35:24] He's retired, was like, darn it, you can't leave Annalies on shore. And it was one of those sorts of things in Louisiana, so out goes another boat. And they hired a medic to follow me around the ship for three days. If I was out of my cabin, that man was standing next to me. So, crazy things like that, to the adventures that Dennis, and I, and his students, in Yellowstone Park, in the snow taking what ultimately Sheli

and I would later discover, the sort of STEM schools that came around much, much later in time into Yellowstone to do that work.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:04] And to really see kiddos be not just citizen scientists, if you will, but truly the scientific team. That was my tea, right? It wasn't all these other professionals. And that was a really important moment for me, because it showed me that if we provide room and have a little bit of faith that kids can do anything if we just give them a little nudge, right? And I think we all intuitively know that, but until you sort of experience it on that sort of level, and then how can we possibly translate that into something bigger.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:40] Not just an after school or summer experience in the case of those kids, but could that be the everyday? Those are really, really important aha moment for me. And I think running close second to that would be, you've heard us make reference to Red River, which was a project in Texas. We're underwater. We're in the current, Sheli and I are out exploring the paddlewheel, then she tried really, really hard to convince me to just blindly let go. And that was a pivotal moment, because not only did I tell her no, heck, no, I'm not letting go, I didn't let go of her either, so helped it become, I think, just that much more of a journey.

Annalies Corbin: [00:37:23] So, absolutely. So, thank you for that. A couple of the other questions that the staff want to know, one of my staff members said that 20 years is longer than most marriages today. What made it that PAST last? And I think we've talked about lots of things that contributed to that, but I wonder, if or sort of when the work that we were ultimately doing together, at some point, it kind of became a roadmap or a template, if you will, right? For not just starting a business in this case, but driving the direction of an organization. And so, one of the questions that they wanted to know was, looking back 20 years later, would we do it differently? I will start with you, Dennis.

Dennis Aig: [00:38:23] That's a very interesting question.

Annalies Corbin: [00:38:26] It is. Every once in a while, the staff is uber profound, not always.

Dennis Aig: [00:38:26] Yes, right. So, I'm going to be very existential about it. Okay. That's one of those questions that's very difficult, because it's not now that we're doing, this isn't like back to the future or something. So, it's kind of like, I would say, would we have done things differently had we known things, because I think we're all learning. Well, of course, we probably would have. On the other hand, I think, Annalies, you mentioned it, one of our greatest strengths was our collective ignorance, that really, you shouldn't be able to do this.

Dennis Aig: [00:39:07] And that's how some great things happen all the time. So, I would say that the logical answer is, of course, we would have done things differently, but we didn't, because they were different times and there are different, both situations and pressures. One of the things we didn't mention that I had the MFA in Science & Natural History Filmmaking, and one of the things we're dealing with now is the general crisis in science communication. And what PAST was really doing was laying the groundwork to solve.

Dennis Aig: [00:39:41] And it's a very complicated problem. But PAST was and is laying the foundation to solve part of that problem anyway. Maybe not the entire problem, but a lot of that. And I think that's one of its strengths. So, whatever decisions we made or didn't make back in the past, this is where we are now. And I think we've all learned and I think PAST, as an organization, including the current organization, has learned. And so, we go on to the future better educated and more learned, I guess, or something.

Annalies Corbin: [00:40:19] Yeah, I would absolutely agree with that. Does anybody else want to add anything else than that or we can move on, too? Either way.

Sheli Smith: [00:40:31] I guess I would say that, I think one of the things we stumbled on, at least for me, which was extremely profound in my thinking and I noticed has been a huge obstacle for others, is something that, we didn't coin the term, certainly, but we grasped it and held on to it, and that's transdisciplinary, that we saw everything holistically. And I think that that allowed us to make decisions that probably other people scratch their heads at, but it changed. It never put us in a box, right? And we didn't know what to call it when we first started out. We were doing it from the get go, but at some point, we discovered the term and we started to use it. And it really seems to me that it probably defines PAST more than anything else.

Annalies Corbin: [00:41:28] Yeah.

Dennis Aig: [00:41:28] Now, that, if I could just jump in, that's a great point, because that's one of the things, we talk about how the sciences tend to get siloed, things like how the pandemic is also an environmental crisis, is multiple things, and PAST has always brought disciplines together. So, that's a great point, Sheli. I think that's so true.

Annalies Corbin: [00:41:49] And I think that that was one of the ways, and there were many ways, where Andy, the skill that you brought, one of the things that you did a great job, Dennis was out trying to gather that film story over and over again, and to push us in really, really creative ways to figure out how would we be able to do that, sort of in the mass media, but you helped us with the visual storytelling in a way that was really, I think, and others, correct me if I'm wrong, that was fairly unique at the time, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:42:25] Because you were literally taking the work, the science, whatever it happened to be, the history, in the case, a lot of these shipwrecks or whatnot, and literally pulling it apart, fully understanding, and the deconstructing of it, and building it back in that sort of visual web space to tell a story that people could understand. Sheli said earlier in reference to Red River, oh, how many school bus could you park on the main deck of a paddle-wheel steamer?

Annalies Corbin: [00:42:51] And I mean, in my mind, I mean, I think that's one of those sort of examples, back to what Dennis was trying to talk about, is I think that oftentimes, the way that you chose to reach in and grab pieces of whatever it was that we were doing it, because like we're not always going to be the pieces that when—I think that when we sat down originally, and said, hey, here's what this project's going to be, here's how we're going to tell the story, it never, ever went the way that you thought at the beginning. And part of it was because of the pieces you chose to pull out on a story. Sheli shaking her head right. I'm right about this, right?

Dennis Aig: [00:43:28] Yeah. No, I agree.

Annalies Corbin: [00:43:28] Because yeah, I want you to talk about that just a little bit, Andy, because I think it's a piece that—and love us, the organization that we are 20 years later, but a lot of the folks that are on the piece of the journey right now, they don't understand how hard we had to work to learn why story matters so much.

Andy Hall: [00:43:49] I think if someone today in 2021 goes back and looks at the things that PAST was doing in 2001 and during the first five years, I think someone without that context, especially maybe a younger person, would look at that, and say, well, that's interesting, but it's not very novel. Well, it was novel at the time. And to your earlier question about, what would you do differently?

Andy Hall: [00:44:21] I can't answer that specifically in the broader sense, but I think it's really important to understand that what PAST was doing, what PAST was doing innovatively, what PAST innovated, what PAST created, which presented a lot of challenges to convincing others of its value, has now become very standard and very, very commonplace, interdisciplinary. That was not where education was. That was not where anthropology was 20 years ago. And so, I think that it's been very exciting to be part of that early on and to be groundbreakers in that sense.

Sheli Smith: [00:45:09] Yeah, I think, Andy, you proved to the world that simple wasn't stupid, and I think that's huge.

Andy Hall: [00:45:17] I'm going to quote you on that.

Sheli Smith: [00:45:22] Because I think you took very complex concepts and you made them understandable to just about anyone who got on our site. And to your point, that wasn't being done. In fact, it was the reverse. People wanted to use more complex words and they wanted to use really kind of very complex language to get their things apart, thinking that was going to help them be smarter. But you actually drove us in the direction of, let's make it simpler. And it didn't mean make it stupid or dumb, it just makes it easy to understand. And I think PAST, 20 years into the future, is the recipient of that gift.

Dennis Aig: [00:46:06] No, I totally agree. Andy is constantly explaining things, bringing in some of the historical stuff. I can still remember some of the emails like, oh, what about that? So, I think something strikes me, Andy and I were trying to do related things. I was trying to make it so that it would be cinematic. He was trying to make it so it's accessible. Both of us are trying to make it so people could fairly quickly understand what we were talking about and what we were doing in our respective media.

Andy Hall: [00:46:37] We were all doing that. We were all doing that, bringing our own background and skills to do that. Again, that was an overarching thing, to make something very complex, very technical, early on, it was archaeology or nautical archaeology, and later, it's expanded to other areas of science, but to make something that was highly technical and highly specialized much more accessible and much more understandable. And I think that is something that PAST, that all of us have done very well with. And that was the key to PAST's success and longevity.

Annalies Corbin: [00:47:19] Well, there's no question in my mind whatsoever that it was very foundational. And Sheli's right. We are the recipients of that work over time, because it has helped us not only think about that notion of accessibility, and I really love that, I think that was absolutely right, Sheli, way to sort of express that, that that piece is key to actually taking anything to scale, right? I mean, without that as part of our foundational component, and it happens all the time, we push on stuff.

Annalies Corbin: [00:47:57] It doesn't have to be this complex. Here are the pieces. Here is the part. This is how you build a thing. This is how you think about team. And that's the other thing, I think, that we do really, really well, circling back around, Shelly was talking about, transdisciplinary. We live and breathe that. And yes, we didn't have the right label on it in the beginning, but we definitely learned to embrace that as a component that made it possible for us to imagine many, many things.

Annalies Corbin: [00:48:26] And if you can imagine it, then theoretically, we could act on it. I want to sort of wrap us all up a bit with what I thought was probably the most profound question that came from the staff as they think about, what is it that you want to know? And it's a question that's tied to the idea of, I'm going to

phrase the question exactly it was posted to me, and then we'll circle back around on it a little bit. The question was, how did you know when it was time to leave your other jobs, to focus on PAST full time?

Annalies Corbin: [00:49:04] Now, we didn't all leave our other jobs, but we did collectively make a decision to PAST that's going to be full time. And I think the essence of this question, because this is a young entrepreneurial component of PAST that are basically asking the question, when do you leap? And how do you know what's the right moment to leap? So, I just sort of toss that sort of to the group as it relates to just sort of thinking about it, because it's a tough thing, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:49:32] And I don't know that there was one specific thing. And my guess is we all sort of have a different personal thread that sort of led to, hey, let's do this thing a little bit differently, let's do it bigger, let's walk away from something that we're already doing in the case of Sheli and I who went full time, but as a group, we said, the moment has come and we should, in fact, do this thing. This is startup 101, Sheli.

Sheli Smith: [00:50:03] Yeah. Cliff jumping, one of my favorite things. We talk about it all the time with young people, that you'll land, you might splat, or you might end up on your feet, but you will land. Yeah. I think it was a time when we wanted to do something. And I think the more we talked about it, to Andy and to Dennis's point, the more we became convinced we could, that it wasn't going to be easy.

Sheli Smith: [00:50:38] I think that's something that's extremely important to put across. I know maybe you guys think differently, but I never, ever thought it was going to be easy up until the moment I walked out the door. I just never thought that. But I never thought that no was going to say no. So, taking those leaps. And I know that Annalies and I have both talked a number of people over the cliff on a number of occasions.

Annalies Corbin: [00:51:10] Here, let me help you.

Sheli Smith: [00:51:16] Here, don't look. Look at me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:51:17] Wait, look over there.

Sheli Smith: [00:51:20] And that they've gone off the cliff, and when they've landed, they've said, oh, we landed. And we're like, yeah, it's okay. But I think that that is extremely important in knowing that it's never going to be easy. And so, when you're ready to go, your passion is going to have to carry you. It's going to have to float you through the night. So, to me, that was what the cliff jumping was. And I think, though, that if I had known about the weather in Columbus, we may have never thought of jumping a little bit.

Annalies Corbin: [00:51:58] You would have negotiated differently?

Sheli Smith: [00:52:00] I negotiated for Trader Joe's. I remember that was my thing.

Annalies Corbin: [00:52:04] I remember that, yeah.

Sheli Smith: [00:52:05] I said, I'm not moving here until you get a Trader Joe's.

Annalies Corbin: [00:52:08] And we did magically.

Sheli Smith: [00:52:11] The minute the doors open, you go, Sheli, we have a Trader Joe's. I was like, damn, make magic, didn't I? So, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:52:24] Dennis or Andy.

Dennis Aig: [00:52:26] I mean, I think my positions sort of changed a little when I went to the board. There was just a point where it was clear that PAST was going to make it. I mean, I remember when we decided to buy the building, or rent the building, and then buy the building.

Annalies Corbin: [00:52:45] See this crazy thing behind us, yeah.

Dennis Aig: [00:52:48] I sit on a couple of boards, including one of my synagogue, and buildings are always like the worst thing. They're the best thing and the worst thing, because that's really a commitment. You have rent, or you have a mortgage, or you have something. But I remember when we did that and I really had no—it was a risk, obviously, but PAST has always been about risks. So, I remember, it's like, sure, yeah, if it fits what we need to do. And of course, now, it looks great.

Dennis Aig: [00:53:21] I remember what it looked like before all the renovations and things, and picking out the kitchen cabinets or whatever the hell we were doing back then. So, I think there was a point, and it was before the building, but it was just like, we're going to keep going. And yeah, nothing is without challenges, so you just take that as they come. But PAST, especially in the first five years, but even immediately after that, it had known when to sort of shift emphasis.

Dennis Aig: [00:53:53] It knew when to expand what it was doing. So, a lot of that is a tribute to you, Annalies. You need to take the credit for that. And we had support from what used to be original advisory board or whatever it was, just a bunch of academics, and now, we had community members, and non-profit people, corporate people. And when you saw that, when I saw that, I said, okay, we're laying a very solid foundation here in the future of the PAST. So, I think that's when I realized it.

Sheli Smith: [00:54:33] Do you think it comes from the fact that we have to put our lives in each other's hands, that we get underwater, Annalies stood on me several times, and she'd never let go of that wheel, man, she would not let go of that hub, but the fact of the matter is, is we had to believe in each other. We had to put that faith in each other's hands. And so many times, it had nothing to do, but when it came to PAST, and earlier, you guys talked about what a team we made, when it came to PAST, we already trusted each other with our lives, therefore we could trust each other with our passions, it seemed to me.

Dennis Aig: [00:55:11] Yeah. I mean, I don't remember us ever saying no, to be quite honest.

Sheli Smith: [00:55:17] No. She said no. She would not let go of that.

Dennis Aig: [00:55:19] Yes. No, but you know what I'm saying. It was like, yeah, it's not like, no, we won't do that, so I think you're right, Sheli. I'm not a diver, so I don't have the same point of reference, but I think it's very appropriate.

Sheli Smith: [00:55:36] You put cameras down, though, 4,000 feet, Dennis.

Dennis Aig: [00:55:40] Yeah, I know. Yeah. That's true. Oh, yeah. Hey, PAST pushed me to places I've never been before.

Annalies Corbin: [00:55:50] I promised a journey. I promised adventure. Andy.

Andy Hall: [00:56:00] No. Just to follow what Dennis said, I don't remember anyone saying no. I remember a lot of, how on earth are we going to do that? But I also remember that everybody brought a really unique individual perspective to a problem, and that gave PAST, in the early years, a lot of sort of intellectual flexibility to address problems that might have sunk a small, somewhat tenuous organization early on that formed the basis of a stronger organization that could grow and adapt into the future.

Annalies Corbin: [00:56:49] I would agree with that. Yeah.

Andy Hall: [00:56:52] So, from my perspective, that's been the great key to the success of PAST.

Annalies Corbin: [00:56:57] Yeah. I want to thank all of you, not just for taking time out of your day today to have the conversation, but more importantly, for having enough faith in us together to take the leap to begin with, right? It wasn't just that we said, hey, let's jump off this cliff together, or build the airplane while we fly it, or all of those components that we hear all the time. For me, the single biggest moment was that we collectively said, not just why not, but very deliberately, yeah, let's do this thing and let's do this thing together.

Annalies Corbin: [00:57:37] And I think that Sheli's right, I think the mindset from the outside was, I have enough faith and trust in these collective people with my work world, whatever that happens to be, to delve into a passion. And had we not done that together, and I think had it been any different four people, it would never have ended up the same sort of way. And who knows what it will do as it grows into the future, but I, for one, am just so grateful for all of you. So, thank you very much for joining us today.

Sheli Smith: [00:58:12] Thank you.

Andy Hall: [00:58:13] Thank you.

Dennis Aig: [00:58:13] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:58:16] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media @Annalies Corbin and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.