

Shelby Stanger:

The presenting sponsor of this season of Wild Ideas Worth Living is Subaru. One thing I just learned that I thought was very cool is Subaru is donating 50 million meals to help feed people in need during the COVID-19 crisis. They know this pandemic is devastating our country and has left hundreds of thousands out of work and unable to feed themselves or their families. Through the Subaru Love Promise, a commitment to support their communities, Subaru and their retailers across the country are making a donation to provide a 50 million meals to Feeding America. This action, called Subaru Loves to Help, will make meals available at 199 local food banks across the country. In addition, Subaru retailers will be doing other things to help these local food banks, including food deliveries, donations, and volunteer events. Subaru knows their ongoing support will be necessary as local communities work to get back on their feet. Subaru Loves to Help, just one part of the Subaru Love Promise. One more reason that makes Subaru more than a car company.

Shelby Stanger:

If you're a dog owner, you're probably especially thankful to have your companion by your side during these days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dogs force you to get outside a few times a day, they likely do some cute things that make you laugh, and their company and unconditional love is reassuring and comforting. I'm Shelby Stanger, and this is Wild Ideas Worth Living. Today's guest, photographer Ben Moon, especially knows the true power of a canine friend. Ben's recent book Denali tells a story of his friendship with his dog Denali, who lived on the road with him, went on adventures with him, and helped Ben face his own battle with colorectal cancer at the young age of 29. Today on the podcast, Ben shares his story, the story about him, the story about Denali, the story about writing his book about his dog, and he also shares how dogs can provide us comfort during stressful times. He even has a couple of training tips for dog owners.

Shelby Stanger:

Ben Moon, welcome to Wild Ideas Worth Living.

Ben Moon:

Hi, Shelby. Thanks for having me.

Shelby Stanger:

I'm really sad that we can't surf in person right now, but I'm enjoying watching you in this beautiful wood room in Oregon. Where are you?

Ben Moon:

I'm in my camper van parked outside the house I'm building. It's the quietest place I have right now.

Shelby Stanger:

That's so awesome that you're in your camper van. It looked like you're in a studio or a sauna.

Ben Moon:

Well, this is where I wrote the book, and this is also where I do work right now.

Shelby Stanger:

Okay, so I want to talk about the book. I mean, your story is amazing. I read your book, Denali, we talked a little bit about it in the intro. This podcast, I really want to focus on how having a pet, especially a dog, can help you during a stressful time. So before we get into Denali, I'm just curious, how are you doing right now? How's your current dog Nori helping you right now?

Ben Moon:

Yeah, Nori's passed out just a couple of feet from me right now, up on the bed. Honestly, when this first all went down in March and we had those two weeks that felt like seven years, it was incredible to have a dog, to be there and also just dog hugs, man. I'm telling you.

Shelby Stanger:

Dog hugs.

Ben Moon:

Dogs hugs are the best.

Shelby Stanger:

Dog hugs are the best. What kind of dog is Nori?

Ben Moon:

She was a feral street dog from the Central Valley of California. I had our DNA tested, and she's many things: a white Swiss shepherd, Australian cattle dog, Australian shepherd, Husky, Malamute, lab, and wolf I think was the other component. So she's got a lot of things. She's just a really incredible, grounded being. She's very independent but also just loves people and loves my friends. You know there's the dogs that are healer dogs, that always want to be there for everybody? She's just very sensitive and knows when people need her. It's incredible just to witness. I've witnessed that in a lot of different scenarios, whether in friend groups or ceremonial plant medicine things. I'm talking across the spectrum.

Shelby Stanger:

She sounds really cool. I mean, the fact that you just said the word dog hugs, it just made me feel like my husband just came over with a bunch of warm sheets from the dryer and put it on top of me. That's one of those feelings that just feels so good. A dog hug, besides a baby hug, those are the best feelings ever.

Ben Moon:

Yeah. I agree. There's no strings attached. That's the best part about a dog hug.

Shelby Stanger:

So let's go back to Denali. How did Denali come into your life? Maybe just give us a little background about what happened in your life at that time.

Ben Moon:

Yeah. I had just moved out to Portland from Michigan. I grew up in the great lakes. Lake Michigan felt like my first ocean. I had only been in Oregon for maybe nine or ten months, but I had been really,

seriously interested in having a dog. I got convinced by my ex to go to the shelter. I didn't want to have a dog in the city. I just was really opposed to it.

Shelby Stanger:

How old were you?

Ben Moon:

24 years old. I was just a pup.

Shelby Stanger:

You were just a pup yourself. You go to the shelter.

Ben Moon:

I did. I basically said, "I will go, but I don't want to bring a dog home because I want to wait 'til ..." We were planning to move to Bend, and I wanted to be in a place that prioritized being outside. Portland, it was a really weird year for the city, and it was also one of the gloomiest years. I feel like in the last 20 years, the weather up here has changed immensely. It was just really gloomy back then, and it was in the middle of winter, so just darker everywhere. So I just had my blinders on. When I met Denali, he was just this adorable pup and kind of just made me take him home. There was no choice involved.

Shelby Stanger:

So he sort of found you. I think a lot of dog owners say that about their dogs, which is really cool.

Ben Moon:

People are like, "How do you know if they're the right dog?" It's kind of like meeting the love of your life. You know. You know deep down that that dog's for you. It's not like, "Oh, I think I might think this dog's cute. They could be." You don't want to have to justify a dog adoption. You're going to know.

Shelby Stanger:

That's totally true. What comfort has Denali brought you over the years? I know you had some stressful times back then. I mean, with the divorce, young.

Ben Moon:

Yeah. That's when it really started. Denali was just kind of my anchor and rock during that, because I didn't really know how to express verbally what I was going through. Being 25 years old, most of my friends didn't have the capacity to be there, also. I didn't have the male friendships that had the depth that I do now. Denali really was the one who could be there for me, when I was going through all that. Eventually your friends just getting tired of you talking about all the same stuff. Then when I moved, first into my Subaru for almost a year and then bought a camper van, I was over in Bend, sleeping in the Metolius parking lot by Smith Rock, at the climbing area, some of the free camping out there. That was kind of where I rebuilt my life in a lot of ways. Around that time is when I ... Well, right before the breakup happened, I had bought a camera. So it was kind of like my creative career and this big cataclysmic event in my life happened simultaneously, in a lot of ways. I had no idea that I was going to be photographer, at all.

Shelby Stanger:

That's so wild. I'm curious. Do you have a passage in your book that you like reading?

Ben Moon:

There's one that I was reading it during the book tour, and then when all this coronavirus stuff happened, it seemed very, very appropriate. You want me to read that?

Shelby Stanger:

Yeah, that would be awesome.

Ben Moon:

So this is basically I had been diagnosed with colorectal cancer. I had had a lot of news about what I was going to have surgery-wise, and I was not happy about it. So I got a second opinion in Portland. Afterwards, I immediately drove to the coast because I wanted to be in the ocean. It was really cold, but I just was in my board shorts and didn't care.

Shelby Stanger:

How old were you?

Ben Moon:

I had just turned 29. I first had symptoms when I was 27, though. That's definitely something that I would want to share with others. If you have symptoms, even if you're young, get checked out, please. Okay, this is after I dove into the ocean.

Ben Moon:

My pace slowed as the currents tugged at my waist, and I dove into the icy 50 degree water. Coming up refreshed, I realized Denali was still beside me, swimming determinately, since by now it was much too deep for him to stand. Skin tingling from the cold baptism, I stood still, staring at the glowing horizon, my despair slowly shifting to a sense of determination. A set of swollen waves appeared before us, and I saw Denali's eyes widen with the realization that he was outside his comfort zone. As the first wave neared, he spun and began swimming frantically toward the shore. He was driven by fear and yet in perfect sync with the wave. And as it caught him, he somehow slid down its face with the grace of a porpoise, the glassy surface continuing onward, pushing him along before releasing him in the shallows. I laughed out loud at the joy of seeing my pup catch his first wave and realized that there was a lesson in this. We're powerless to fight the unexpected swells in life, and there are times when the only choice is to let go of the perception that we're in control and simply allow the wave to carry us through.

Shelby Stanger:

I remember reading that week two of this whole thing, and it was really important to me, too. That's so interesting. I'm glad you picked that part to read. Thank you.

Ben Moon:

I feel like we always think we're in control. In everyday life, we kind of try to control as much as we can, in our routines and just in everything we do. There's always this false sense of security when we take

things for granted. But when something like this hits, we realize that we're just little specks in the universe that have no real control. It's amazing how that works sometimes and how culturally in society actually works so well most of the time.

Shelby Stanger:

What's really interesting is, before you started reading this you said, "Hey, get checked out." I think it's really interesting because you were friends with a friend of mine, Tate McDowell who also had colorectal cancer, and he was on the podcast. Unfortunately he passed. I'm just really grateful that you've brought awareness to that because I remember even when you posted that picture on Instagram, I was like, "Who's this hottie with a colostomy bag?" You were rock climbing, and I was like, "This is so cool. I've never met a guy in the outdoor industry that seems this vulnerable." I know we're off topic.

Ben Moon:

No, this is really important to me. Honestly, seeing Tate go through what he went through, he reached out to me through mutual friends at Patagonia, when he was first told he would have to have a colostomy bag. He always joked that I was his still mentor, like I taught him how to just manage having those changes to your body at that age. We had a lot of similar interests, and it was really interesting, too, just the emotional part of going through, knowing that he and I were diagnosed with the exact same stage, and then his came back. It was hard not to have survivor guilt when he passed, but it really motivated me to finish the book because I had lost two friends before that. Both were women, and both were under the age of 34. One I had met at a film festival and another I had met through a mutual friend. Both times I was like, "You guys are going to be fine. It's going to be great." I remember seeing Tate the summer before, and we were able to hang out. I knew he was still fighting some things, but I thought he was going to pull through. The sad thing is, in our medical system, it's really challenging to actually get a colonoscopy if you're younger, and that's the easiest way to diagnose, to find precancerous polyps. It's a day of prep. That part's not that fun, but honestly it's a pretty easy procedure that can save your life. So if you have any doubt, just get checked out. It could save your life. If you know anybody who's dragging their feet, just get them into the doctor.

Shelby Stanger:

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. You know, Tate actually said I should interview you. So that's pretty cool that we're finally getting to interview, even though it's not in person.

Shelby Stanger:

I love the outdoors, but on my outdoor adventures, I like to keep my load light. That's why I love the Trail Series water bottle from Hydroflask. It's the same look and feel you know and love from Hydroflask, but it's 25% lighter. And lighter doesn't mean your ice will melt or your coffee will get lukewarm. The double wall vacuum insulation protects the temperature for hours. Add in the lightweight leak-proof cap, and you've found yourself the dream water bottle. Find out more about Hydroflask and their Trail Series water bottle at hydroflask.com/wildideas. That's hydroflask.com/wildideas. Stay hydrated and stay happy.

Shelby Stanger:

You've been through a lot. You've been through divorce. Then you got this awesome dog Denali and were living out of your Subaru Outback, and then you had cancer. Talk to me about how dogs in general, especially your dog, can really help you during stressful times, scary times.

Ben Moon:

I think the one thing about dogs that is unique to our relationship with them, compared to human relationships, is they're just absolutely there for you. There's not all these boundaries or strings. With human relationships, there's always baggage. It's always this kind of game we play. Obviously in a really healthy relationship, you can stay out of that, but there's just always these calculations that we make in human interactions. Dogs don't care about all that stuff. They're just here for us. Going through cancer, I didn't have the energy for human interactions a lot of times. It was just conversations were exhausting. It wasn't the cancer that was making me that exhausted. It was the treatment, the chemo and radiation and a lot of the surgeries. Especially during the really heavy doses of chemo, it was just existing. And so having Denali there for me just made me feel like at least somebody had my back. Energetically, I could still feel all the friends that were there for me, but I didn't want anybody to caretaker me. I didn't have a partner at the time, and so it was a really unusual kind of ... I was in my late twenties, so I felt strong enough to drive myself to treatments, but it was always this kind of barely hanging on sort of feeling. Denali, he was my anchor during all that time.

Shelby Stanger:

I don't feel like they have an ego.

Ben Moon:

No.

Shelby Stanger:

They just want to play and love you, no matter what. I think one of the things you say in your book is you talk a lot about unconditional love. What do you think of all these shelters right now that are empty? People are adopting dogs right now, which is so cool.

Ben Moon:

People always ask me why Nori is such a good dog and why Denali was such a great dog. Honestly, it's the time you spend with them. The cool thing about all these dogs getting adopted is people are getting to spend every moment with them. That's when those relationships are formed. You can truly train a dog. They don't get all the anxiety. There's a lot of real quality time that can be spent, especially if you train them well. Yesterday, my friend wanted to take Nori for a run. She's like, "Hey, do you have a leash around?" I literally couldn't find a leash because she hadn't been on a leash in like two months. I mean, she's just always right there, you know? It's so funny, I live in a condo complex, and everybody pretty much has a dog. We're not allowed to have one in ours, but somehow everybody else is. They are just the happiest they've ever been, all the dogs, because their owners are home all day with them. It's really cool.

Shelby Stanger:

I think we should talk a little bit more about your book because it's a really big deal, to write a book. First, you did a movie about Denali that went gangbusters viral, like two million views in a day. Damn,

Ben, good job. But then you decide to write a book about it. Writing a movie is a beast, but writing a book is a whole other beast. So maybe tell me about those processes and why you decided to do it.

Ben Moon:

I mean, the film was kind of something that we ended up filming right before he passed. We had that footage, and it took a year and a half to put that together, Skip Armstrong, who filmed a lot of it, my friend Page, and then Ben Knight. That was really a collaborative effort, to put that all together. It took time. I'm so grateful for Ben, who really made that story shine. Telling that story and getting it out there to the world, it was the first time I'd really had my life be public at all. Being a photographer for Patagonia catalogues, you're just the caption. Nobody really knows who you are. Pre social media, there wasn't this face that came along with photography. It was really kind of a private affair. So the film, when it had eight million views in a week or whatever, everybody was calling, and then Oprah put it on Super Soul Sunday. It was a lot.

Shelby Stanger:

No big deal.

Ben Moon:

I know, having her share that was like, "Whoa. Life goal." Just got to get her the book, now. Somebody know her? Get her the book, please. So when all that happened and the film went crazy online, I kind of went inward because all of a sudden all this ... It wasn't that it was that much information. It was just nobody really knew my life details, outside of the outdoor community. It was just getting thousands and thousands of emails and direct messages and media outlets wanting to know more about the story. It was interesting. I'm a little bit of an introverted private person at heart, even though I love people. I kind of had some chatter about maybe going deeper into the story, but I realized there's something universal about friendship with a dog and going through struggle. The story really wasn't about me. It was universal in the way that it's about friendship and love and loss and grieving. I realized that if I could tell my story and go deeper and actually touch on all of those themes that I did in the book. A lot of people think they're just getting a reboot of the Denali film, which, then they get a big surprise. I go a lot deeper. I just wanted to make sure if I was going to write the book, that there was a purpose for it, and it could be helpful to others, anybody going through struggle or cancer or dealing with anxiety and depression, or just feeling alone in experiences, especially being a young cancer survivor. I just wanted people to feel like somebody else had been there and was expressing what they felt, or just what it's like to lose a dog. It's hard to put that into words, when they're there for you for so long. Writing a book wasn't something I'd ever intended to do, and it took me four years start to finish, which some say is a long time, some say it's not. But it was definitely a very introspective process. Most of it I spent living here on the coast in Oregon, in my van, surfing and just writing.

Shelby Stanger:

You had other jobs during that time.

Ben Moon:

Yes. I also had to keep a photography career going and a film production company going, and was planning and permitting a house. So there was a few things going on outside of that, too.

Shelby Stanger:

Was there one thing that was just really hard about the experience?

Ben Moon:

I felt the hardest part was really writing about other people's experiences within the book. I wanted to make sure that it always came from my perspective, and I wasn't putting words in somebody else's mouth. I wanted to make sure that only the things that needed to be in there were in there. Anytime there was a challenging experience, it was really hard to write about that stuff. They say that trauma really just kind of lives within our psyche and our brain. Obviously writing about the cancer experience, that was pretty easy to write about, other than the fact that chemo makes you forget a lot of stuff. I had to kind of go back and revisit a lot of experiences and the divorce. The big wave incident that I wrote about was really easy to write about. That was the easiest thing. That chapter came out in an evening. That was the easiest. I barely changed anything on that, because that was probably the most acute or compressed version of a life or death experience I'd ever gone through. Whereas cancer is a very prolonged battle. Swimming through 50 foot waves is something that most people don't forget. But it was an up and down experience. Some things came out at their most random times. I had a lot of voice memos, a lot of notes, a lot of dictated things that were just little anecdotes that I had to string together and somehow make it into a book.

Shelby Stanger:

It's a really good book. What did you take away from it all?

Ben Moon:

I think when all the edits were wrapped up, I was just ready to walk away and move on with my life. I was just like, "Okay, I just want to return to being social again and feeling like I can say yes." So I thought I was done with it when the edits were done. Then my publisher called and was like, "Oh, you're reading this for the audio book." I had agreed to that earlier, but I wasn't really prepared for that. It was very cathartic, though, reliving the whole experience all over again, because I hadn't actually read it start to finish. I just edited pieces and wrote pieces. So that was an incredibly nerve-wracking and stressful, but also, like I said, cathartic experience. Then when it finally was published, I felt like I had about a three or four month vulnerability hangover. I'm still just kind of coming out of that. Before this pandemic hit, already people were really responding to the story and telling me how they'd related to it in deep ways and in a lot of surprising ways. Once I had a few of those letters, I felt like it was worth it. The whole goal, the whole time I was writing the book, was if I could help one person with something they're going through, it will be worth it. Those are really touching messages. Then when all the most recent stuff hit, suddenly it felt a lot more relevant. Because really what the book was about is getting through times of struggle and crisis, and when things are very uncertain and you don't know which way to go, just to keep going and not give up.

Shelby Stanger:

I was going to ask you for more advice, like keep going, don't give up. Anything else you've learned? I mean, you've been through a lot, and we're all kind of going through something.

Ben Moon:

I feel like facing a cancer diagnosis, the uncertainty of that and not knowing if you're going to make it or not, you really can only focus on that moment in that day. If you look at the big picture and all the things you have left, all the rounds of chemo you have left, all the facts and figures and numbers that are

getting thrown at us right now with this pandemic, that will just crush you. You have to just focus on what you can do right now. There's been so many days, especially early on in this, in March when this was all first starting going down, I would be on the news. I like to understand things, and so I was researching, reading a lot of articles and journals, trying to figure out what was actually happening, going down these Twitter rabbit holes, and just trying to understand what was happening. There were times I just felt completely paralyzed with anxiety. But if I would just get outside, go for a walk, which is what dogs are wonderful for, because they're like, "Let's get out of this van." Nori would make me go to the beach with her. Even seeing the sky or just feeling the wind, looking at the ocean, just made me feel a hundred percent better. While I was going through all the chemo and stuff, I didn't have the physical capacity to climb my best and do all the things I could do prior, but if I just went to the cliff and hung out with all my climbing partners and just was around friends, it helped a lot. Right now we're not supposed to be in person together as much, but the wonderful thing has been everybody calls each other. Getting a random FaceTime or a random call from somebody you haven't talked to in forever just feels so good. We all need that right now. If you're thinking about somebody, call them because they probably need to hear from you.

Shelby Stanger:

That's good advice. So how did Nori help you write the book?

Ben Moon:

After the Denali film went crazy online, he had been gone for a couple of years at that point, and I had started to doubt that it could have been really that good. It's just felt like here's all this hype around the film. Was it really as special as that was? Then when I got Nori and started remembering all those experiences and I had all those feelings, they just all came flooding back. As she kind of came into her own and grew into a full-grown dog and our friendship grew, I realized that it was all very real, and even more real than I had remembered. Because Denali was my first real dog that was mine, that I had raised from a pup. You kind of take things for granted. It's like being in the best relationship or best friendship, you just don't realize what you have until it's gone. And so Nori really reminded me of all that. She helped immensely in that way.

Shelby Stanger:

Yeah. She seems like an awesome ... I just love her name, with so many meanings. Any advice to dog owners out there, that you've used over the years, or during this time? I mean, you're not the dog whisperer, but you kind of are.

Ben Moon:

Yeah. I mean, I do love dogs. I think the more time you can spend with your dog, the better. Personally, I never have hired a dog trainer, but with Denali and with Nori, I never really used treats or anything like that. Occasionally, maybe, but I really wanted everything to come from a place of ... It's more of give a lot of love and attention. My reward is I usually would squat down and just get really excited and give her a hug or love her up. Instead of being like, "Here's a treat, here's a treat." Because otherwise they're just always looking at your pockets and your hands for treats. I personally just don't like having dog treats in my hands or pockets all the time. The other thing is, a lot of people will just keep calling and trying to say a thing over and over and over to a dog. I feel like you have to say it once and mean it. It's like learning how to have them respond the first time you say something. That doesn't mean being really firm or cruel or harsh with them. It just means just trying to be aware when you're repeating something

and have them listen the first time, especially if there's a danger involved. Nori's not on at least a lot of times, so if there's a car coming, I need her to be at my side immediately when I say it. She knows that tone of voice, and so she will stop what she's doing and listen.

Shelby Stanger:

That's good parenting advice, too, it sounds like.

Ben Moon:

Yeah, you have to mean it. I mean, it's like anything. In a relationship, if someone keeps telling you something and then they don't really mean it, you stop trusting them. You stop believing them. Follow through is huge.

Shelby Stanger:

So everybody can watch the movie Denali. You can buy Denali anywhere you buy books. But what's next for you?

Ben Moon:

Honestly, I just want to finish this house I'm building. I have a home here on the Oregon coast and a little production studio that I'm building. I'm really excited to have a space to share. I've been in the van for two and a half years. So I'm excited to have a little more indoor space. Really, with the book and the house, it just took a lot of creative energy. The last few years I've been working with a company called Rivian. It's a new electric truck company. They're incredible, an incredible company. It's been really fun to create content for them. I'm excited that a lot of my creative brain can come back online in other ways and work on a lot of projects that I've kind of had in the back of my mind, but haven't had the time to pursue. I'm really, really excited to ... There's a lot of projects surrounding my portraiture, with some short films and storytelling, that I just can't wait to dive into.

Shelby Stanger:

Ben, it has been a joy to meet you and talk to you. I totally appreciate it. Thanks for sharing about Nori, about Denali, about your work. I think we could all use some of the advice you give at this time. We could all use dog hugs.

Ben Moon:

Dog hugs are the best. If you know someone with a dog and you don't have a dog, just go get one of those hugs because you won't regret it.

Shelby Stanger:

Ben's path as a creative wasn't linear and definitely wasn't easy, but tapping into his personal stories and challenges has allowed him to share in a really vulnerable, authentic way that's impactful. His story has clearly resonated with a lot of people. It doesn't hurt that lots of his stories involved sweet dogs. If you need some comfort these days, try spending some quality time with your pup and see if you can finagle a dog hug out of them. Thank you so much to Ben for coming onto the show and sharing your story with us. To see Ben's work, go to benmoon.com and follow his adventures with his new pup Nori on Instagram at [ben_moon](https://www.instagram.com/ben_moon). If you haven't read the book or seen the short film Denali, please do so. Both are incredibly touching and inspiring. Lastly, Ben has a new short film out called The Lucky Ones.

This transcript was exported on May 18, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

It's about being a photographer and his journey with cancer. You can find the links to all these things I just mentioned in the show notes on rei.com/wildideasworthliving, or in the description, wherever you're listening to this show. Special shout out to my mom's dogs, Teddy and Coco, who I got to visit this weekend. I just love dogs, and so give your dog a big hug from me as well right now.

Shelby Stanger:

As restrictions are being lifted in the COVID-19 pandemic, I just wanted to thank all of you who are hanging in there and doing your best to stay safe and stay home. To all the service workers, grocery store workers, healthcare professionals, drivers, delivery trucks, law enforcement, parents, teachers, to all of you for doing your part, yes, you listening to this show, we're in this together. We've still got a ways to go, so thank you. I hope you're all staying safe and hanging in there. Wild Ideas Worth Living is part of the REI podcast network. It's hosted by me, Shelby Stanger, written and edited by Annie Fassler, and produced by Chelsea Davis. Our executive producers are Paolo Mottola and Joe Crosby. Our presenting sponsor is Subaru. As always, I love it when you subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you listen. We read every single review. If you make us laugh, that means even more. Sending you all giant hugs and dog hugs. And remember, right now the best way to live wildly is by staying safe.