Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 7:
Seriously Seeking Sasquatch

[INTRO MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah.

David Hunt: This is a skeleton of one individual and I don't have it laid out in anatomical order...

Haleema Shah (on tape): Mhm.

David Hunt: ...but you can see this is the spine right here.

Haleema Shah: So, I recently visited the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. And I went there to meet with two anthropologists. One is David Hunt -- that's his voice you're hearing right now.

David Hunt: And, these two, these three here, likely are arthritis from trauma such as what happens to most of us if we lift things wrong…

Haleema Shah (on tape): Mhm.

David Hunt: ...and if we get hit in a car.

Haleema Shah: He basically researches skeletal remains and tries to figure out their story.

David Hunt: And then the tail goes back out here. So there's some extra -- these extra bones right here.

Haleema Shah: And if you haven't guessed, the bones we're looking at are not human bones. They belong to an animal that you wouldn't typically see in a natural history museum.

David Hunt: This one here Icky.

Haleema Shah (on tape): Okay.

David Hunt: This one here is Yahoo. And this one over here is Leica.

Haleema Shah: They're dogs, who were family pets. Yahoo and Icky were Irish wolfhounds.

David Hunt: ...and Leica was the German Shepherd.

Haleema Shah: David Hunt doesn't just collect and preserve bones for the Smithsonian. He's also a professor who teaches his students to analyze skeletal remains. And if you're dying to know why the dogs are in the museum in the first place, it's because of their owner. Who happens to be the second anthropologist I came to see -- Grover Krantz. And he is just a few feet away.

David Hunt: And this is Grover Krantz, a human articulated and uh, Clyde, his dog also articulated.

Haleema Shah: Grover Krantz is dead. He didn't work at the Smithsonian when he was alive. But his skeleton is on display in the museum, along with one of his four dogs. This one is Clyde, another Irish wolfhound. Grover Krantz and Clyde the Dog are posed as if they were alive, which is what Hunt means when he says "articulated." Because the way they're posed is based on an old photo that was taken of them together.

David Hunt: The picture is Grover standing with Clyde's paws on his shoulder and his, he's trying to lick grover's face.

Haleema Shah (on tape): Oh. What a nice picture. So was Grover… did you know him?

David Hunt: Yes I do. I did know him.

Haleema Shah: And when people who knew Grover tell stories about him, you can tell he was definitely a character.

David Hunt: But he was also highly intelligent. And you know how some people who are very intelligent often are not real easy to get along with -- just because they're already ahead of you in thinking? And, so that's kinda how he was more than anything else.

Haleema Shah: Grover was an eccentric anthropologist. And he followed some unconventional thinking. Grover became the first scientist to try to prove that bigfoot is real.

Haleema Shah: So this time on Sidedoor, we'll be talking about Grover Krantz, an accomplished anthropologist who risked his livelihood -- and reputation -- for bigfoot. And somehow ended up on display in the Smithsonian.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: One day back in summer 2006, Laura Krantz was reading The Washington Post. She followed the news closely for her work as a radio journalist at NPR. But that day, something different caught her eye.

Laura Krantz: There was this huge spread in the style section about this guy, Grover Krantz, who was an anthropology professor at Washington State University. And when he died, he had also donated his skeleton to the Smithsonian.

Haleema Shah: Someone who shares her last name donated his skeleton to the Smithsonian. Naturally, Laura read a little closer.

Laura Krantz: There was this throwaway paragraph, or section, in this article that was talking about how Grover Krantz used to drive around the Pacific northwest with a spotlight and a rifle searching for sasquatch. And so I'm thinking, “all right same last name, the guys from Salt Lake City,” which is where my dad's family was from, “and he seems like a complete and utter weirdo. I wonder if we're related.”

Haleema Shah: Laura checked in with her grandfather…

Laura Krantz: My grandfather was like, “Oh yeah, that was my cousin. He used to come to the family picnics and measure people's heads with calipers.” So, that's kinda what got me into this.

Haleema Shah: So it was an article and a shared last name that sent Laura on a 10-year journey through family lore -- and on more than a few trips to the Pacific Northwest. Laura turned this adventure into a recently launched podcast called “Wild Thing.” She says the podcast is about science, society… and sasquatch. You’ll hear Laura throughout this episode, she’s going to help us tell this story.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Back in the 1960s, Grover Krantz was a respected anthropologist at Washington State University. He had tenure, which meant, among other things, that it gave him a lot of job security. And, he was doing all of the professor things: teaching classes, doing research, publishing in academic journals -- he studied things like hunting in early humans, and primate communication, and he was putting together a nice career.

Haleema Shah: And then -- he met bigfoot. Not like “Harry and the Hendersons” hit-it-with-your-car “met bigfoot.”

[“HARRY AND THE HENDERSONS” FILM CLIP START]
Clip: Buddy, it’s gotta be a bear.
Clip: Could it be a gorilla?
[END FILM CLIP]

Haleema Shah: And not even, saw-a-blurry-hairy-creature-from-500-yards-away-running-through-the-woods “met bigfoot.” No, Grover was an anthropologist and he went about things scientifically. In 1970, Grover first met Bigfoot’s feet.

Laura Krantz: He saw some plaster casts of a set of footprints that had been found up in Bossberg, Washington, which is kind of this ghost town in the middle of nowhere in Washington. And, one of them was crippled. It looked almost like clubfoot.

Haleema Shah: These famous plaster casts were of bigfeet. Big foots. Bigfoot's feet? Whatever, the feet were big.

Laura Krantz: Yeah, the plural. I really struggled with that.

Haleema Shah (on tape): Yeah.

Laura Krantz: It could just be bigfoot. It could be like deer, but I don't, I don't know for sure there doesn't seem to be consensus on this one yet.

Haleema Shah: And Grover found these plaster casts *very* convincing. There was a detail to the prints that he thought could not be faked.

Laura Krantz: In the imprint there were dermal ridges,

Haleema Shah: "Dermal ridges" are what science-people call fingerprints.

Laura Krantz: Except they're on your feet. And if you want to check that out, I'll give you a minute to like take your shoe off and check because they're, they're there -- those little ridges.

Haleema Shah: Okay. I'm wearing very, like, difficult to take off sandals. But, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I see them.

Laura Krantz: So anyway, these, this set of footprints had the kind of anatomical detail that Grover just -- he said, "You know, unless someone was an expert in anatomy," and was as good as anatomy as he was, "these would have been impossible to fake."

Haleema Shah: Laura has a good memory, because that's almost the exact quote. We actually found a clip of Grover talking about this back in the 1990s in an interview. And it's better when you hear it from Grover himself.

Grover Krantz: He had to be a real genius, expert at anatomy, and very inventive in original thinking. He had to outclass me in those areas. And I don't think anybody outclasses me in those areas, at least not since Leonardo Da Vinci.

Laura Krantz: (Laughing) Grover did have a little bit of an ego, it seems. But then again, he was very well respected in this field. And so, I think he legitimately thought that these were too realistic to fake.

Haleema Shah: And Grover wasn't alone in this opinion. He asked the FBI and Scotland Yard's fingerprint experts to examine them -- and there are reports that Scotland Yard found them to be credible too. So these footprints sent Grover down a rabbit-hole. A… bigfoot rabbit-hole.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: So, just in case you're not familiar with bigfoot, here's a quick explainer from Grover.

Grover Krantz: Bigfoot is a large, massive, hairy, bipedal, higher primate. You could describe it as a gigantic man covered with hair, or an oversized, upright walking gorilla.

Haleema Shah: He estimated that bigfoot was six to eight feet tall, and weighed 500 to 800 pounds.

Grover: Now you've got a fair description.

Laura Krantz: He believed that, that bigfoot was descended from a ancient ape out of Asia called gigantopithecus that had, you know, existed about a million years ago. It had potentially come over the Bering Land Bridge when sea level was very low, and migrated with a lot of other animals that came over at the time. And, that it is just simply a descendant of that particular of that particular… ape. Sorry, there's a spider crawling across my desk and it just threw me off for a second. (Laughs)

Haleema Shah (on tape): No worries, you're fine.

Laura Krantz: No, it's fine, it just alarmed me. I was like, "what is… oh it's a spider. Okay. It's not Bigfoot."

Haleema Shah: Stories of a hairy ape-man have existed for centuries in North America. It was part of Native American lore. You may have heard Bigfoot referred to as "Sasquatch," which is a word that comes from native groups in the Pacific northwest.

Haleema Shah: And American settlers in the west claimed to see something similar too. But y'know…

Laura Krantz: but, then again, with those, it's hard to know what's true and what sort of came out of the bottom of a whiskey bottle while sitting around a campfire in the middle of the mountains somewhere.

Haleema Shah: In fact, Laura says bigfoot has been spotted in every state in the U.S. -- except Hawaii.

Laura Krantz: ...and I'm told that is because bigfoot can't swim that far.

Haleema Shah: Imagine being the scientist to uncover the first modern Gigantopithecus or whatever bigfoot was. Well, that mattered to Grover. So he started collecting all the evidence he could. He studied plaster casts, and he interviewed people who had Bigfoot encounters hoping that their stories could give him clues about bigfoot's behaviors. And we have one of those firsthand bigfoot encounters right here.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Back in the 1970s, John Mionczynski was a wildlife biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service, and he also worked for the Bureau of Land Management. Sometimes he would go camping in the wilderness to study animals for work. One night, he was camping in a pretty remote area…

Laura Krantz: ...and he woke up to the sound of something breathing nearby.

John Mionczynski: And, it got close enough to cast a shadow -- and it was a rising moon. It was almost full.

Haleema Shah: So, Mionczynski was sitting inside the tent. He could see the shadow of a huge creature that was standing in the moonlight. So, whatever this *thing* was -- it was standing close.

Laura Krantz: Initially he thought, "bear," but the breathing was a little weird.

Haleema Shah: For most people, this kind of encounter with a bear is the stuff of nightmares. But John's a professional. He's in the backcountry all the time, and he knows what to do.

John Mionczynski: My first thought was to scare it and make it go away. So I did the yell and hit it with the back of the hand. And, I hit something soft and it ran off, back behind the tent. But I could still hear it breathing. And then it came back a second time.

Haleema Shah: This cat and mouse game of breathing and hitting repeated a couple times. Whatever it is: it's curious. And persistent. Then it came back a third time.

Laura Krantz: But then something poked its face into the side of the tent again. So he's like, "Shoot! It's a bear!"

Haleema Shah: I'm going to repeat this, because if I'm off camping in the backcountry, these words will never not terrify me: "Something poked its face in the side of the tent."

Laura Krantz: So, he hits this face and yells, but this time it wasn't soft like a nose. It was very, very hard. Almost like he was hitting bone.

John Mionczynski: And when I... as soon as I did, the shadow came up over the top of the tent.

Haleema Shah: In the moon shadow, John saw a hand. Not a paw. And, it did not have claws. It had fingers.

John Mionczynski: It was a silhouette of a hand that was about twice the width of mine and with an opposed thumb and hair between the fingers.

Laura Krantz: It scared the bejesus out of him, understandably. And it sort of knocks the tent over and John scrambles out and whatever this thing is, is now retreated off behind the trees again. And so, John is now sitting by the fire, huddled under his sleeping bag and he could still hear it breathing.

Haleema Shah: So, John's in the woods, far away from other people. His tent is partially torn down, and he's terrified. But it's late. He hiked all day. And John got tired.

Laura Krantz: It was late at night, and he started to doze off a little bit, and then he hears a sound and it wakes him up really quick.

John Mionczynski: Something hit the ground and I didn't see anything, and then I saw a pine cone fall out of a tree and I thought "that explains the first noise"

Laura Krantz: But then he saw more pine cones dropping and another one and another one.

John Mionczynski: And over the course of 10 mins, about 20 pine cones came in my direction they all landed around the fire and around me sitting there with my sleeping bag draped over my head.

Haleema Shah: I'm no bear expert, but I do know this: bears do not throw pine cones at people.

Laura Krantz: At this point he's like, he, he has no idea what's going on and he's just like, thinking "I'm just going to stay here by the fire and maybe this thing is going to go away." And eventually it does.

Haleema Shah (on tape): My eyes just expanded like by twice their size when you were telling that story.

Haleema Shah: Later, Mionczynski collected himself and hiked out of the backcountry. When he got back to the office, his boss suggested that he may have had a bigfoot encounter. But over time, his boss told John to stop talking about bigfoot. And John ended up quitting his job.

Haleema Shah: I imagine to be John, it must be tremendously frustrating to experience something so vivid and then not have people believe you.

Laura Krantz: Yeah, I think that that's been a problem for a lot of people is they've had these experiences that are extremely vivid and extremely powerful and yet they are sort of dismissed out of hand as kooks when they say “Maybe it was bigfoot.” It's not something we can take seriously. And I can only imagine how frustrating that would be to be constantly be told that what you experienced wasn't real.

Haleema Shah: But people with spooky backcountry experiences like John Mionczynski had a sympathetic ear in Grover Krantz. Grover believed people like John had seen *something*. Throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Grover collected a growing body of stories and footprints to build a scientific case with hard evidence to prove bigfoot’s existence.

Haleema Shah: Coming up after a quick break, we’ll find out how Grover Krantz went from on the trail of Bigfoot -- to on display at the Smithsonian.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: Grover Krantz was an anthropologist who lived in the Pacific northwest for most of his life. As a young scientist, Grover didn’t see any other researchers giving a serious look into the pretty persistent reports of this fabled creature. So, Grover figured “it might as well be me.” And in the early 1970s, he fell down the bigfoot rabbit hole in a big way.

Haleema Shah: And before we get back Grover’s story, here’s a few bigfoot fun facts. Bigfoot’s believers say that they eat berries, nuts, small mammals, and insects. And, they sleep in huge nests.

Laura Krantz: Like, think of a bird's nest, think of them the way sticks are interwoven and intertwined and it almost looks like something was braided or plaited into place and that's what these nests look like in their eight, nine, 10 feet across. So if you imagine yourself as a teeny, tiny little baby bird, and then think of how big a bird's nest is to a baby bird. That's sort of the scale that we're, that we're thinking about.

Haleema Shah: Okay, back to Grover Krantz: he was a serious scientist. He published his research in academic journals, and he wrote 10 books. A handful were about typical anthropological topics like human evolution, one was about his dog Clyde, but another 5 of them were about bigfoot. He knew that science didn’t have have all the answers. And in order to get those answers, scientists had to ask hard -- and sometimes weird -- questions.

Haleema Shah: It’s possible that Grover Krantz was hooked by the mystery of it all. For someone who is used to having all the answers, the possibility of discovery must have been a bit thrilling. Plus, for an academic, there would be a little bit of fame for the guy who was the first to *prove* that bigfoot exists.

Haleema Shah: But, Grover’s Bigfoot curiosity wasn’t always welcomed by his peers. Even though being a tenured professor gave him job security, it can be hard to take someone

seriously if they say, “I know more about my field than anyone since Leonardo Da Vinci. And I think bigfoot is real.”

Laura Krantz: It caused him a lot of problems, like, he already had tenure, so he didn't have to worry about that. But, I think he had difficulty getting promoted. I think he was sort of seen as an embarrassment to the anthropology department at Washington state. I think a lot of his colleagues kind of rolled their eyes at him and he was kind of the butt of jokes. And even now in anthropology circles, there are still wisecracks made about Grover.

Haleema Shah: But, Laura says that, at the very least, Grover was happy to be a bit of an iconoclast.

Laura Krantz: This was a guy who was not afraid to do silly things or play with weird theories because he cared… because of what other people would think

Haleema Shah: Despite the fact that his -- quote “normal research” was respected -- his bigfoot work was dismissed by other scientists. Here’s Grover:

Grover Krantz: They’re not going to embrace the idea of the existence of the Sasquatch until definitive evidence comes in. A few of them will accept it when they have done a substantial fraction of the kind of research that I’ve done. When they’ve talked with enough people that they’re going to be convinced there isn’t another explanation. They want to see the definitive proof, a body or a piece of one. That’ll convince them instantly. So, I don’t anticipate convincing anyone on the evidence that I’ve got.

Haleema Shah: Grover knew how science worked. He knew that he needed better evidence for Bigfoot’s existence. He just thought we’d find it. His bigfoot research didn’t help his reputation around the university, but it made him a *star* in the bigfoot hunting community.

Haleema Shah (on tape): So, there's a moment in your podcast actually that I really love where someone tells you that they study in the “Krantzian School of Sasqualogy.”

Laura Krantz: (Laughing) Uh huh.

Haleema Shah (on tape): Growing up, I’m assuming you weren’t aware that you were, kind of, Squatch royalty.

Laura Krantz: No. It was a little funny to hear that and I'm still not entirely sure what the “Krantzian School of Sasqualogy” is, but I will definitely say that it was a lot of fun to go to these kinds of events and people would be like, “Oh, are you related to Grover?” And to have that moment of being like, “Yeah, I am related to Grover” and people would get very excited.

Haleema Shah: In 2001, Grover was diagnosed with cancer. And shortly after, he made his pitch for eternity. He called up David Hunt at the Smithsonian. They had known each other

professionally. Except, this time, Grover had a personal request: to donate his bones to the Smithsonian where he'd be used as a teaching tool. But his remains would come with a catch. Here's Hunt again.

David Hunt: And he says, "Well, all right, well, I've been a teacher all my life, so, I might as well be one when I'm dead." And he says, "But you have to put my dogs with me." And I was like, "Eh, we can do that.

Haleema Shah: Grover never lived to see bigfoot. After he died, his body was skeletonized at the University of Tennessee -- and that's where Hunt went to pick him up.

David Hunt: So, I went down and I picked up Grover and drove him back.

Haleema Shah (on tape): What do you mean when you say picked up?

David Hunt: I picked up his bones there at the facility. They had them waiting for me and I, I put them in the back of my car and drove him back home,

Haleema Shah: His new home… at the Smithsonian.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: But what about bigfoot?

Haleema Shah (on tape): It's been 16 years since grover Krantz has died. And, now with all of these resources, is there any harder evidence of bigfoot?

Laura Krantz: No. I think that's the easiest way to put it. There's a lot… I think there's still the possibility that something might crop up, but as of now, there's no more proof than there was 16 years ago, 30 years ago, 60 year ago, 200 years ago. Like, there just, there doesn't… you have to really have solid physical evidence and that just hasn't been found.

Haleema Shah: Laura says she started this whole bigfoot adventure as a skeptic… but a curious one.

Haleema Shah (on tape): So, as a credible science-loving journalist, where are you with your belief in bigfoot now?

Laura Krantz: I, I want bigfoot to be real. I just think that it's such a… it's a good story. And I like the idea that we haven't pruned and paved and landscaped every inch of the planet and that a population of these kinds of creatures could survive somewhere. But, yeah, when it comes down to it, until there's sort of that, incontrovertible physical proof, it's going to be pretty hard for me to come out and say, "Yes, I believe in bigfoot."

Haleema Shah: Today, the Smithsonian's official position is that bigfoot does not exist. There aren't any bigfoot objects in its official collections. And bigfoot is not mentioned on Grover's label inside the National Museum of Natural History. But Grover Krantz is here: The bones of the man who dared to ask questions that made him "quirky" preside over the Museum's science education center. And David Hunt thinks Grover would like that.

David Hunt: So, here was Grover watching people get educated, And, I think that's great.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Haleema Shah: If you want to see Grover Krantz's skeleton, he's posed with his Irish wolfhound Clyde, in the National Museum of Natural History's science education center, "Q?rius". And just in case you get any ideas, it's worth noting that the Smithsonian is not currently accepting donations of human bodies.

Haleema Shah: If you want to hear more about Grover's story, and Bigfoot, check out Laura Krantz's podcast "Wild Thing." It's all about science, society and sasquatch. We'll put a link to it on our website.

Haleema Shah: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian's National Board. And thanks to listeners like you. Your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

Haleema Shah: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Lizzie Peabody, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from John Barth, and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Haleema Shah: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host Haleema Shah. Thanks for listening.

Haleema Shah (on tape): What shoe size would Bigfoot have worn?

David Hunt: I've seen Shaq O'Neal's shoes, and I suppose it would be about that size. Yeah.