

Burn Wild

Leah Sottile and Georgia Catt

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For more than a decade, two mugshots of fugitive environmentalists have sat amongst airplane hijackers, bombers and murders on the FBI's Most Wanted Domestic Terrorists list.

One of the photos is of a tall, hipster looking engineer from Seattle. He's wearing a red shirt, has a light shadowy beard.

His name: Joseph Mahmoud Dibee.

The other photo is of a young white woman with thick eyebrows, piercing brown eyes and long brown hair. Across her back is a large tattoo: a bird with its wings outstretched, soaring.

Her name: Josephine Sunshine Overaker.

To the authorities, Joseph Mahmoud Dibee and Josephine Sunshine Overaker are dangerous, violent extremists, part of an eco-terrorist movement that in 2005 the then Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI called the number one domestic terror threat in America.

And now one of them - Joseph Dibee - has been caught.

For the past eighteen months journalist Leah Sottile has been recording with Joe Dibee as his case progresses through the courts and as she works to understand the truth behind the mugshots and how they ended up here.

Burn Wild is a story of radical environmentalism and morality that journeys into one of the most thorny and murky questions of our time: How far is too far to go to stop the planet burning?

Answering this will take Leah and producer Georgia Catt into radical activist communities past and present on both sides of the Atlantic, amongst people who've spent their lives running from the authorities, and those who carry the weight of that word - terrorist - on their shoulders.

In this story people will take away very different things on what they hear, but where you sit isn't a question of the past. It's a question of right now.

CREDITS

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Burn Wild is a BBC Audio Documentaries Production for BBC Sounds and BBC Radio 5 Live.

Introducing: Burn Wild

Aug. 30, 2022

For over a decade, a pair of mugshots have lived side by side on the FBI's website, on its list of America's Most

Wanted Domestic Terrorists.

The government says these fugitives were part of an eco-terrorist movement that in 2005 the then Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI called the number one domestic terrorism threat in America.

And now one of them has been caught.

For the past eighteen months journalist Leah Sottile and producer Georgia Catt have been recording with him across a case that ventures into some of the thorniest questions of our time:

- What is the most effective way to bring about change?
- How far is too far to go to stop the planet burning?
- What happens when you step over that line?

Burn Wild. An eight-part podcast series. Starting September 6th.

LAWYER: How many people who have been on the FBI's most wanted list have ever sat down for a podcast? With the BBC.

DIBEE: I think about like how many people have been murdered, how many people have been brutally tortured? And how do I get on the most wanted people in the entire country of the United States?

LEAH: For over a decade, a pair of mug shots lived side by side on the FBI's website on its list of America's Most Wanted domestic terrorists.

FBI OFFICER: The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$50,000 for information leading to the arrest of each. Of these individuals.

LEAH: The US government says they were a part of a movement whose reign of intimidation and fear was so great that in 2005 they were called the number one domestic terror threat in America.

FBI OFFICER: Anyway you look at it these individuals are considered as terrorists.

LEAH: Their names Joseph Mahmoud Dibee and Josephine Sunshine Overaker. The cause of their alleged terrorist actions. The environment. And now one of them has. Been caught.

LEAH: Do you think we could talk to him?

LAWYER: Absolutely, absolutely.

DIBEE: From the moment they started like we're going to put you in prison for 35 years. Well, that was pretty serious and that hasn't really. Relented any.

LEAH: I'm Leah Satilla and for the past 18 months as Joe Debyes case goes through the court, I've been trying to understand who the two fugitive ecoterrorists really are. Beyond those mug shots.

UNKNOWN: I think they would be heroes.

LEAH: And what the truth is about a group known as the Earth Liberation Front?

Speaker 5: There is a vibrant, angry, capable underground that will create a consequence that you will feel.

Speaker 6: They feel like they're hurting the big corporations I'm sure, but really, it's the little people that suffer that can't get a pay check.

UNKNOWN: You can't hurt them guys. They tried to destroy our lives. That's what they accomplished in my view.

LEAH: Answering it will take us into radical activist communities past and present on both sides of the Atlantic.

Speaker 7: Living on campus will wear you down and break you in in a lot of ways. Rebuild you as a totally different. Person how do?

UNKNOWN: You deal with these massive like environmental problems.

Speaker 5: You know, it's why I thought it was necessary. You know it was necessary to take such drastic action.

LEAH: In my work on extremism, I've covered a lot of stories about the far right. Why people resort to violence commit actions that leave people dead, and how society responds to that. And this story, it doesn't quite fit that mold.

Speaker 6: The terrorist label being applied to activists who take kind of extreme measures to ensure that no one is injured. I think it reveals the priorities of our government.

LEAH: People will take away very different things on what they hear.

Speaker 6: Charges that I was facing carried a mandatory minimum sentence of 35 years up to I think it was like 235 years or something like that.

FBI OFFICER: The definition of terrorism: It doesn't say you have to harm anybody.

UNKNOWN: I'm sorry, but your children and your grandchild's history book will not agree with you.

Speaker 5: You could have been blown apart, you know I mean for piece of wood?

LEAH: At the heart of this story are questions still being asked today.

NEWSREADER: The moment temperatures are rising by 1/4 of a degree every 10 years.

UNKNOWN: No matter how long this takes, we're going to stop the Decoter Access pipeline.

NEWSREADER: Now a new study says that catastrophic climate change outcomes, including human extinction, are not being taken seriously enough.

LEAH: What's the most effective way to bring about change?

Speaker 7: The people were just more overwhelmed now that. No one knows what to do.

LEAH: Last year, the temperatures got to 115 degrees, a bunch of farm workers here died. So this is. The thing right? They didn't die, they were killed. There's a real.

Speaker 6: Biting sense at the minute that things are reaching ahead.

LEAH: How far is too far to go to stop the planet burning?

DIBEE: If it's not me, then it's who you know, and if it's not now then, it's when?

LEAH: Burn Wild An 8 part podcast from BBC Radio 5 live and BBC Sounds, starting September 6th.

Episode 1: The Elves are watching

Sept. 6, 2022

An underground group of radical environmentalists become a domestic terror priority. Then two go on the run. And this series goes in an unexpected direction.

LEAH: On a clear cold night, two people are driving in a pickup truck up the side of a mountain in Vail Co.

CHELSEA: I quit my job, got my truck started driving north. And I didn't know where we were going. I didn't know what the target was. It was exciting but also right away gave me a sense of we're doing a dangerous thing here.

LEAH: This is Chelsea Gerlach and the target was a building a popular ski resort, which had recently gotten plans approved that would expand it through 800 acres of forest and the two in the pickup. Truck they'd come to make sure that didn't happen.

CHELSEA: It was, you know, a shocking action, a destructive action, a scary action.

LEAH: On the way they picked up all the materials they needed to succeed.

CHELSEA: Even in going shopping, we're doing a clandestine action here, and you're going to wear a baseball cap so that the overhead cameras can't see your face. At some point along the way, we had all of the components that we needed. We rented a hotel room and essentially made a clean room. Donned Bunny suits and hats and gloves and masks and had instructions to make a timed incendiary device.

LEAH: They would destroy it with homemade firebombs, gas cans, rigged up with timers. That would go. Off and burn it to the ground. We were by.

CHELSEA: That time psychologically, we were prepared for the scale of. What we were doing.

LEAH: It was the night of October 19th, 1998. They'd traveled a. Long, long way and they were committed to carrying out this mission no matter what.

CHELSEA: By the time we got to the mountain, there had been a snowstorm. And we got stuck in the snow in the middle of the night part way up the mountain.

LEAH: It might have been an opportunity that other. People would have. Stopped and turned around, steered back down the mountain, taking it as a sign perhaps. But they didn't. They kept going.

CHELSEA: We had no idea how we were going to. Pull that off just the two of us.

LEAH: They kept going until the fire bombs were planted and then. They drove away. The mountain just a shadow in the rearview mirror.

CHELSEA: I saw this orange glow on the mountain, but I couldn't quite identify if it was fire, but then I had a scanner, a police scanner in my truck. And the first thing that I heard. Was a call for mutual aid. So they were calling a neighboring fire department. To help put out the fire. So I thought when I knew that. It happened.

LEAH: The arsenic veil caused over \$10 million of damages. The buildings were blackened and destroyed. The arsonist issued a statement. It said putting profits ahead of Colorado's wildlife will not be tolerated. This action is just a warning. Chelsea Gerlach was part of a radical environmental movement that wanted to bring about change. Theirs was a group that had moved far, far beyond holding signs in protest. They called themselves the Earth Liberation Front, the ELF. The Alf had

decided to take action against things they saw as harmful to the environment, and the only way they thought would make people listen. They intended to get their way by force by fire. They had a line to never injure anyone, and they never did. But soon the arsonists. Would be called, not environmentalists, not criminals, but terrorists.

FBI OFFICER: Terrorism is terrorism no matter what the motive.

LEAH: A certain kind of terrorist?

NEWSREADER: Tonight the FBI calls out one of the most dangerous domestic terrorism groups around.

LEAH: In 2005, the deputy Assistant director of the FBI called them the number one domestic terror threat in America.

CHELSEA: The terrorist label being applied to activists who take kind of extreme measures to ensure that no one is injured. I think it reveals the priorities of our government.

LAWYER: To compare an activity like that to somebody taking an occupied plane and rolling it into an office building just outrageous.

LEAH: The fires happened nearly 20 years ago, but the case isn't closed for over a decade. The pair of mug shots lived side by side. And the FBI's website on its list of America's Most Wanted domestic terrorists. It's a page filled with photos. Of airplane hijackers, bombers, and murderers.

FBI OFFICER: The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$50,000 for information leading to the arrest of each of these individuals.

LEAH: Two people the government calls ecoterrorists.

FBI OFFICER: Josephine Sunshine Overaker, who has been on the run since 2001. Second individual is Joseph Mahmoud Dibee.

FBI OFFICER: The way you look at it, these individuals are considered as terrorists.

LEAH: For the most part, few people from the Earth Liberation Front have spoken about the destructive actions they took on behalf of the entire. But for the past 18 months, we've been talking to people in this movement who are finally ready after all this time to weigh. Up what they did.

Speaker 10: You know, for the longest time and then like ohh, I will never talk about that night. It's really unusual. I think everything I you know myself talk about it.

LEAH: I want to know who they are beyond these mug shots and how they ended up. Better understanding that means fitting together pieces of a much bigger jigsaw puzzle. Key, people, moments, and ideas that take us into one of the most pressing questions of our time. Last year, the temperatures got to 115 degrees, a bunch of farm workers here died.

Speaker 11: So this is the thing, right? They didn't die, they were killed.

LEAH: How far is too far to go to stop the planet burning?

Speaker 1: There's a real biting sense at the minute that things are reaching.

Speaker 12: Ahead, we all start off nonviolent. We write letters and we petition, and we hold signs and we do civil disobedience and. On and on and on and then we even get to the point where we'll destroy property. But we won't hurt people. If things don't change, someday we might be doing something besides destroying property and I don't want to be pointing the finger at those people and saying. You're not justified. Because we've tried so many things all along the way, and if there's going to be something that comes along that follows in the footsteps of the Earth Liberation Front it could very well be worse.

LEAH: This is burn wild episode one. The elves are watching. I'm Leah petilli.

Intro Ends

LEAH: I wrote my first story on domestic extremism in 2014, and I've been reporting on it in America ever since. The majority of that work has revolved around violent, far right figures, militias, bombers, guys with guns. In America that has been particularly relevant in the last few years. In my

work, I try to understand what drives people to extremism and what society's response to extremists looks like. But in recent years, people in law enforcement will often say to me, don't. Forget about ecoterrorists. And every time they have. I've been skeptical I hadn't heard of any real acts of ecoterrorism since I was a teenager and the Earth Liberation Front was lighting fires. Around the world. As the effects of climate change are becoming increasingly pronounced, environmental actions are becoming. More high profile, more disruptive.

Speaker 13: Central London brought to a standstill as protesters simultaneously occupied five bridges across the river. No matter how long this takes, we're going to stop the Dakota Access pipeline. This is only the beginning of the beginning.

Speaker 2: The events of the last week have exposed another emerging threat, the so-called eco crusaders turned criminals. I refused point blank to allow that kind of anarchy on our streets.

NEWSREADER: If your house is on fire and you want to keep your house from burning to the ground, then that does require some level of panic.

LEAH: These actions aren't at the level of the ELF. 20 years ago, nowhere near it.

NEWSREADER: The federal government is cracking down on ecoterrorism. Perhaps a serious debate to be. Had about what is.

LEAH: But if you watch some media or listen to certain politicians, eco mobs, eco criminals.

Speaker 5: An eco terrorist organisation Karma nominee.

Speaker 14: Who collaborated with Ecoterrorism? There are mob of eco terrorists.

LEAH: Our threat again right now and the response can be severe.

FBI OFFICER: If pipeline saboteurs can be prosecuted as terrorists.

LEAH: In 2016, hundreds of indigenous protesters blocked the construction of an oil pipeline in the unit. States and were met with police. Decked out like soldiers.

Speaker 15: Sickening, that they would use dogs against peaceful protesters. And Mace people.

LEAH: In the UK, new legislation has been brought in and includes an offence of intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance. Which just seems to make the protesters more resolute.

Speaker 1: The fact that these types of protests are met with such such extreme measures demonstrates more of a need to. Do them in my view, you know.

LEAH: The government says it's needed to uphold the right to peaceful protests while providing the police with the necessary powers to stop disruptive protests from disproportionately infringing on the rights and freedoms of others. For this podcast, I teamed up with Georgia Cat, a BBC producer based in London, in the summer of 2021. Georgia headed to a thicket of 400 year old woodland up near Staffordshire where months earlier protesters set up what they called a protection camp. They occupied trees slated to be cut. Down to make way for a high speed rail line. The methods of these protesters. They're nothing like the ELF. They're not torching buildings, they're occupying forests using their bodies, not fire. To stop the machine. But 20 years on from when Chelsea lit the arson on the mountain and Vale, the questions being asked, the grievances aired sounds very similar.

Speaker 16: Control the narrative. On what is deemed violent like they have to send a message to the wider public that that's not acceptable. So by labeling people eco terrorists, they must send a message to people that. Like don't do this.

LEAH: These activists are expressly nonviolent, but their definition of violence is very different to the authorities.

Speaker 17: People who did massive arson attacks in the US like they saw themselves as nonviolent because so like what is violent, violence is causing harm to to people to animals.

Speaker 16: Is destroying a tree grab and diggers that are going to tear apart an ancient woodland? What's more destructive? Doing things that won't stop it or. Torturing the ***** thing so they can't destroy it.

LEAH: This is why Georgia and I wanted to. Make this podcast.

Speaker 18: Right now it.

LEAH: Feels like humanity is on the cusp of something like around the world. People are asking what the right thing to do is about the planet and at times. Morality and the. Law come crashing together. And it might feel like we're encountering these issues for the first time, but we're not. That question and the eco protesters demanding change. They have a history, a line that goes straight back to Chelsea and her burning ski resort to when the left asked the same thing and thought they had the answer.

Speaker 12: That was what they call a communique sort of a secret message from the underground. It sort of announced the Earth liberation. Front's existence

LEAH: Leslie Pickering remembers seeing the ELF's announcement in the mid 1990s. He would go on to be a spokesperson for the group.

Speaker 12: That get started off with. Welcome to the struggle of all species to be free, we are the burning rage of this dying planet. The War of greed ravages the earth and species die out every day. The Earth Liberation Front works to speed up the collapse of industry to scare the rich and undermine the foundations of the state and on and on. It goes.

LEAH: Impressive that you have this memorized.

Speaker 12: It was enough to cause, like just countless discussions around firesides, you know, secret little hush, hush discussions between activists. What do you think's going to happen or you know I'm a little scared or I think this is a good idea or I think this is a bad idea. What what the Earth Liberation Front did? Was a massive step. Beyond anything that had tactically been done. In the underground for the environment fire. Just send the. Message to the world that now there are consequences. You know, we all know that you're used to living in a world where you can destroy the environment and pollute whatever you want. And at best, expect to find that you can easily afford to pay. But those days are over. If the government is not going to do anything to stop you, then there is a vibrant, angry, capable underground that will create a consequence that you will feel.

LEAH: And so the fire started. They played out in the. West, the region I've spent almost my entire life living in.

Speaker 12: Estimates the high estimates are 1/4 billion dollars in damages over. You know a 10 year.

LEAH: Period and I remember how it freaked people out that so-called eco terrorists were stalking around in the forests at night. When one fire would go out, another would start.

Speaker 12: Corporation headquarters and government agencies were reduced to ashes and they would be looking. Sifting through those ashes for evidence. Still, when another fire would be set, you know the next state over it felt like a war. It felt like a war.

LEAH: Those warring sides were the radical earth. Liberation Front versus the companies and corporations that they thought should be punished for destroying the environment. Greg Harvey was working as a detective at the Police Department in Eugene, OR when the first fires happened.

Speaker 14: When we would talk to the victims, they'll say they were fully terrorized.

LEAH: I mean correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like with this group there was kind of a concerted effort to make sure people didn't. Get hurt, right?

Speaker 14: Yes, yeah that. Was but as anything, if you don't truly know what you're doing when you're dealing with fuel oil, so yeah, no one was ever hurt. But the chances of people getting hurt was there.

LEAH: Chuck Tilby was a police officer working with Greg.

Speaker 19: They were just starting to experience life, you know. So they had that carefree attitude of young people that kind of made them more dangerous than most. Why is that?

Speaker 19: Well, they just didn't. You know, younger people don't understand the ramifications of what they do. They they didn't understand it and didn't care. As long as it was outrageous and shocked the conscience. Of normal society. They were into it.

LEAH: And it did shock people and scare them. Georgia and I spoke with Patty Strand, founder of the NAIA, the National Animal Interest Alliance. It's an association of agricultural, scientific and recreational business interests that quote support. Responsible animal use.

Speaker 8: I met people in farming who had lost property, had places fire bombed.

LEAH: The NAIA compiled a list of attacks from animal rights and environmental extremists.

Speaker 8: Now I will share this with you, but this is just let's see.

Speaker 2: Yeah, let's have a look.

Speaker 8: You start looking at this. These are just these are criminal advance. This is are fire-bombings. These are research break INS, they're animal releases and as you can see, there's just one right after.

LEAH: The other for Patty the ELF, they're terrorists.

Speaker 8: Oh I can. They're terrorists are the people who are firebombing. Buildings destroying property, destroying people's businesses and individual lives and their homes, frightening them, scaring them to death. The ideology kind of like a cult. I think all of the opening things that you hear all sound good. You have a picture of utopia. You have just the ideas you're presenting. You don't talk yet about the methods that you're going to use in order to get it, or that people are, maybe, you know, going to be oppressed in the process.

LEAH: With every fire, the headlines swept across America.

NEWSREADER: Police say they did find a sign left at the scene of the fires with the initials. Els

Speaker 10: Else is taking credit for the.

CHELSEA: And soon the world.

Speaker 20: Calling card of Earth Liberation Front.

LEAH: People were wondering who would be.

Speaker 21: Next, loose collection of radical environmentalists.

LEAH: What would be next?

Speaker 14: If you're something else who's destroying the natural environment, you may be considered the next target of the El.

LEAH: This case is massive, multiple crimes, multiple perpetrators, multiple messages to their victims.

Speaker 11: Troy Ranger Station arson graffiti, including the words Earth Liberation Front were spray painted on several trucks.

LEAH: Early on in making this series, George and I wanted to get our heads around the broad strokes of this story.

Speaker 11: Six days later, 5.

LEAH: Who the ELF? Were who they were targeting and why? Attributing the arson to elf. Calling superior lumber a typical earth. So we printed out a pile of court documents on the group. A list of the communiques and details on the suspected members. "We hope to see an escalation in tactics against capitalism and industry. Choose an earth rape-r and destroy them."

Speaker 11: You know they weren't victims, but they could have. Been yeah.

LEAH: It's a lot as the communique bragged that the event would bring to a screeching halt. What countless protests and letter writing campaigns could never stop hundreds and hundreds of pages, so we got a little distracted.

Speaker 11: Yeah, what type was?

Speaker 1: That that is.

LEAH: November 30th, 1997. George and I have been working on podcasts together since early 2020, but we've never met in person, only over a zoom screen.

Speaker 11: What were you doing in 1997?

LEAH: I was a junior in. Even so, we learned a lot about each other. Just like in 8th grade maybe?

Speaker 11: Seventh yeah yeah.

LEAH: We grew up countries and oceans apart and yet we liked a lot of. The same music.

Speaker 11: Spice goes the number one. Did you like the Spice Girls?

LEAH: Well, except the Spice Girls I guess?

Speaker 5: I don't think I did.

LEAH: We settle down again.

Speaker 11: "Let this be a lesson to all greedy multinational corporations who don't respect their ecosystems. The elves are watching Earth liberation Front."

LEAH: The elves are watching. Members of the ELF called themselves the Elves. They were out there in the night watching everything. It reminded me a bit of the old fairy tale about the elves and the Shoemaker about the cobbler who could only get his work done with the help of. Elves who came out after dark by morning. There was no trace of them. Except in this story, the Elves weren't making things, they were destroying them.

Chelsea

GEORGIA: Defendants so check this out. They have this little bio of.

LEAH: Chelsea as we kept reading we got to a profile the government wrote of Chelsea Gerlock

NEWSREADER: Chelsea was the woman who.

LEAH: Drove to the mountains of Colorado to burn down the Vale ski resort in the middle of the night. And motivated in an early age to sabotage and destroy the property of both the government and private business. I'm going to be honest when George and I read what the government put out about her.

Speaker 1: Wasn't that staying?

LEAH: She sounded. Romania Chevrolet Jefferson. In no uncertain terms in the eyes of the government, Chelsea is a terrorist. Of federal crimes of terrorism. Chelsea hasn't really spoken to the media before, not the whole story. It took some effort, but George and I tracked her down and finally after some light British prodding, she agreed to meet up with me. We needed somewhere quiet Georgia's in London, and she's left me in charge. So of course we ended up in a cemetery cemetery. I'm pretty sure she's here, so I'm going to.

LAWYER: Go over there.

LEAH: It's a sweltering summer day when I. Meet her, we're. At a graveyard in the heart of Portland, OR, and when I pull up, I recognize her right away. Hey, how are you? I'm Leah, I don't like you. Her mid 40s. She looks like anyone else trying to keep cool in the heat. She has short cropped hair and a big smile. Chelsea tells me she just recently quit her job.

Speaker 5: Job like living out of.

LEAH: My car and she's actually living in her car right now while she writes a book about her life.

Speaker 5: On a trip across the country with the.

LEAH: Oh my God, she's friendly and bubbly and easy to talk to.

Speaker 11: How was it?

LEAH: Not really at all what I expected.

NEWSREADER: So we.

LEAH: We decide to go sit on the grass where it's quiet. Chelsea tells me that for her, the forest wasn't a distant place. She fell in love. With it was her backyard.

CHELSEA: So I don't ever remember. Bing suddenly now I'm in love with nature. It really was just in my bones. What I do remember clearly is a moment of recognizing. That the forest ecosystem that I had grown up in was deeply in trouble. I was 15 and I had a summer job that took crews of kids out in the woods. We learned to identify the trees and camped out. I remember we were camping up on this Ridge and had this vast view to the horizon of National Forest land. And it was just. A checkerboard of clear cuts. You could very clearly see the green of the forest and the brown of where

the forest had been just cleared away and then the scale to see the scale. Of the damage that had been done. Made it just visceral. I remember just crying at the at the impact of it. The weight of it.

LEAH: Chelsea's deep connection to the wilderness is part of why activism appealed to her. This was personal when she talks about clear cuts. It's almost like you can see a physical pain pass across her face. Pretty quickly, Chelsea knew what she wanted to do. She tells me the story of the first big direct action protest she went to. She was 16 years old.

CHELSEA: I had gotten my driver's license and gotten my dad's old Subaru and decided that I was going to drive out to central Idaho to a forest campaign.

LEAH: Deep in Idaho, a major project had been proposed to remove massive swaths of forest to make way for over 100 miles of new roads.

CHELSEA: It's the largest contiguous roadless area in the lower 48 states, or at least it was in 1992 when that campaign began. Functionally intact wilderness areas that are important for large roaming predators like Gray wolves, so that's why it drew the attention of local environmentalists who were filing appeals through the administrative process trying to get changes made. To the timber harvest plant and then filing lawsuits when the Forest Service decided to go ahead with those plans, those lawsuits being unsuccessful and then kind of the final last stand being let's call in the cavalry. Bring people who are willing to put their bodies on the line to physically stop the Rd building and I was all in. I thought these people are. Really doing it, they understand the magnitude of what's happening and are making an impact. You know I'm in 16. I'm in high school. How am I going to make a difference? You know how am I? How am I going to save the forest?

Speaker 15: That I.

CHELSEA: Care so much about. I can't file. A lawsuit I can't. Vote I don't have any money but I can come. I can be present and I thought well that's a thing I can do.

LEAH: That was just the beginning. Chelsea became involved in several environmental protests and campaigns, but after enough time passed she started to get a sinking feeling that they weren't adding up to anything.

CHELSEA: I had tried to work through the system in various ways, going door to door and talking to people about local environmental issues and trying to get support through the grassroots organizing and went on to work for the Sierra Club Working through administrative appeals and the legal process, and felt like those efforts were largely unsuccessful. I wanted to give my life to doing what I could. Extinction is forever. We used to say and we were seeing the last bits of intact forest ecosystems fall to the chainsaws.

LEAH: And as Chelsea was experiencing disillusionment, Leslie Pickering, former spokesperson for the ELF, was going through something very different.

Speaker 12: We were in the middle of the most intense period, representing. You know the most radical group on the left at the time that was causing 10s of millions of dollars in damages over and over again. This ELF ship. Was the most exciting thing I had ever seen. I was not interested in seeing it go down. I wanted it to ride as far and as fast and as high as it possibly could. And I felt optimistic for maybe the first time. About the environmental situation and I and I wasn't. Alone a lot of people were. You know, their ears perked up.

LEAH: And Chelsea, she was one of. Those people whose ears perked up at the idea of taking things one step further. She knew people in the ELF, including a guy named Avalon who she'd met back when she was 16 at the protest in Idaho.

CHELSEA: So I had kind of been on standby for.

Speaker 5: Maybe a year of.

Speaker 15: OK.

CHELSEA: Wanting to get involved with this Earth Liberation Front cell and waiting to be called essentially Avalon came and said it's time.

LEAH: Which brings us back to that moment on the mountain. The fire at Vail. How did you choose these targets?

CHELSEA: Our purpose was direct action to disrupt. Environmental destruction. There's no shortage of targets. Knowing that corporations only speak the language of the bottom line, we wanted to cause them as much financial damage as possible. If the project became too expensive, that could turn the tide. So I would say the main criteria actually for choosing a target was could we do it without hurting anyone? Because that was the only rule that the Earth Liberation Front had was not causing any harm to any living being. And then could you know, could we actually do it and get away with it? That was an important consideration as well.

LEAH: For a long time they were getting away with it. But that wouldn't last. Chelsea would face penalties far worse than she could have ever imagined. Repercussions she's still working through now.

CHELSEA: I can name and point to many negative effects that came about from my actions. It's much more difficult to name and be able to state with confidence. Any positive impact from our actions? Does that mean there weren't any? I don't know.

LEAH: We're going to get into all that. In this series.

Speaker 22: Take you to Canada now and the town which recorded the country's highest ever temperature this.

Speaker 21: Week flooding and landslides in east. In India, have now left more than 50 people. Dead nearly 1,000,000.

LEAH: The threat of climate change was apparent to the members of the ELF 20 years ago.

Speaker 2: Some of the worst that they've ever witnessed.

Speaker 18: To the effects of climate change means a lane when it shouldn't, and it doesn't rain and it should and people's crops fail.

LEAH: And in the two decades since the elf lit their fires, the battlefield looks different.

Speaker 21: Record-breaking heat waves in NW India and Pakistan. Are 100 times more likely because of climate change?

Speaker 13: Europe is in the grip of a. Fierce heat wave.

Speaker 2: Dozens have died of heatstroke across India. But millions of workers cannot afford to. In Japan, we've been telling about the unprecedented heat wave this week. Possible shortage of electricity to keep the air conditioners going.

Speaker 18: This isn't A1.

Speaker 20: Off, it's something that we're going to have.

Speaker 21: To get used to.

LEAH: Vast parts of the world have. Literally gone up in flames.

Speaker 21: Thousands of people in the western United States are spending the weekend in evacuation centres as wildfires continue to burn.

Speaker 17: Across the region.

Speaker 8: We are not making a movie here.

Speaker 2: This is not Hollywood. It is Turkey and Turkey is burning furiously.

Speaker 13: Huge plumes of smoke rose above London as grass fires engulfed homes on the outskirts of the capital.

Speaker 2: Warning that climate change is not something to be ignored.

LEAH: Just this past March. The scientific experts released a report that said the climate change situation is far worse than we thought.

Speaker 13: For as long as our emissions continue to warm the planet, and at the moment temperatures are rising by 1/4 of a. Degree every 10 years.

LEAH: There is no more time for Bureau. Time is running out.

CHELSEA: We have been saying that for decades and it's starting to become pretty irrefutable that we're seeing those catastrophic impacts.

LEAH: The United Nations Secretary General called the report a quote damning indictment of failed climate.

CHELSEA: Leadership and still we haven't been able to. Turn the boat around.

Speaker 22: Our new study says that catastrophic climate change outcomes, including human extinction, are not being taken seriously enough.

CHELSEA: That's pretty frightening.

LEAH: When George and I first started this series, we wanted to investigate how a group who never killed or injured anyone would be identified as the number one domestic terror threat in America. We wanted to know how their actions have impacted activism and the clamp down. On activism to this day, I think that.

Speaker 5: We don't really know the impacts of our actions, particularly the impacts of an action like this that would go far beyond the scope of what we could possibly be aware.

LEAH: Of and we wanted to tell it now, at this moment when questions like how far is too far to go to save the. Planet and what's the right way to bring about change are being asked again a time the stakes feel higher than ever? Over a decade ago, as the case of the Earth, Liberation Front was reaching its zenith. In America, two Ecoterrorists slipped right through the fingers of the FBI and for over a decade, their mugshots stared out from the FBI's website on its list of America's Most Wanted. Domestic terrorists. It's a page filled with photos of airplane hijackers, bombers, and murderers. One of the photos is of a tall, lanky Syrian American engineer from Seattle. He's wearing a red shirt and it's kind of a hipster looking guy with a light, shadowy beard. His name's Joseph Mahmoud debay. The other photo. Is of a young white woman with thick eyebrows and piercing brown eyes. She has long brown hair across her back is a large tattoo, a bird with its wings outstretched soaring. Her name is Josephine Sunshine Overaker or just sunshine.

NEWSREADER: How do?

LEAH: Think that Overaker and B. How do you think that?

LEAH: They would be viewed in these circles today.

Speaker 14: Oh I Think they would be heroes?

Speaker 19: They would be the they would be the leaders not. Of your mainstream movement. But certainly of the extreme, if they want to.

Speaker 14: I want to see the full story. It's it'd be unbelievable.

Jo Dibee

LEAH: And then something happened that would change the direction of this podcast. One hot Summer day, 12 years after those two people disappeared, I was going about my work when an e-mail hit my inbox and it stopped me in my tracks. It was a press release from the US Attorney's Office. It read quote. Oregon domestic terrorism suspect in custody. After 12 years on the run. They'd caught Joseph debay On January 8th, 2021, it's the middle of the pandemic and I'm stuck at home. I'm staring at my laptop screen. Joseph Debay this man. The government has wanted for so long is appearing in court from a jail in Portland via. Zoom link. The government says Joseph Debyes. Domestic terrorist But online his supporters describe him as a political prisoner, a hero they posted on Twitter with the hashtag. Free Joseph debay He shackled to the floor with chains, has a mask over his face, and he looks like Hannibal Lecter sitting there. Every time he coughed his chains shook. He was pleading not guilty to everything. The government accused him of multiple charges, including arson and conspiracy, to commit arson as a part of this eco terrorist movement charges that could see him face a sentence of more than 30 years. He'd hired one of the most intense defense attorneys I've ever known. His name is Matthew Schindler. He goes by Matt and let's just say he's a rather upfront guy. Hi, Matt. Right after the hearing, Georgia and I were on the.

LAWYER: Phone with Matt here in London it's going great.

LEAH: How's it going?

LAWYER: It's kind of an unusual thing to to have the opportunity to be paid by the government to show up and just **** with it.

LEAH: Well, I think Georgia could feel you seething all the way in London and I told her when you got on. That yeah.

LAWYER: No my wife. Told me when she saw me come. Out and that I had that look on my face that look like just don't **** with me and I said well you know if you're gonna stand in a room and call the United States of America out and that takes strength.

Speaker 11: British lawyers aren't like this, no no.

LAWYER: It's the most powerful. Law enforcement apparatus in the history of human civilization.

LEAH: So this first call with Matt. He goes on like this.

LAWYER: It's the greatest culture of incarceration that humanity has ever known.

LEAH: And on.

LAWYER: I'm here to stand up and say. **** you I.

LEAH: And on.

LAWYER: Grew up with a silver spoon. I was a Jewish doctor's kid. I came. My education was paid. So I'm exactly the kind of person that should be standing here doing this.

LEAH: And on.

LAWYER: I'm here because I want to be because I think this is fascinating and I think Joe is a fascinating person.

LEAH: Matt tells us his interest in defending Joseph Debay. It's about that label. He's been given terrorists.

LAWYER: Joe challenges peoples perceptions of who they would label a terrorist.

LEAH: And this moral question over what the right thing to do is, in the face of a pressing climate. Which is the reason we're interested too.

LAWYER: And I think that this movement and trying to understand it, but assess. I think its impact because in many respects I think the government claimed great credit for sort of destroying the momentum of this. But when I started as a lawyer at Lewis and Clark Law School in 1992, I thought I would be an environmental lawyer because it was the only thing I could. Think of that I gave a. Tiny **** about that. At the turn of the 20th century, there were 40 million acres of old growth forest. In 1992 when I moved here, there were four million left. There's no question that that radical activism they did. They accomplished something. There's a difference between going into a cafe or a bus. Stop putting a bomb in there and blowing up 50 people and burning down a a **** hole. They deserve to be burned down.

NEWSREADER: In this story.

LEAH: The line between victim and perpetrator isn't always clear and people are going to take away very different things on what they hear. At times, you're going to hear George and I struggling with it too. But the question of where you sit as the story unfolds isn't the question of the past. It's something that's becoming increasingly urgent right now. When the planet is burning, what are you supposed to do? Play by the rules or take direct action? And if you take action, how far is too far to go? Answering it will take us into radical activist communities past and present on both sides of the Atlantic.

Speaker 16: Living on campus will wear you down and break you in in a lot of ways. Rebuild you as a totally different person.

LEAH: You're going to hear from people who've been in.

CHELSEA: Prison charges that I was facing carried a mandatory minimum sentence of 35 years.

LEAH: Left broken up to I think.

Speaker 5: It was like 200 and.

CHELSEA: 35 years or something like that.

LEAH: But also embolden.

Speaker 12: This is a train about to hit a wall. Do I still want to be in this? The answer was yes.

LEAH: Would you answer differently now?

Speaker 12: No, I don't think.

LEAH: So you're going to hear from people who suffered.

FBI OFFICER: You tried to. Destroy our lives. That's what they accomplished in.

Speaker 8: My view, why are they picking on?

LEAH: Us, you'll meet people who've made it their life's work to see the remaining ecoterrorist caught.

Speaker 8: Would you say she's like your white whale?

Speaker 5: In a way, yeah.

Speaker 13: That's probably a good comparison.

LEAH: And those who've spent their lives avoiding the authorities.

Speaker 13: I was just a tramp my whole.

Speaker 11: Life tramping around.

LEAH: It's a murky world where secrets are only just now coming to light. No way.

Speaker 14: We had a multiple industries coming together trying to get this labeled terrorism.

LEAH: People we never thought would speak to us have.

Speaker 5: Another guy you might want to be interested in. Yeah, that's him.

LEAH: And at the heart of this are questions still being asked today.

Speaker 16: People were. Just more overwhelmed now. That no one knows what to do.

LEAH: What's the most effective way to bring about change?

Speaker 17: Maybe there are more. People who really want to do. Whatever is necessary to make change, I don't know what that. Is either.

Speaker 20: You know people who argue for women's suffrage. They were condemned at the time, but of course it's just obvious now in retrospect that they had right on their.

LEAH: Side, how far is too far to go to? Stop the planet burning. It's a big question. And it starts here with this call to Joseph Debyes, attorney.

LAWYER: He wanted to change things he still wants to change things. That's what motivates him.

LEAH: And a request. Do you think we could? Talk to him this by him. OK, yeah.

LAWYER: You're very well. Positioned to do this. Because I think you understand an extremist mindset. Well, Joe is a fascinating picture of extreme.

LEAH: I mean, it'll be a while. We probably won't put it out until next year, but that's why we have conversations.

LAWYER: Well good, I mean then we can do it makes sense to me. Then I can come on and crow about winning all this **** and being right.

LEAH: Matt is confident, overconfident, maybe that if he can get this case to go to trial, his client, a man who for more than a decade has sat on the list of the FBI's most wanted domestic terrorists. We'll walk free and we'll be with him through all of it as it unfolds right now. Next time. How many people?

LAWYER: Who have been on the FBI's most wanted list have ever sat down for a podcast? With the ***** BBC.

Speaker 10: I think about like how many people have been murdered, how many people have been brutally tortured? How many children have been molested? Many women have been raped. And how do I get on the most wanted people in the entire country of the United States?

Episode 2: The Family

Sept. 13, 2022

For over a decade, Joseph Dibee's mugshot stared out from the FBI's Most Wanted Domestic Terrorists list.

He's charged with crimes in connection to an underground cell that was known as The Family, whose actions committed in the name of the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front would see them called terrorists.

In 2005 the then Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI called the eco-terrorist movement they were said to be a part of the number one domestic terror threat in America.

And since that year, Joseph Dibee has been a fugitive.

Now, he's been caught.

For the first time in what would be more than eighteen months of recording, journalist Leah Sottile and producer Georgia Catt get to talk to him.

WITNESS: It was a warm night, a nice summer night about 1:00 in the morning. Had the windows open and I was sound asleep.

LEAH: One night on a quiet slice of farmland on the way out to the Oregon coast farmer Mike Seeley sat straight up in bed.

WITNESS: And then all of a sudden start hearing these loud booms. Very very loud booms. They were incredible explosions.

LEAH: Down the road at a nearby tree farm, something had blown up. It sounded like a war was starting. Mike got up out of bed and rushed to the window outside. The sky was glowing red.

WITNESS: 40 by 100 foot barn with trucks and tractors inside. They were on fire. Shop was on fire, gas tanks, diesel tanks were all exploding.

LEAH: There was black smoke everywhere and as it started to clear, an ominous message emerged from the gloom.

WITNESS: There was a small building right beside it that they had painted health.

LEAH: On the one side of an old white shed, someone had spray painted the letters ELF. And on another wall in the same black paint, there was a statement A1 sentence manifesto. It said you cannot control what is wild.

WITNESS: I knew what else stood for. And there is no question about that.

LEAH: ELF those letters stood for Earth Liberation Front, a radical environmental group. Its members were known. As the elves. And one of those elves was Daniel McGowan.

DANIEL: Please, I was just sitting there trying to get fresh air after breathing in a lot of gasoline fumes and just. Wondering like what's next?

LEAH: Trees might seem like an odd target, but the arsonists claim the hybrid variety farms. Here we're replacing native species. They described it as an ecological nightmare. The tree farm arson was just one of many lit across the western United States in the late 1990s and early 2000s. No one was killed or injured that night, or in any of the fires that ELF lit. But soon the arsonist would be called ecoterrorists. And soon after that this movement. Could be identified as the number one domestic terror threat in America.

DANIEL: When you're on that path, you're just like, well, I want this to stop. I want I want these things to stop. I want the. Forest to have a. Chance to recover in this.

LEAH: Series, you're going to hear from people. Who, 20 years? Ago, since we were in a pot of water, slowly reaching a boiling point and who took things further than anyone else had to try to draw attention to the threats to the environment.

DANIEL: I don't think you needed to be a. You know a psychic 2530 years ago to. Know that like some of what we were. Doing was going to create a very bad situation. You know, it's why I thought it was necessary. You know it was necessary to take such drastic action.

LEAH: And at the center of this are two fugitives who, for more than a decade have sat on the FBI's most wanted domestic terror list.

FBI OFFICER: The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$50,000 for information leading to the arrest of each. Of these individuals.

LEAH: One who's still missing?

FBI OFFICER: Josephine Sunshine Overaker, who has been on the run since 2001. Second individual is Joseph Mcmoon divey.

DIBEE: And I mean, Havana, Cuba.

LEAH: One now caught.

DIBEE: Sometime around midnight, I was driven to jail. It was brutally hot, no water. About the third day I was in pretty tough shape. I've been going in and out of consciousness.

FBI OFFICER: Any way you look at it, these. Individuals are considered as terrorists.

MATT: How many people? Who have been on the FBI's most wanted list have ever sat down for a podcast with the ***** BBC?

LEAH: Well, this one did.

DIBEE: He wanted to know about arson and trying to get me to stay at this is me. And of course I'm not too eager to do that.

LEAH: This is burn wild episode 2. The family I'm Leah petilli. In my years of writing about extremism, I've tried to get to the root of why people radicalize, because a lot of times you can boil it down to a moment or a couple of moments, and those moments can be key to understanding what pushes someone toward committing Viola. I'm a visual person and one of the best ways I've heard extremism described is like a funnel. Someone who comes open to one idea at the wide end of the funnel, which leads them further down into it. The walls of the funnel gets steeper and they start sliding more and more quickly toward more and more extreme ideas. If they get. All the way to the bottom of that funnel. Then they might be open to breaking the law. In the name of. Those ideas or worse? In most cases, my work on extremism has involved violent, far right ideologies. But that's not what we're looking at here. We're trying to understand questions like how far is too far to go to stop the planet burning and how environmentalism becomes radical, and that's important to understand right now in this moment, because what can make a person feel more powerless than not being? Able to do. Anything about climate change? Producer, Georgia Cat and I started working on this project in January 2021. It turned out that would be a big week for discussions of what is and what isn't terrorism.

JAN 6 RIOTER: Take that house! Take it now!

LEAH: On January 6th, a mob of far right demonstrators stormed the United States Capitol in an attempt to overturn the presidential election in favor of former President Donald Trump. And two days later, on January 8th I was watching Joseph Debay appear in court, shackled and masked for three years. Joseph Debay had been passed through various jails around Oregon, but still hadn't seen trial. And at this point in time he contracted COVID. On this day. His attorney, Matt Schindler, was arguing that.

MATT: If you asked me, Matt, what are my chances of of getting an international fugitive eco terrorist released from jail? I would say not too strong.

LEAH: The FBI had been on the hunt for his client for more than a decade. In all that time, his mug shot stared out from the FBI's most wanted domestic terrorist list. But the following week it

turned out his plan worked. The fact Joseph DeBay was sick with COVID and had his jaw broken and his father was dying. The government agreed to home detention.

MATT: God, it couldn't have hurt to watch a bunch of racist Nazi ***** hillbillies over on our capital two days ago to put this little chunk of ecoterrorism in perspective.

LEAH: For the first time in three years, Joseph DeBay walked out of the jail in Portland. He wore a pair. Of cargo pants and a fleece jacket. He was released to home detention until his trial and finally we got to talk to him.

DIBEE: OK so I should hold it.

LEAH: Setting this up hasn't been simple. For one, we're in the middle of a pandemic and two because house arrest comes with severe restrictions.

DIBEE: Not allowed to have a feeling that has technology, so my sister comes by and I actually don't touch the phone. When she puts the phone down because I'm not allowed to touch the phone, technically I'm maintaining the orders of the court, blah blah.

LEAH: So Georgia mailed him a microphone. Other than the few words he said in his court hearing, this is the first time. I've heard his. Voice and it's the first time I've spoken to someone who's been on an FBI most wanted list. Until this moment, I'd only seen Joseph Dbay in his mugshot on the FBI's website, a young hipster guy looking at the camera with a kind of bemusement, even arrogance, maybe.

DIBEE: A bit closer to the.

LEAH: He tells us to call him Joe.

MATT: Phone or the way? If you can't get that microphone working, Mr.

LEAH: Joe's attorney Matt Schindler.

MATT: I'm going to be deeply disappointed.

DIBEE: Too much technology.

LEAH: Before the federal government designated him a domestic terror. Christ Joe was an engineer at Microsoft. He grew up in Seattle, the son of an esteemed university professor.

Speaker 1: And I'm recording this.

LEAH: As Georgia goes over the logistics of recording, I'm struck by the passage of time in his face.

DIBEE: OK, how about that?

LEAH: He's not the hipster looking guy in the mugshot anymore. He's in his 50s now. His beard is Gray. His face looks a little more hollowed out by time and age. He looks tired.

DIBEE: Then we go out.

LEAH: At first I'm not really sure who I'm dealing with here. This guy has been talked about like a ghost and a terrorist. And it's hard to. Know what's real?

DIBEE: OK, so let's do it. I don't know what the date is because, I haven't... it's the 18th?

LEAH: March 19th

DIBEE: Oh, in the 19th I'm still under house arrest and I was charged by the United States government with a. A slew of various crimes dating back from 2 decades ago.

MATT: Leah Leah. One thing I that's important Joe?

LEAH: Debyes attorney Matt Schindler.

MATT: I don't want people. You think that Joe got out? You know he went to the karaoke bar in the strip club. He's been to the the Bahamas. I mean, he's living under the strictest possible form of federal release. He's under house arrest and that involves electronic monitoring, which is 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You know, while confronting being labeled a a terrorist by the United States of America. So it's quite an adventure.

LEAH: Joe grew up near the Cascade Mountains in Washington state, an area known for its beauty and thick forests. But it was also a place known for clear cuts. The removal of trees from an area. If you haven't seen a clear cut, it looks like a razor has gone through a strip of hair. I want to start with kind of an odd opening question from a journalist probably, but when was the first time you can recall maybe falling in love with the Earth in such a way that it was motivating for you?

DIBEE: I think it came to it like sort of over time when I was in high school I was kind of a nerd and I guess awkward is the word you probably is. There was this one Meadow that I used to go to a lot. I discovered it sort of just by happenstance. I was plowing through this horrible clear cut. There are a lot of clear cuts out there and somehow they've forgotten the little piece of it that to cut. It had some second growth and it had some old growth and it had a little Creek. That ran through it. It was really beautiful. I went there. It's kind of like this little refuge and because the area was destroyed around it, all the animals that would otherwise have been in that area gravitated toward that. And there was if you walk. Quietly like deer would jump out from behind the trees. There is grouse in all the trees and there's tons. Of rabbits and stuff. Kind of snuck up on the Creek. There was all this trout in the Creek because you know, the water ran very clear there and it was a sort of refuge I went to. After a while, I think I was about 15 and I got there and I was looking forward to stomping around the Meadow and somehow they remembered that they'd forgotten to cut it. So I think that stirred me pretty pretty deeply.

LEAH: From there you know you're 15. Still living at home, obviously. Where did you go next with it?

DIBEE: Once I became 16, I got car keys. And I started mountaineering and I was sort of became my life. And you know, I climbed all these different mountains in the Cascades. And I got up to the top of all these mountains and I could look out and I could look out all over the the region and what I saw. Were clear cuts everywhere. And I thought back to the Meadow that I'd enjoyed so much and I realized it was. It was like this really special place to me, and I realized that they didn't just take my special place, that they taken everybody's special place. So it was. It was really at that time that I kind of just gelled for me. It clicked for me, it's wrong. Somebody's going to do something about this, and if it's not me, then it's who you know, and if it's not now, then it's when.

LEAH: In the years leading up to the Earth Liberation Front's formation in the northwest.

Speaker 2: The loss of.

LEAH: Old growth trees like those. Joes talking about had become. A bitter issue for a lot of people. And the loss of forests wasn't restricted to the US, either on Georgia's side of the Atlantic, there was anger brewing over Rd projects, cutting through Woodlands in the UK.

Speaker 4: It seems to be working then.

LEAH: This is Paul Rogers. An environmental activist now living in Scotland.

Speaker 4: Charlie good hello good morning.

LEAH: Paul holds provocative views and he regularly found himself rubbing up against the law. Lack of a better word. What is the? Most extreme thing that. You have done.

Speaker 4: I'm not going to tell you that.

LEAH: Needless to say, Paul's been arrested. A lot.

Speaker 4: Blinding criminal damage sensation.

LEAH: So all things connected to. Your activism.

Speaker 4: Let's go.

LEAH: For nearly 20 years until the early 2000s, Paul Rogers ran a magazine called Green Anarchist, which, as you probably guessed from the name, combined environmentalism with anarchism.

Speaker 4: At one stage we had two publications under the same name. Going out under different editors because that's what the anarchist movement is like. It's very anarchistic anyway, yeah?

LEAH: He and four others would be charged with conspiracy to incite criminal damage. Paul's case was dismissed, but three editors were imprisoned for three years before they were let out on appeal. And the magazine gave a sense of the kinds of actions taking place around the world in the 1990s.

Speaker 4: The listings tended to be, like you know. Kind of people gluing locks damage to construction equipment that sort. Of thing you know. But yeah, I mean at the in the space of about two to three months between publications we we could feel painters.

LEAH: Like it didn't even give us a working definition of what you believe. Direct action. To be.

Speaker 4: Direct action is imagine that there's a pipeline spilling polluted water or whatever into. The local environment. Conventional orthodox or practice would be to go through the appropriate channels. The agencies involved in in regulating it, the legislators and so forth, asking them to stop doing it as civil disobedience approach. Would be to. Do essentially the same thing it's involved in other, more dramatic ways of framing it. You know they might go occupy the roof of the polluters house or something like that. But it's actually they're. Still trying to persuade someone else to stop. The pollution or direct action would be if they. Go and block the pipe.

LEAH: Think of the environmental movement in terms of different levels. The elves were part of the underground, secret unaccountable. Then there's the one that's probably familiar to you. The above ground movement, people waving signs and writing letters to their representatives and members of Parliament. Working with the nonprofits Greenpeace Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, organizing direct actions. In the open in the 1980s, a section of that movement came along that ratcheted up what above ground direct action looked like. Their name was Earth first. Earth first methods were very different from that of the Earth Liberation Front earth firsters used their bodies as blockades and techniques. They called monkey wrenching to sabotage machinery. When it came to the forests, they took up residence in the trees, slated to be cut. During the anti roads protests in the UK in the 1990s, they tunnelled deep underground.

Speaker 1: It's been hailed the Third Battle of Newbury, evicting people from the network of underground tunnels is proving the most difficult.

LEAH: These tunnellers got a name.

Speaker 4: The anti Rd protests of the 90s when Earth first really started rolling in the UK.

Speaker 1: There were skirmishes with the.

Speaker 4: Police, which ranged from people occupying the. The testers chained themselves to cranes and machinery.

Speaker 4: The Eco Warriors continue to Rage Against the government's plan.

Speaker 5: For a tree being evicted and there's a climber coming up.

Speaker 4: I'm moving on from there to actually destroying the the plant used to to construct the rope. Paver Planet Homes entry.

Speaker 4: But of course, there's. A certain amount of the you. Know Clandestinity involved as well, which really isn't very appropriate to discuss. Well, you think you're.

Speaker 13: Even willing to stand on the ground.

LEAH: These tactics soon took off across the Atlantic. They would influence the likes of Daniel McGowan, the elf you heard from at the beginning of this episode.

DANIEL: I would say that the sort of UK environmental and animal rights movement we're sort of like a. I don't know how to describe it, but it was definitely something I would say I looked up to was always like a damn. The British really get down like what like? Well you would put them on pedestals and be like oh man these are the people that like you know, stopped this like highway and they were campaigns in. The United States that. Mirrored some of the anti roads movement.

LEAH: But back in America, in the 90s one action was dominating the conversation. It was a massive year long protest in the forests of Oregon. The year is 1995 deep in the Willamette National Forest. A thick, mossy forest filled with waterfalls and old growth trees. Home to elk, cougar and black bear. A huge timber sale was being proposed at a place called Warner Creek Critical Habitat for the endangered spotted owl.

Speaker 14: It was nearly a year long of a blockade.

LEAH: Greg Harvey was a police detective in the close by city of Eugene at the time.

WITNESS: I forgot four or.

Speaker 14: 5 feet of snow that they had to live in and they blocked the road. They didn't pulled up culverts. They had people buried in the culverts.

Speaker 1: At the site.

LEAH: Of the timber sale, protesters put their bodies in. The way of logging vehicles. Using techniques seen in Earth. First blockades they bury themselves on the only Rd. Up to the. Forests with their heads sticking out of the ground. Or they chain themselves together. Some protesters would sit at the top of these tall wooden tripods they'd set up, so if loggers tried to cut. Them down they'd fall. Their message was clear. They were willing to be. Killed for that forest. And in this story, Warner Creek would be a critical meeting place for a group who would take things further. A group that would become known as the family.

Speaker 14: Warner Creek was probably the actual. Ground Zero.

LEAH: Police Detective Greg Harvey.

Speaker 14: I know for a fact I mean. I'm dedicated, lost. Stuff that what they went through. It it truly explains what they're. Willing to do.

Speaker 14: Group of environmentalists. The winter they spent together, they were. In a tight group. And so if you're in a small like a teepee, type of a tent, and pack snow all around it and you guys are just clinging together for warm for food, you're talking to each other. They're learning every deep dark secret about each other, and you learn who you can trust, who you can't trust.

LEAH: Chelsea Gerlach, who you heard in the last episode starting the fire high on that snow capped mountain, was there at Warner Creek. And so were. The two fugitives

Speaker 14: Josephine Overaker was there believe Joe Diby was there.

DIBEE: So I was an accomplished climber. I'd spent a lot of time climbing and I had a lot of climbing gear and I had an engineering degree and I had a biology degree and I wanted to use them for something positive.

LEAH: Since witnessing the clear cut on that Mountain, Joe had become more and more involved with direct actions. And at Warner Creek he used his mountaineering skills to help others scale the trees, but he was also an engineer.

DIBEE: There are a bunch of technological social gadgets that I've come up with, but I think that some of them are still in use and they don't really want to. Kind of. Sort of spill the beans on them.

Speaker 2: I see sure, yeah.

DIBEE: It was there was some fear. There was a lot of fear there because, you know loggers would show up there with their chainsaws and. They were pretty angry. There was some hope. Warner Creek gave everybody a fair amount of hope that you know, maybe something could change.

LEAH: Joe Debay, Chelsea Gerlach, Josephine overaker. They were all there at Warner Creek. And their tactics worked after a year long blockade the Warner Creek timber sail fell apart. Warner Creek had been where everything came together where environmentalists put everything on the line and want. But while the blockade was going on, another story was coming out of the area. The fire had been lit at a dairy in Eugene, painted on the trucks where the words dairy equals death, Alf. That stood for animal liberation. And then two months after the win at Warner Creek 2 Ranger stations run by the United States Forest Service went up in flames on the side of one of the buildings the arsonist had spray painted a message, stop ***** our forests. And they left a signature Earth Liberation Front. The Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front are sprawling, leaderless movements that span far beyond Oregon, and the northwest Joe tells us it's more like an ideology than a movement with members.

DIBEE: People say that. We were part of the Earth Liberation Front, but. I don't really. Think so I don't think. I was ever part of. The Earth Liberation Front, you know, I was just. I was angry that the government like continually disrespected all the process that they created to keep us occupied. I was just frustrated with that situation.

LEAH: But in the American Northwest in the 1990s, as the fire started, some would be claimed in the name of the Animal Liberation Front or Alf, and some in the name of the Earth Liberation Front or ELF. And as the media and authorities tried to wrap their arms around, who is behind these arsons and messages on the sides of scorched buildings? A name began to be used for this sub cell of ELF and Alf, and it stuck.

FBI OFFICER: 1996 to 2001 these individuals participated in a sale of approximately 20 individuals known as the Family.

LEAH: The family. The reason it was called the family. It was said that they would. Never betray each other. And I want to say that we know the family is in a perfect term, but as shorthand it works. And going forward we'll use it because the fates of its members would become intertwined.

Speaker 1: Joe Debay is a.

LEAH: Guy who grew up in Seattle with the mountains right nearby and an early love for nature. Chelsea Gerlach was at environmental protest by the time she was a teenager. The forest was her backyard. But Daniel McGowan had a different kind of story. He was one of the members of the elf that set the tree farm in Oregon on fire. The one you heard from at the beginning of this episode. Coughing on gas fumes, Daniel. Was born and. Raised in a sea of concrete Queens, NY.

DANIEL: People understand that the need for fans and stuff.

Speaker 5: In his real life. Is this true?

LEAH: When we speak to him, he's. In a hot apartment.

DANIEL: And it could fit. It could fit into your your narrative, of course. Right global warming?

Speaker 12: People are hot.

DANIEL: Yeah, it's September in a closed bedroom in New York City.

LEAH: Daniel says in the 1990s when he was in his early 20s, he was a recycler. A petition signer highly concerned about the. Government, but to look at him. He's about as far from a hippie environmentalist as you can imagine. Working a corporate job at a public relations firm. But then he heard about this bar. That was a hotbed of political activity, a place for punk shows and zines and information on going vegan way before that was a mainstream thing. One day he went by after work.

DANIEL: I walk in here and wear like, you know, work clothes you know, essentially, like you know, khakis or something. I walk into this like hippie club and I just look like a complete square. And like people were like walking in with like these pro Alf T-shirts and I'm just like trying to keep up everything was self referential. It's like trying to understand a foreign language. I mean I, I just was totally perplexed by it, but it was intriguing. At the same time, and I felt like a real ***** like this dude. Top five which?

LEAH: Yeah, I was gonna say were.

Speaker 2: They nervous about you.

DANIEL: Uh, yeah. Yeah, and then and then when they get to know me and I'm kind of like, yeah. I work at this PR agency.

LEAH: So at what point did? It I mean, was it like? Pretty immediate that you got involved that you know you like shed the. Khakis and started in on the movement or.

DANIEL: Yeah, yeah it was absolutely immediate. Was it like that little thing?

DANIEL: It was absolutely I was absolutely ready for it and this organization. They had protests sometimes two to three days a week. I'd be at a protest and like people would do the wrong chant. So like somebody would start doing some kind of seal chant and you'd be like dude. We're not here. About that, and they're like, oh.

LEAH: Pretty quickly, Daniel attended this big gathering that Earth first held each year to talk about their actions, set priorities, and share tactics.

DANIEL: And I was like camping and like hanging out in the woods and I ended up getting arrested out standing outside like Exxon's mining headquarters and I spent like a week in jail, which was like mind-blowing. So I had never been arrested, but it was. It was super fast for me and I'm sure everyone in my life. It was like what the **** like what happened to this guy? I would have been considered a political like like I was not involved in anything. But I just had. No idea how to be involved in anything.

Speaker 12: And was that it? I mean, was it was.

LEAH: This sort of cannonballing into the deep end what was? It that.

DANIEL: Yeah, I don't. I don't think I was missing anything. I mean it was not some psychological like I was missing something. It was more. Like I had had these feelings for like most of my life that like things that are going on in the world, they're. Really messed up. I just had no outlet for it.

LEAH: And once Daniel was in, he was all in. He started joining more actions and then started committing property damage. And he joined this group called.

DANIEL: The Biotic Beacon brigade.

LEAH: Right and what they did? They pied people literally threw pies at people. One time Daniel threw a pie in the face of the President of the Sierra Club.

DANIEL: At a shareholders meeting, yeah unbelievable.

LEAH: And I know this story might not seem like much. But this part is important. The Sierra Club is firmly a part of the above ground environmental movement.

DANIEL: You know some. Might say, oh, you're eating your own. You're attacking the Sierra Club, but my politics were so beyond the Sierra Club. At that point.

LEAH: It showed the tension within environmental circles. Some people didn't think that what the Sierra Club was doing was enough. By the mid 1990s Daniel was taking part in anarchist actions on. The West Coast.

Speaker 1: 40,000 people turned up to demonstrate against including the.

LEAH: World Trade Organization conference in.

Speaker 1: Seattle meant to be peaceful, turned into a.

LEAH: Images of black clad protesters smashing up windows.

Speaker 1: Riot got more.

LEAH: We're broadcast all around the world.

Speaker 1: Still managed to break windows.

LEAH: Daniel was one of those guys. Soon after, he would end up living near the site of the Warner Creek blockade. In a city this story. We'll come back to. Over and over again, Eugene OR. Eugene was somewhere that environmentalists from all. Over the world would. Paul Rogers of Green Anarchist magazine in the UK would visit.

Speaker 4: I just went on and visits, uh, looked up old, old old mates essentially. OK. Ohh there was.

Speaker 4: A There was a lot of militancy at this stage, close and trusting, sort of community of activists.

LEAH: And Eugene is where Daniel would end up working as an editor at the Earth. First journal.

DANIEL: We get stuck at the light in Eugene, OR, you know, by the the train yard and I. Would just watch like. Freshly cut trees and sometimes you would just. See like you know, play. Train then would be like 40 cars, 50 cars for plywood, you know and it would just blow my mind and kind of kick me. It hit me really hard and. I just was like how? How do you deal with this? Like how do you deal with these massive like environmental problems?

LEAH: The answer soon came to him the same answer as had come to Chelsea. The Earth Liberation Front.

DANIEL: Like I don't know how. I let these people know that I was down. I mean, obviously you've just seen me in the street all day long break and ****. So you, you've got to assume that I have no problem with that and you've heard me speak and so you're like, OK, well, you're not an idiot. And so, like I somehow you know, I ended up crossing paths with with. People in the EOF case.

Speaker 14: It was a very very intelligent group of people.

LEAH: Greg Harvey, a police detective in Eugene investigating who the family were.

Speaker 14: They didn't know each other's names. You knew as their nicknames. I mean, Joe Diby was Seattle when they would actually do these arson. They took an oath that they would never ever talk about it again. They they would do. The action and it was never to be brought up.

LEAH: We've been told that the secrecy was so tight they'd only know who was involved in their immediate actions. They were as in the dark as everyone else as to who was behind the rest, they didn't know how many people were involved and they had a term for these precautions.

Speaker 15: It was called security culture.

LEAH: Chelsea Gerlach, who started that fire on the mountain in Vail Co.

Speaker 15: Not calling each other on our actual phones, not visiting each other at our actual houses. We communicated through e-mail, Dropbox, we would only. Access that e-mail from a Public Library sometimes. We would use proxy. Servers never use names. We would never discuss targets. What we would? Talk about in those emails would be hey, let's meet and we would have established a meeting place probably beforehand.

LEAH: Would you call your relationships with the people that you perform these actions with, were they friendships?

Speaker 15: Yeah, so you know I had been an above ground activist in a lot of different areas, so I felt like I was known as an activist. And then when I made the decision to turn to more radical types of actions, felt like I needed to separate myself from the above ground movement, knowing that. Particularly the direct action radical environmental movements like Earth first that were my friends, knowing that they were likely to be the first place that law enforcement started to investigate. I felt like I needed to distance myself from that community. And so I lost. I lost that community. I lost a lot of my friendships and so. The people that I was doing their actions with became really the only relationships that I had. You know, didn't really establish new friendships because my whole life revolved around doing these actions and I couldn't talk to people about that. It distanced myself from my family as well. Yeah, the people I was doing actions with warm my closest friends, but because of security culture we couldn't really hang. Out yeah I couldn't call them and say, hey, let's go for a beer. Hey, I'm feeling down today let's hang out you know so it was a very isolating existence.

LEAH: Interesting, stressful.

Speaker 15: Very stressful, yeah?

DANIEL: Doing these actions were tough because it involved, like lying to everyone.

LEAH: Daniel McGowan.

DANIEL: Keeping it all to yourself like I'm a chatty person so you know then they're very real fact that my family, my whole family is. In New York. And just feeling like you know, very far away from them. Especially, you know. Like you're in Eugene for the holidays and it's like 54 degrees and rainy on Christmas and like that's just not a northeast. Christmas, I mean it is now, but it used to be like, uh, white Christmas, like total snowy and you know all that **** and I'm a sucker for all that. I love that stuff. I love the like you know non religious kind of cultural aspects of it. I mean, I'm drinking pumpkin coffee today, you know, yeah. Wow, I did not expect this.

DANIEL: Yeah no, I know you really thought you really thought you were gonna talk to like a you know.

Speaker 12: For holidays, they liked it.

DANIEL: I mean, it's. Just as I am as insane as you think, I am in some ways, but though I'm going to throw some curveballs.

LEAH: In six years there would be arson after arson, millions in damages would be caused. Behind the fires, the so-called family. When all this was happening, while Chelsea and Daniel were in Eugene, Joe Debay was living several hours north in Seattle. The government accused him of multiple charges, including three counts of conspiracy to commit arson and say he participated in two arsons and he's pleading not guilty to. All of them. For almost all of them, he says he was not involved in any way whatsoever.

Speaker 1: He tells us.

LEAH: The name the family is just a fantasy enabling the United States government to charge people with crimes they hadn't committed to imply they were in it together. We asked the FBI about this and they told us in a statement that the name came from one of the members of the group saying

they would never rat on each other. The press got a hold of it and ran with it and they told us giving a name to a group does not gain anything for an investigation or prosecution. While Joe is pleading not guilty for one of the actions, the government accuses him well. He's not really denying he was there. The burning of a horse meat processing facility in Oregon, Georgia, and I pulled up the charges.

Speaker 5: West classifier caused by introduction of.

LEAH: The horse slaughterhouse was called Caval West. Caval West was totally destroyed.

LEAH: It was in Redmond OR a rural city in the central part of the state. The communique bragged that the event would bring to a screeching halt what countless protests and letter writing campaigns could never stop. Can we talk about Kevin West?

MATT: Well, I mean. What I would tell you is that I think Joe can explain history. Joe, do you have an issue talking about?

DIBEE: That I don't have an issue.

MATT: If you yeah no, I'm comfortable with that and if something is uncomfortable about it.

DIBEE: So it's my understanding based on a number of articles that I read that. Cal West was taking horses off the public lands and horses on public lands are protected under an act of Congress.

LEAH: The wild horse issue is. Unique to the American West. Some places you might see herds of horses running all together. Kicking up dust means in the wind and a federal law protects them. But in the 1990s, an article claimed that some people were adopting wild horses legally with the help of government agencies and then selling them off to slaughterhouses like Cavill West.

DIBEE: They can't. Kill these horses, but they have a lot of political pressure to get rid of them in some way. So what they do is they go out there with helicopters and they round them up and then they set them up for adoption. You know these are wild animals. They don't want to be crowd. So they don't make very good house pets.

LEAH: Which is where cavel W comes in. Joe had read it was a place that would buy these adopted wild horses.

Speaker 12: And kill them.

LEAH: He says that for years, environmental and animal rights groups had been battling to get this practice stopped, but Cho says the process to protect these wild horses had failed that there appeared no legitimate or legal outlet for their grievance. We approached the Bureau of Land Management, the government agency responsible for these wild horses, with the claims made in this program. In a statement they told us.

Speaker 5: The BLM are committed to the health and safety of wild horses and burros without management, wild horse herds grew 15 to 20% annually. Overpopulating their habitat and degrading critical resources on which they and other wildlife rely. The BLM works to sustainably manage these populations by gathering excess animals and offering them for adoption to qualified individuals. For organisations to adopt or purchase an animal, applicants must sign an A. David, under penalty of prosecution for making false statements to a federal agency that states they will provide humane care for the animal and not intentionally or knowingly send the animal to slaughter, adopted wild horses and burros remain property of the US government for at least one year from adoption date, during which time the animal must be available for inspection and adopters. Prohibited from reselling the animal for any purpose. Adopted animals must be inspected a final time before title of ownership is issued and the animal becomes private property. These safeguards disincentivize reselling horses for slaughter once they are titled.

LEAH: According to the government, on the night of July 7th, 1997, Joe was down in Eugene OR with several people made. The two hour drive over to Redmond undercover of night. They placed incendiary devices around Cavel W they drilled holes through the walls and poured a flammable. Gel something that's been called vegan jello through those holes that ignited and burned the place to the ground. No people or animals were hurt, but the building was destroyed over \$1,000,000 in damages was caused. The Animal Liberation Front claimed the arson they said quote. The action would bring to a screeching halt what countless protests and letter writing campaigns could never stop. The very last

horse slaughterhouses in America shut down in 2000. And seven they're all gone. It turned out people were enraged at the idea of horses being sold off for meat, and it's hard not to see the Cavill W arson as a defining moment in that fight.

MATT: You say to any American, and I bet it would be the same. Way in the UK.

LEAH: Joe Debyes attorney. Matt Schindler.

MATT: I represent a terrorist who's accused of burning down a horse meat processing facility. People's reactions are horse meat. What I frequently joke with the US attorney, then I'm going to defend the case on the basis that they ***** deserved it.

LEAH: We reached out. To the former owner of Cavel W, who declined our interview request. We sent him the claims made in this program, but he didn't get back to us. For now, Joe's line is this until the government can prove I was there. I'm not guilty. He tells us he wants his case to go to trial so he can ask questions about the government's conduct. He doesn't want to be forced into an agreement or a guilty plea on the other charges. Things he says he had nothing to do with. In the story of the so-called Family, it's hard on this first meeting to know what Joe's place in it is over the next two years, we've spent recording with him that will become clear. But in January 2021, there was something more fundamental. We're trying to understand. Producer George and I hop on a call, so I'm not saying there's not a crime. I mean, of course there's harm in an arson.

Speaker 5: From the government that he's done, he burnt down his Lord's house. I mean, we don't. Even know for sure that. Wild horses were being slaughtered there. You know, this is his, he read. And ask at the same time the terrorist thing, right?

LEAH: Is his crime a big enough crime to be called terrorism, you know?

Speaker 5: And to be on the FBI's list of most. Wanted domestic terrorists.

LEAH: Yes, a domestic terrorist. When you say that term, you think of Oklahoma City. Right, like you think of. This, you know, completely collapsed building and all these dead people, dead children. It's just real hard for me to put that on the same kind of. Scale as a. Burning of a horse slaughterhouse with no one.

MATT: You know, if if Joe if Joe was a terrorist, we wouldn't be here.

LEAH: Joe Debyes attorney. Matt Schindler.

MATT: You know, I'm not a moron. If I were defending a terrorist, you know. Here we are 15 years removed from this, this man has never engaged in a single other act of anything that you could remotely call violent. The folks that got involved in direct action stuff that was never like the first thing. You know, it's like, Oh yeah, let's go burn the place down and so again to compare an activity like that to somebody taking an occupied plane and rolling it into an an office building.

MATT: It's just outrageous.

LEAH: Over the next 18 months, as Joe's case develops, George and I would talk to him a lot. Was there a?

Speaker 5: Moment when you realized how big it had got.

DIBEE: Well, I mean from the moment they started like we're going to put you in prison for 35 years. Well, that was pretty serious and that hasn't really relented any.

LEAH: His story and the story of the so-called Family would change more than we could possibly have known on this first meeting, and as always with these stories, there are two sides. Do you think that that the Earth Liberation Front were terrorists?

WITNESS: Yeah I do.

Speaker 2: He punished this community. You know, so I mean, I resent that.

Speaker 16: You know, I mean like I would have been able to raise my son. I would have raised my daughter you. Could have been. Blown apart, you know? I mean for. You know a piece of wood.

LEAH: That's next time and we start to understand the role of something else. Someone else in this story too.

Speaker 16: I've been an agent for 21 years. 15 of those years I've been looking for Overaker.

LEAH: Someone side by side on the FBI's most wanted domestic terrorist page. With Joe deBay. Josephine Sunshine Overaker.

Speaker 16: I want to finish it, put the CAP on the largest domestic terrorism overall case that that we've had in the United States.

Speaker 2: This is the largest domestic terrorism case in the.

LEAH: United the first fragments of a.

Speaker 12: I did state.

LEAH: Picture pieces of a puzzle. That would come together to reveal something massive.

Speaker 12: Seeing what has become of all of us and knowing the fate that would await, I'm not surprised that she would decide wherever. She is whatever she's doing to stay put there.

Episode 3: The case of Sunshine

Sept. 20, 2022

More than fifteen years ago a woman, authorities call an eco-terrorist, slipped through the fingers of the FBI and vanished. Leah Sottile meets the agent she evaded, who's made it his mission to see her caught before he retires.

LEAH: For 17 years, a member of the Earth Liberation Front in the so-called Family has somehow evaded the capture of the United States government. Her name is Josephine Sunshine, Overaker or. Just sunshine. She's on the FBI's most wanted domestic terrorist site alongside people accused of murder plane hijackings and bank robberies. Here's the story from the FBI strap in.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: Overaker is wanted for arson and other crimes. She committed dating back to 1996 when she was a member of an Eco terrorism cell known as the Family, The. After the nameless.

LEAH: Photo stares out from the website glowering at the camera.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: Nation front and the Earth Liberation Front.

LEAH: Unafraid, defiant.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: But first responders lives in danger as well as causing over \$45 million in very large bird tattoo that starts on her right shoulder.

LEAH: There's a \$50,000 reward for information that leads to her capture.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: Hair on her upper lip. She is vegan.

LEAH: The reason I got increasingly sucked into the story of sunshine was because who she is divides people. For some she's a warrior. Someone on the front line to halt environmental destruction to others. She's a dangerous domestic terrorist.

Speaker 4: The ultimate is Josephine Overaker, who did all this and she is still in the wind. She would be a queen to them.

LEAH: But getting information on her. Proved to be very difficult.

LEAH: Did you know? Her Josephine.

LEAH: I asked Joe Debay, who until recently was also a fugitive and Chelsea Gerlach.

Speaker 7: I didn't.

GEORGIA: OK.

Speaker 8: Yeah, I can't come on anything about him.

Speaker 6: OK, OK.

LEAH: And Daniel McGowan, the elf at the tree farm fire. I do have a question, and I bet you're not going to answer it, but I'm going. To ask it anyway. Is like just yesterday I was like just like scrolling through my Twitter feed and I saw the FBI Josephine Sunshine Overakers still at large. Like here's a reward.

DANIEL: I thought this was a question that was off. The table Leah.

LEAH: Ohh yeah it it. Is it is it is but.

DANIEL: It absolutely is. I'm just not interested. In talking about it.

LEAH: We even asked people. In the UK about sunshine like. Activist Paul Rogers

GEORGIA: No, now best of luck to them.

Speaker 10: OK.

PAUL: Keep on running.

LEAH: Paul Rogers says keep running and after asking enough people we got the feeling that's what a lot of activists think she's evaded the. Feds this long. Good honor. George and I've been working on this project for months. When we jumped on the call to go through what we'd found, I'm sort of. Struck by how little everyone seems to know about her. Was basically nothing.

GEORGIA: Think it's kind of a good story for. The movement isn't. It that she's evaded the FBI for this.

LEAH: Long, yeah, nobody's telling us anything. Useful, Joe says he knows nothing. Chelsea won't talk and I **** Daniel off. Who is Josephine Sunshine Overaker? This is burn wild episode 3. The case of sunshine. I'm Leah citelli.

Intro Ends

GEORGIA: I'm I've got I'm.

LEAH: Here it's a rainy night in early January 2022. Typical Oregon Weather Georgia has arrived from London so we can dig more into the story of sunshine.

GEORGIA: I'll see you in. A few minutes.

LEAH: And the ecoterrorists sell the family. Which the FBI says. She was a part of. I mean like.

GEORGIA: A great bed. Sort of brown brown floor.

LEAH: You should know that at this point, George and I've been working together on podcasts for the BBC for three years. We talk basically every day, no exaggeration. So every day when she pours a glass of wine after work I'm drinking my morning coffee, but we've never actually met in person.

GEORGIA: Not every day.

LEAH: So in a way I'm going to the airport to pick up an old friend and a complete stranger. You're like a real person.

GEORGIA: You say that. You're tall as well, normally just legs. Yeah you mate.

LEAH: We've got a ton of reporting to do while she's here in Oregon, but I don't really think it's fair to do this story without taking Georgia. Into the woods. Things like.

GEORGIA: This yeah.

LEAH: As we've heard, these forests are pretty much where this story started and where it will keep. Coming back to. So one morning I hand her a pair of snowshoes and we tromp a couple of miles into a National Forest.

Speaker 6: Brown, golden

GEORGIA: Having stuff like this. Covering so much bargain. That's the reason why. There is this kind of environmental movement here.

LEAH: It's a reason people move here.

Speaker 6: Is to be close to.

LEAH: The you know to nature and because you all more connected.

GEORGIA: To it, yeah.

LEAH: But if somebody said they were going to come in here and like cut all these trees down. As well as the thick forest, Georgia also sees the clear cuts swaths of forests that have been cut down that had fired up Joe and Chelsea so much when they were younger.

GEORGIA: I didn't like realize people coming here like how. Much timber is a big part.

LEAH: Of it right, there's a logger on. The state Capitol or. The local, you know soccer team is the Timbers and you don't realize it until somebody comes here and then. You're like, Oh yeah. Yeah, that's just yeah, that's everywhere like.

GEORGIA: Physical isn't.

LEAH: It is like you know and it's funny. It's like the. Kind of thing like it feels. Like a violation, you know for everyone. But she's not just here for the forests on this trip. We want to learn as much as

we can about sunshine. And there's one place we need to go first to meet the FBI agent who, for over a decade has led the case on the family.

GEORGIA: Everyone still.

LEAH: We should probably we should probably. And the sad thing is. We're actually not. Georgia can't seem to get clearance to get into the. FBI's offices

GEORGIA: Yeah, I'm not allowed or because of my criminal past.

LEAH: The criminal. Past no.

LEAH: It would really round. Out your character in an interesting way. So we're heading, so we're headed to the federal courthouse instead. Become an internationally famous building because of the protests last. The 2020 protests over racial injustice stretched on in Portland, the city I live in far longer than most other places. 120 days is only a pause in the summer when wildfire smoke. Got so thick. It made it impossible to be outside. After the smoke. Feared the protests changed. Symbol of peoples anger at the Trump administration, but also just the federal government in failing to take action on climate change on racial justice, and. Point I saw these photos of graffiti on the courthouse that read free debay the Joseph Debay we've been speaking to. He was still.

LEAH: In the jail at the time. And that struck me that maybe the equivalent of the Earth Liberation Front of today was there in those crowds.

Speaker 10: Hey got our coffee here.

LEAH: We go through the metal detectors, take off our shoes, show our ID's, make our way upstairs to the district attorney's office, show our ID's again, get escorted down some stairs and more hallways to a meeting room. Special Agent Tim Suttles is waiting for us. Hi hello, how are you? Are we shaking hands? OK, Tim's dressed. In a shirt and slacks looks pretty. Casual and when people see he's visiting from Eugene, they stop. And wave through the. Door he's been an agent here for two decades.

Speaker 11: Whereabouts Sydney?

LEAH: I didn't spot it until we were leave. But on his phone case, there's a thin blue line flag and there's another sewn on his bag. If you don't know the flag, it was originally a pro police flag, but some far right groups Co opted it as an anti Black Lives Matter flag. It's an incredibly controversial symbol in America. Right now.

Speaker 12: Good morning, my name is Tim Suttles. I'm a special agent with the FBI. I'm assigned to the Eugene office. My primary work is with environmental but domestic terrorism. To include all groups.

LEAH: Tim would be instrumental in capturing Joe Debay, but because Joe is still making his way through the court system, Tim says he can't comment on that case. But sunshine well, finally we found someone who really. Wants to talk about.

Speaker 12: Her she's very passionate about animals and the environment. She had an engaging personality she. Wasn't afraid to dig in and get our hands dirty if you will. She wasn't a flower on the wall. She was out in. Front, she was born a Canadian citizen to a Canadian mother and the United States citizen.

LEAH: Tim tells us that Sunshine was born in Canada and raised in California. Did her high school years in Arizona.

Speaker 12: She was a sheep herder. At one time.

LEAH: And then moved up to Eugene OR in the mid 1990s where she was a fixture at environmental protests. He tells us how she was one of those protesters who came together at Warner. Like the direct action protests that won that stopped the logging.

Speaker 12: They're civil disobedience, and the tree sits got. That timber sale reversed.

LEAH: This is 1. Question that we sort of struggled with.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: It's sort of moral.

Speaker 8: Center of this is like when people.

LEAH: Have agreements and they do legally protest and it never seems to make any progress.

Speaker 10: And then the small. Group of people decide to take it to the next.

Speaker 13: Level but in.

Speaker 10: This case you're saying the protest didn't work, so.

Speaker 12: Right, but they wanted more change than not just their little corner they wanted. Nationwide change of no more logging period. No more using natural resources, period. An Overaker burned down the Oak Ridge Ranger Station that was the Ranger station overseeing the Warner Creek area and so a lot of the environmentalists. In the area felt, why did we burn that down? If we just had a victory from the start, it put this group kind of on the outs with the mainstream. Environmentalists that were protesting at City Hall, writing letters, doing all the 1st amendment protected activities. So put them on the out and so kind of from the first incident. This group had to go underground if you will, on what they were doing.

LEAH: In the years since she vanished, Tim tells us sometimes he's gotten his hopes up. Seeing videos of what could be her at a protest. But then it's not her, and he's back at square.

Speaker 12: One you know his Overaker still doing protest. I think that would not change with her personality, whether she's still doing criminal acts. I don't know, or if she's for lack of a better word. Growing up People do probably look up to her. And she's probably a grand figure in the movement because she's still out there, so I think. She probably has a following.

Speaker 10: I mean, you've got the like all the. Instrumentalities of like the.

LEAH: The largest government. Do you think she's?

Speaker 12: Alive I think she is. She was very good at being off the grid if you will. She might be one of the few percentage of humans that don't have cell phones and doesn't. Get on the Internet. She had resources and connections with groups internationally. I think she's just living under a different identity.

Speaker 10: Would you say she's like your white whale in a way?

Speaker 12: Yeah, that's probably a good comparison.

LEAH: We're going to come back to sunshine later, but while Georgia's in town we also want. To speak to. People who felt. Victimized by the Earth Liberation Front and the family like. This is the Oregon countryside. Where there are a. 1,000,000 shades of green. This is where the kind of place. I spend the majority of my time. Bald Eagles roost at the tops of tall trees, the kind of place far, far from city lights where at night the stars are brighter than anywhere else. It's the last place in the world you'd think would be a target of terrorism. But it was.

LEAH: So they came out here and there was an arson. Of some vehicles. And some buildings I. The town of Clatskanie, Oregon is near the tree farm that the LF including Daniel McGowan who you heard in the last episode burned up in May of 2001 repaid. It you cannot control what is wild. After the fire, a communique was sent that read our forests are being liquidated and replaced with monocultured tree farms. So greedy earth ***** corporations can make more money. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, we stop into town and go by a beautiful stone mansion. It's home to the local Historical Society and the archives of the local newspaper, the Clatskanie chief. Deborah Steele Hazen was the editor and publisher.

Speaker 6: Been standing out here for a long time.

LEAH: Deborah is a ball of energy. Big smile, big voice, lots of stories to tell.

Speaker 6: Do you mind either taking your?

LEAH: She tells us to come inside and take off our boots. This old mansion we learned was literally built by Oregon's earliest timbermen

Speaker 6: 98 buy.

LEAH: Even the creaky floors we walk across in our socks are Douglas fir, cut from the nearby forest.

Speaker 6: 40,000 acres of timber around classic and I.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: We get the.

LEAH: Impression pretty quickly that she's a very busy person.

Speaker 6: 5th Generation resident of the class, comma I community and I'm the third generation of my family to own publishing. Report the class and I chief. If I worked for the chief until 2014 when I sold the newspaper and retired, I continue to be active in the community.

GEORGIA: Come to the right.

Speaker 6: I have been very busy.

LEAH: So basically, if klatsch and I was a person, that person would be Deborah and Deborah remembers the night the elves came to her town.

Speaker 6: I was the one from the. Chief who went out that morning to the site of the attack on the fiber farm.

LEAH: Deborah has gotten out the hard bound volumes of the CLATSKANIE chief to show us and flip through the pages to find her story from that next day she reads the headline out loud.

Speaker 6: OK, here it is. Early morning Blaze Monday does at least \$500,000 in damage Ecoterorists suspected in arson at Poplar.

LEAH: And along with this story are photos of the graffiti left. At the scene.

Speaker 6: We're good. ELF on the door and you cannot control what is. Wild on the side. You know, so I mean, I resent that. The burning of this business did. Take a toll on it. And I would say that it put a few. People out of. Work, you know. It was probably at that point it started to take a downturn.

LEAH: At the time of the tree farm fire timber ruled Oregon still does. Back in 2001, tensions in the northwest between environmentalists who wanted to see forests protected and the entrenched timber industry were very, very real. To people in Clatsop and I like Deborah, the tree farm arson was the work of environmentalists who are part of a changing culture in Oregon, the one that wanted to shut down the local industry in their town to protect the forests and she still takes that personally what? Was the general.

Speaker 10: Mood after this happened?

Speaker 6: Why are they picking on us? You know what the hell and kind of like? You know these guys have been creeping around our. Our little friendly open community.

LEAH: I asked Deborah about the line between protest and criminality as we've worked on this project. It's become a big question.

Speaker 6: He has a right to his beliefs, just as I have a right. To my beliefs I. Don't he didn't have a right to. Commit arson. You know this guy has a right to believe that clatskanie used Poplar farms. Threatening the planet he he does not have a right to come down here and burn them.

LEAH: In the past few years, Oregon has felt the effects of climate change in a big way. In the summer of 2021, ninety six people died when an unprecedented heat Dome hit the state, sending temperatures soaring to 117 degrees. That's 47 degrees Celsius.

Speaker 10: In Oregon, there's just been really. Visible signs of climate change in. The last few years tell.

LEAH: Me have you felt? That out here, have you noticed?

Speaker 10: That has it bobbed.

Speaker 6: Well, I mean. We got the smoke from the wildfires, but I don't necessarily blame it on man-made factors of climate change.

GEORGIA: In your headline back there you said terrorists so you you consider these.

Speaker 6: Eco terrorist yeah, I considered it an act of terrorism.

LEAH: Over the years I've covered a lot of extremism and terrorism cases cases I've seen have left people dead or injured. This doesn't feel the same. Questions about what constitutes violence. If property damages violence, or if it's only violent if people are hurt have come up a lot in the last few years. In the wake of protests around the world, and of course, in environmental protests on both sides of the Atlantic. FBI agent Tim Suttles.

Speaker 12: The definition of terrorism. Is committing a criminal violent act? In order to change the government's. It doesn't say you have to harm anybody.

Speaker 10: And violence does include just buildings, oh.

Speaker 12: Yeah yeah, I mean our sin by nature is a violent act.

UNKNOWN: OK.

LEAH: In 2005, at a congressional hearing, the Deputy Assistant director of the FBI said the actions of the ELF and the Alf were not only terror. But that the ecoterrorism movement they were a part of was the number one domestic terrorist threat in America back in 2020. George and I made a podcast for the BBC called 2 minutes past nine about the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, which left 168 people. Dead and 680 injured. Go check it out later. When we were making that show, we spoke to Darrell Johnson who is a Homeland Security analyst working in counterterrorism. The elves were being called terrorists, so he knew about them, and when we called him up, he told us pretty much the same thing as Tim.

Speaker 14: That label was applied to them in the early 2000s. They were looked at as terrorists before that, but that's when they had the hearings in Congress and that had the FBI director saying that they were the number one domestic terrorist threat. Terrorism doesn't have to have a body count terrorism at its root is ideologically motivated violence. You know, an animal release is not violent, but arson has been defined in US code as a violent crime. And so whenever you have burning something for A cause and you're inscribing. Yeah, social or political. Agenda to it by leaving you left, tagging, graffiti tagging. Then that makes that incident an act of terror.

LEAH: But there's another question I wanted to put to Darrell too. Honestly, the conversation around climate change has changed drastically since the Earth Liberation Front was committing their arsons. I guess I have. A question in your mind is. A belief in the pressing threat of climate change. Ideological and I asked that because when you see far right groups commit an act of terror or violence, the ideology is. Is racism or misogyny? But do you think that climate change is an ideology?

Speaker 14: I wouldn't say that climate change per say, is an ideology. It's kind of a factual thing that's occurring in our environment. But you could definitely have an organization or movement that uses climate change as kind of. A way to mobilize people. You know we need to draw distinction between activism and terrorism. Activism isn't a crime and people should be involved in activism if they're passionate about a cause, but there's limits. When it starts harming property or people or what have you, just realize that you're crossing a line. You're radicalizing, and when that happens and it's part of a movement or an ideology behind it, you're going to get the terrorist label.

LEAH: But Daniel McGowan, one of the elves behind the tree Farm fire, thinks differently.

DANIEL: I'm sorry, but your children and your grandchild's history. Book will not agree with you so. You know, **** **.

LEAH: Back in Clatskanie, we headed out to the tree farm itself. The tree farm operation closed down shortly after the fire, but as we get close we see the tall skinny trees are still there waving in the wind. That's interesting, so it looks like it lives. In the middle of the street. We're here to meet Mike Seeley, a nearby mint farmer who remembers the night of the. We crossed over a river and turned down a long gravel Rd. Eventually we see Mike waiting at the gate of his property with his colleagues who were running back and forth along the fence line, letting him know we've arrived.

GEORGIA: Hey, how are you nice to meet you?

LEAH: This area is beautiful and Mike is proud to live here.

Speaker 15: I have a bald eagle parked in the Cottonwood tree right up there. Do you really?

Speaker 15: Yeah, bald Eagles are golden.

Speaker 10: Does that have a nest?

Speaker 15: This is actually where Mint got started in the in the Pacific Northwest.

LEAH: Oh, is it really Mike is charming? He's dressed like a farmer, jeans, baseball cap and he really, really loves talking about mint.

Speaker 15: Our peppermint spearmint our hay crops are all regenerative 4th generation peppermint spearmint farm. We can keep a peppermint field in spearmint field in for 50 years. Mitchum Peppermint that was first discovered in Mitchum. My place was originally planted in 1961 and we took

it. Out in 20. 11 and my son wants to run mint because he doesn't have to chase men around. In the middle. Of the night and end up in the neighbors yard at 1:00 o'clock in the morning on a pouring down night where you can't see a black cow. 30 acres of mint, peppermint and spearmint for the tea and oil. 34 different varieties of mint. Yeah, we make a killer peppermint Patty.

LEAH: At one point one of the dogs Diamond snatches away the fluffy bit from Georgia's microphone. It takes all three of us to. Get it back. After a game of catch the fluffy from the collie. Mike hops in my Jeep. And we shuffle away the. Bag of Cheetos, Georgia, and I've been eating for breakfast.

Speaker 8: Free so.

Speaker 15: I have breakfast or lunch yeah?

LEAH: And then we get to the. Old Tree farm.

Speaker 15: Let's switch gears here. That green building there is the one that they painted. Oh, OK.

Speaker 15: Self on all the barns and buildings they set on fire.

LEAH: Mike told us about the night of the fire being woken up, jumping out of bed, and seeing flames stretching high into the air. He told us the. Explosions were so loud it sounded like a war was starting.

Speaker 10: Kind of walk.

LEAH: Us through the aftermath of it, as you remember.

Speaker 15: There was a huge backlash and discussed about really why would you do this to people here or just trying to make a living? You know we are a timber agricultural community, whether people like it. Or not, but that's what we. Based on they have pesticides over there that they. Burned up settling around the community. How do you justify creating toxic pollution that you're endangering other people? That's also polluting the Earth. Well, I just don't think that's right to to expose everybody else to that.

LEAH: Do you think that that the Earth Liberation Front were terrorists?

Speaker 15: Yeah I do. I mean they were burning down other peoples property care. If you disagree with them or don't like their values, you still don't destroy somebody else's property. You engage them. You engage the community and try and. Persuade people that maybe this is wrong.

LEAH: For Mike, that night of the tree farm fire and what happened that was terrorism, he says. But he's also feeling the impact of climate change. More head on than others we've spoken to. How concerned are you or how much are you thinking about climate change right now?

Speaker 15: Oh, I believe it's real. I mean, we're finding we saw it this last year and that where literally we had to start in harvesting early because we ran out of water and we're 18 people over the Columbia River and two of our fields. We couldn't get enough water to, so for us when the sea levels rise, that's a big deal. So for us, climate change is real.

LEAH: Because of this. We also wanted to know if he had any sympathy for the aims of the Earth Liberation Front trying to draw attention to the climate crisis, when no. One else was.

GEORGIA: A lot of the people. We've spoken to feel that they were right to be trying to raise the alarm.

Speaker 15: I think we're all environmentalist. We are. I was taught to be organic before organic was a word out there. You know everything. 30 years ago you can go back and say well gosh yeah we should done this. We should done that. You know, we probably should have done something. And more to be greener. But there wasn't the technology back then either. You have some groups that that want to take it to another level, which is wrong.

LEAH: George and I head back into town where we want to meet up with one more person.

Speaker 16: I still get a little bit bent on just the fact that I. Could have died right there.

LEAH: Eric holsey. He's a firefighter, was the 1st. Person on the scene back in 2001.

Speaker 16: I don't think they pictured me standing there with a hose line in the end. It didn't hurt anybody, but had a lot of great capacity to do so, but it would have kept me from going to my family forever. You know, I mean like I would have been able to raise my son. I want to raise my daughter.

You know, I don't think that. They thought of any of those consequences. But then you know. Also, though I mean what they don't think about is like the. Secondary tertiary losses, you know. I mean you had people lose jobs, you know, because of this and. You know whether it's right. Wrong or within your belief? You know, I mean, you still got. To feed your family and the end of the day, you still got to have health insurance. You know there's still basic necessities. You still got to keep a shelter over your head. You know, I mean, and, and I think that when you do things that can remove people from them, being able to take care of their own basic needs like that. They're not victims. I mean, yeah, somebody didn't get blown up but you. Know people still lost from that, you know? Until you stand there and you stand. In our shoes. And you have to know that you know. I mean, you could. Have been blown apart, you know, I mean. You know a piece of wood.

LEAH: Eric, can't forget that fire. Neither can Daniel McGowan one of. The elves who lit it.

DANIEL: You know, I never really felt that I was trying to do things to scare the hell out of people. I obviously AM. Not so cool. With that I don't understand that some of the things we you know I took. Part in was scary. People don't necessarily know what's in your heart or your mind when you're doing this yet. The fact. That people weren't hurt their. Physical bodies weren't hurt. It's not some kind of accident was a major part of our politics. They want to. Harm people physically or have them live in terror. What I was trying to do was just stop. To stop them from doing what they were doing, which I had a problem with and I didn't think the political process was strong enough to utilize to to stop people from doing what they were doing.

LEAH: But you had to have known some people would be afraid, right? Like I, I have to believe that you knew that there.

Speaker 10: Would be some.

LEAH: Fear that would come from that right?

DANIEL: Yeah, that's I'm not sure how much I really. Thought about it. Obviously there was. There was a certain idea that we didn't want to do something that was too. Didn't want anything to to reach out of control. I certainly didn't want to destroy Clatskanie, Oregon. I had no nothing really necessarily against anyone there. I would say I was pretty focused on what was going on there, you know, and at that particular place we targeted and it still wasn't about living in fear, but I, you know, I'm not an idiot. I obviously in retrospect. I mean, all this is quite easy from the perspective that we're in right now. To like look back and be like Oh yeah, that that scared people. And I mean, the other truth is that there was probably some element to me in my mindset that was like, you know, it's like. An inescapable consequence of what we were doing. And so maybe I just at one point thought this is just like. Par for the course. I certainly had no problem problem with the first responders and the goal was not to terrorize people and have them live in fear.

LEAH: But Daniel tells us after that. Tree Farm fire out near Clatskanie. He was done.

DANIEL: I didn't leave the movement, I was still very much part of like resistance movements. I just decided that for me I didn't want to. You necessarily go out and do these big, spectacular actions because I felt like they were. They were not leading us, leading me where I wanted to go.

LEAH: The Clatskanie tree farm fire which Daniel McGowan lit happened on May 21st 2001 and people called that terrorism. And then three months later, something so. Violent would happen. It would shake the world to the core.

Speaker 12: I was just standing here watching the World Trade Center. Gotta be a a terrorist attack. I can't tell you anything more than that I saw. The plane hit. The building.

Speaker 10: You know, I'm noticing all these. You were writing all these stories in in 2001, just a few months before 911.

LEAH: You know terrorism was something that the world was talking about then, but it?

Speaker 10: Sounds like you were. Talking about.

Speaker 10: It before did it feel similar?

LEAH: At all that I mean. We just weren't terrible.

Speaker 6: I you know, I guess it felt. I mean just felt much.

LEAH: Bigger Deborah Steele Hazen, former editor at the newspaper and Klatskin I.

Speaker 6: You know happened 3000 miles. Away, but yeah, I mean it. Felt like part of the same continuum, if you would.

LEAH: Of extreme.

Speaker 6: Of extreme behavior, yeah, targeted on what I consider innocent people.

LEAH: Almost 3000 people died on September 11. No one was hurt at the tree farm fire, or in any of the arsons claimed by the ELF, and so-called Family.

DANIEL: I was out of the country for September 11th. I came back and it was like a. Whole new world. And I don't know if you recall. But like the Alaska senator at the time, on September 12th said this could be the work of the eco terrorists. And he said that in Congress, like he was out of control.

LEAH: It almost feels like things could have gone two ways at this moment. The bloodshed of 911 might have made the ELF seem less like terrorists, or it could bring them into that same orbit and that second option is what happened.

DANIEL: They used to say ecoterrorists and we would laugh, but like after September 11th it was just domestic terrorists or just terrorists. And I was like, holy ****, like you do these actions and then this like massive thing happens. And then suddenly your actions are perceived in a different way.

LEAH: Suddenly the word terrorism was everywhere and there were huge amounts of resources being funneled toward combating it.

Speaker 13: In whatever form.

DANIEL: Department of Homeland Security. And there was, you know, even more joint terrorist and task forces. Like holy **** like.

DANIEL: All this money is going to go to counterterrorism and we're going to be ***** because eventually someone's going to do something stupid. I had multiple premonitions at various times I thought to myself like our goose is cooked.

LEAH: When Daniel stepped back from the group in 2001, he wasn't alone. Chelsea Gerlach, one of the people behind the veil fire on the mountain in Colorado, says by then the group was through. We had.

Speaker 8: Gone our separate ways, we went on with our lives. Mostly we weren't in touch anymore. We pretty much thought this is behind us.

LEAH: But it's hard to really move on when you and your friends are a domestic terror priority. Like that doesn't just go away.

Speaker 8: I actually went underground at that time as a precautionary measure, really.

LEAH: He went back home to New York and worked for a nonprofit and he tried to put a lid on. His feelings which. Was not easy.

DANIEL: I watched a documentary on the Weather Underground. They talked about being on. The run and I'm sitting there with friends and I'm thinking of. Am I am I on the run? Are you underground? It would. Pop up often it would pop. Up with the witching hours. You know, like you're half asleep and your defenses are down and you know I had various times where like yes I had I had. I wake up with chills.

LEAH: Years passed. There were no more fires. People started to think maybe the past would stay in the past, but the FBI hadn't forgotten. The Bureau had been flooded with more money, more manpower. They'd given their search for the eco terrorist and name Operation Backfire. And while Daniel was getting the cold sweats, an FBI agent called Jane Quimby was basically having the time of her life.

Speaker 13: It was really challenging, but a lot of fun to put a major case like that together is incredibly challenging intellectually and professionally because these folks were very good at what they did. You're really hard charging, you're thinking? Gosh, this is the biggest thing ever and what these people did is so incredible and so wrong.

LEAH: Slowly, painstakingly, the FBI and police around the country pieced together the names of people they believe to be behind the fires. But they needed someone to talk, and that was difficult because these weren't your usual suspects.

Speaker 13: There was a public stance of no comp. You know you don't cooperate with law enforcement, you don't talk, we all stick together. You would never, ever betray any member of your close knit group or friends that are involved in the movement. And so we knew going in that this was not the typical criminal organization, particularly drug dealers. You know, they'll they'll wrap their mom out if it's going to help them.

LEAH: It took some time, but finally the feds got a goose that laid golden eggs and it just so happened. It was a former boyfriend of Josephine Sunshine Overaker.

Speaker 13: Our success in this particular case really came down to one particular individual. His name was Jacob Ferguson. I mean, he was a very ***** activist.

LEAH: I just want you to picture this guy. He had a big tattoo across his forehead and a septum ring long before that was the thing. There were photos of him from Warner Creek where he stood defiantly atop a blockade and head to toe camouflage like go ahead. Try me. What made him?

Speaker 13: Cooperate well, I think part of it was we had a strategic change. You know instead of just. Believing that no one's ever going to cooperate, let's start knocking on doors and see if we can kind of shake the trees a little bit and rattle something loose. Jakes was one of those doors that got knocked on and then relentless pursuit surveillance, constantly showing up where Jake was. Hey, we're watching you. We know you're guilty and we're going to catch you and I just think that. Tremendous pressure to think that that kind of the sky was going to fall. Eventually got to him.

LEAH: And he was kind of the key, right? Like did once you got him, did the did.

Speaker 13: Oh, he was the key.

LEAH: Jake was decked out. With a wire and met up with his old friends and started reminiscing. Chelsea still remembers when he came to her wanting to. Talk about the old days.

Speaker 8: We never talked about past. Actions once an action was done, it was done. You never discussed it again, so when Jake. Came around with the body wire reminiscing about old actions. I didn't talk about our past actions because that was the security culture that we had.

LEAH: You must have kind of known.

Speaker 8: It struck me as very strange that he wanted to reminisce about the old the past.

LEAH: But she can understand why people wanted to talk. It was like the FBI knew how much stress they were all living under and Jake coming around to chat must have felt like a pressure valve being released. An opportunity to breathe.

Speaker 8: There's a an isolation that happens being underground and having such a significant part of your life be a secret that you can't share with anyone, so I could sense in reading the transcripts of people's conversations with him, a kind of a sense of relief. Being able to get it off their chest and connect with someone that understood these really difficult experiences that we all lived through together. But of course that was. All of our undoing.

LEAH: When Jake Ferguson recorded his friends talking he. Gave the feds. Everything they needed to take the group down. In late 2005, the FBI had their targets and was getting ready to move on. The key members of the family.

Speaker 13: And it was December 7th, kind of our Pearl Harbor Day. That's why I can remember the the day.

LEAH: Retired FBI agent Jane Quimby.

Speaker 13: We had multiple. Locations throughout the country now like we need to make sure we kind of nab these people on the front end because they will go underground.

DANIEL: So yeah, I went to work on. December 7th, 2005. There were not many people in that day we. Were like sending. Out our holiday. Cards, and so I had like been. Dealing with like the envelopes. I was chatting with someone on my. E-mail and I. Just said goodbye to them and it was. Like 3:30. And

I got up and I had the these two shopping bags full. Of like the holiday cards. And these two dudes were just suddenly like in the. Doorway to my queue.

Speaker 8: So yeah, I was just. Going to get coffee. Pulled up to that stop sign. And every intersection was blocked by a police car. Agents surrounded the car, guns drawn yelling. Can I have the car?

DANIEL: And they were like Daniel McGowan and.

Speaker 12: I was like, oh.

DANIEL: ****, here we go and next thing I know I was like on the. I was on the desk like arms behind my back the cards, but you know God knows flying.

LEAH: The FBI had their ecoterrorists, except Joseph Mahmoud Dibe wasn't among them, and neither was Josephine Sunshine Overaker.

Speaker 13: You know, my sense is that it was kind of like we'll find her in the next couple of days. She's going to surface and that obviously was misguided on our part, in fact.

LEAH: The last lead on Sunshine was a few years earlier. She'd been training to become a wildland firefighter. Ironic, I know, but it also kind of fits. In the West, people who fight fire in the woods genuinely give a damn about the forests. It's dangerous work, but increasingly it's become more and more important. Detective Greg Harvey.

Speaker 4: They have these transport vans that transport the crews so that we start picking up a tail on her. The idea was as it was getting closer to Eugene, we'd have it stopped. And bring her in for questioning. So they're they're following. Her and when it gets just outside of Gene, there's a little rest area. They end up stopping it. No longer on it. They had pulled over on the side of the road outside of Portland and let her off. Yeah, we're saying to going, how could she? Have been tipped off. And she wasn't. I mean there there was no way that she was tipped off. It was just that pure luck. That we missed out on. And from that point on, she's in the wind.

Speaker 13: I'm guessing she just. Kind of reestablished a life for herself off the grid or below the radar.

LEAH: Retired FBI agent Jane Quimby.

Speaker 13: She was the type of person, or is the type of person. That didn't really require a. Lot so I could see her living remotely on some farm somewhere and you know, she's raising animals and maybe growing a nice garden. Just living as assistance living if that's what she's done, it would allow her to stay off the radar screen and not garner a lot of attention. So I would guess there's some people that take great pleasure in the fact that this kind of simple, pretty down to Earth, young woman has been successful in eluding authorities all this time.

LEAH: That's not an. Ending FBI agent Tim Suttles wants to accept.

GEORGIA: How many files do you think? You have on them.

Speaker 12: Oh we have rooms. What would it?

Speaker 10: Mean to catch Overaker?

Speaker 12: Well, it would be a good ending for me. I've been an agent for 21 years 15 of those years I've been looking for Overaker. It would be a a sweet. Ending to my career. There at some point I'm going. To retire and. I would like to get her held responsible before then.

LEAH: How close are you to?

Speaker 12: Retirement I can retire now if I want to. But I got I got. You know 2 1/2. Three years before I'm mandatory so.

Speaker 13: Does this case keep? You from retire.

Speaker 12: A little bit, yeah. I want to finish it, put the cap on a very long, very big case. The largest domestic terrorism. Overall case that we've had in the United States, and that's been. Worked by the FBI.

LEAH: I just want to pause for a second on this operation backfire it took place in the decade after the Oklahoma City bombing that left 168 people dead and more than 680 injured. And when we do this interview with Tim, we're right around the one year anniversary of when a group of insurrectionists

stormed the United States Capitol in an attempt to overthrow the election. Three people were killed in the process. And yet these people haven't been called terrorists. So I'm struck when Agent Tim Suttle says this, that this case involving the Earth Liberation Front, a case with no body count, was the largest domestic terrorism case in American history bigger than January 6th, which fell to a lot of people like terrorism. And bigger than Oklahoma.

Speaker 10: And many ago you said this is. The largest domestic terrorism case in the United States.

Speaker 12: Yes, if you look at the scope and the number of cases, this is the largest undertaking investigation wise that.

Speaker 10: I don't think I knew this.

Speaker 12: The eye has had in a domestic terrorism case.

Speaker 6: Really, I think that. DC, January 6th might be eclipsing us.

LEAH: That's the spokesperson for the FBI who this whole time has been busily typing away at her computer in the corner of. The room.

Speaker 12: Well, yeah. Depending on. How you look at it?

Speaker 12: Yeah, because it is this incorporated. Up to 20 arsons over multiple jurisdictions. That's what I mean by large. Yeah, City obviously is larger. The January 6th maybe larger, but if you. From my standpoint, the number of separate cases. That come in to making operation Backfire.

LEAH: What we hadn't realized then is just how political, how subjective, the application of the terrorism label can be.

GEORGIA: Do you think that the threat from the Earth Liberation Front to like ordinary Americans at that time was more serious than the threat from the far right?

Speaker 14: Absolutely not.

LEAH: Darrell Johnson, former Homeland Security analyst.

Speaker 14: Got these people. That are imprisoned for lengthy periods of time and they haven't killed anybody, but that's the nature of politics and the nature of counterterrorism.

LEAH: That's next time as we. Hear what that word? Would mean for the members of the so-called family.

Speaker 7: Some FBI agents came to.

LEAH: Me Joe debay

Speaker 7: It was on the 5th of December 2005 and they were like we have this subpoena for you and you're going to do 35 years if you don't cooperate with us and you can be a snitch for us. We had a family meeting and I was like, well, you know, this is what they're saying and the government's claiming, you know, all these things. They want me to be a snitch. And if I don't do it, they're going to, at the very least, they're going to put me in prison for 35 years. And on and on and on my phone. I was like, why don't you just go back home? That's what I did. I went back to Syria.

LEAH: Burn Wild is written and presented by me, Leah Santilli, the producer and Co writer is Georgia Cat. Fact checking by Rob Byrne music and sound design by Phil Channel. Additional music, including the theme by Echo Collective, composed, performed and produced by Neil Leiter and Margaret Hermont and recorded, mixed and produced by Fabian Lasseur. Podcast script recorded at Anjuna, Recording studio by Slater Swan. Series studio and mixing by Sarah Hockley. The commissioning executive is Dylan Haskins. The editor is Philip Sellers. Burn Wild is a BBC audio documentaries production for BBC Radio 5 live and BBC Sounds. Please subscribe so you don't miss an episode and leave a review to help other people find us.

Speaker 8: The message said something happened to Keith. They can't find him.

Speaker 11: I'm Rachel Monroe and lost at sea. I've been investigating what happened to Keith Davis. We couldn't believe it that he would just fall overboard in August. 2015 Keith arrived in Panama and boarded a tuna vessel. When the ship returned to Port, Keith was missing.

DANIEL: Convinced he saw something that people didn't want him to.

Speaker 11: See when someone goes missing on the high seas hundreds of miles from shore who's even accountable? These captains the king. Imagine him over the side of the ship. Watching the ship sail off into the distance.

Speaker 11: Working for the whole of. Lost at sea.

Speaker 11: On BBC sounds.

Episode 4: Ghosts and myths

Sept. 27, 2022

In 2005 Joe Dibee fled America – leaving everything behind. Speaking in Summer 2021, as he awaits what he hopes will be a trial date, Joe tells Leah and Georgia about life out of reach of the FBI, and his eventual capture in Cuba. As they faced - or face - years behind bars, Leah Sottile explores what that word, terrorist, meant for the environmentalists who had become a ‘domestic terror priority’.

RUPERT: We are with our backs up against the wall, we’re off the Cliff.

LEAH: Over the past 18 months as producer Georgia Cat and I’ve been working on this project, we’ve heard people saying a lot of things like this.

RUPERT: Things are very very bad, however bad you think they are, they’re probably worse.

LEAH: This is Rupert Reed, an academic and environmental campaigner in the UK.

RUPERT: Fires in the West Coast of the US and the fires in the Arctic. For God’s sake, I mean fires in the Arctic. What the hell is our planet coming to? We’re tumbling down the Cliff itself. We have to try to stop ourselves falling and then we have to try to start painfully hauling ourselves back up again.

LEAH: But how do we do that around the world? As more and more people take to the streets calling for change, environmental actions are high, profile becoming increasingly disruptive. The tactics of today’s environmentalists bear no resemblance to that of the so-called family. Their methods are about raising awareness, mass, civil disobedience, marching in the streets. Many say they’re disruptors, not destroyers. But Even so, words like eco Mob, ecozone, OTS, and even eco extremists and eco terrorists are back in the news again on both sides of the Atlantic. Got their way.

NEWSREADER: But whether this is...

LEAH: We’ve been looking back to when the term eco terrorists became part of the world’s vocabulary. Larry at a time when it was identified as the number one domestic terror threat in America.

UNKNOWN: Vandalism, violence, extremist movements known to support acts of domestic terrorism.

LEAH: In this series. You’re going to hear people who 20 years ago since we were in a pot of water, slowly reaching a boiling point and chose to take things further. How we judge their actions of 20 years ago may not be a thought experiment for much longer.

RUPERT: What’s the more likely scenario people looking back in 2040 or 2050 on 2021 or 2022? Are they going to say? Ah yes. Thank God. The government cracked down on those pesky eco extremists. Or are they going to say? Thank God the government didn’t crack down so hard on those pesky eco extremists that they weren’t able to to really warn us and get us moving in time. Or are they going to be saying? And I’ve got to tell you, I think this is the most likely scenario. Christ, if only we’d listen to them rather than allowing governments to brand them as eco terrorists.

LEAH: This is burn wild. Episode 4 Ghosts and myths. I’m Leah petilli.

Intro Ends

LEAH: At the heart of the story of the Earth Liberation Front and the so-called Family are two fugitives whose mugshot sat on the FBI’s most wanted domestic terrorist site. Joe Debay now awaiting

trial and a woman named Josephine Sunshine Overaker Sunshine. Every day she's gone is one more day. She stuck her finger in the eye of one of the most powerful law enforcement agencies in the world. Midway through our reporting Sunshine was the focus of an episode of a TV Show called America's Most Wanted. It's a show that's been around since the 1980s. Each episode spotlights several fugitives who've evaded law enforcement and asked for the public's help in keeping an eye out. For them. And for decades it has proven to be a great way for the government to own the story about the people they want to find the most. The descriptions they give are almost identical to those on the FBI's page on this particular episode, the hosts talk about sunshine hologram, this cartoonish version. Of her wearing jeans. And a tight red tank top rotates in between the two hosts.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: The FBI launched the biggest ecoterrorism investigation in the history of the FBI into Josephine Overaker and her group. Every member of the group was caught except Josephine.

LEAH: And she, well, the hologram version of her looks nervous...

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: What charges would she face?

Speaker 10: It breathes, chest moving up and down, and well it's weird.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: The Group of the party were responsible for over 40.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: With self-made firebombs huge reward \$50,000 for any information leading to. And this is.

LEAH: The narrative on sunshine that dominates and snippets like this and the FBI's story is really all we've had to go.

Speaker 10: You really want to get.

MOST WANTED TV SHOW: Her all right.

LEAH: Gone and that story is kind of thin.

GEORGIA: It says she could be a midwife, a masseuse or a firefighter.

LEAH: Here's Georgia, the producer.

GEORGIA: It says she's got a hairy upper lip and she's vegan, and I think that when you're referencing a hairy upper lip, you're pretty desperate, aren't you? And I don't think veganism is as uncommon today as it might have been. 20 years ago. So we're in one. Hours, I mean, we've been on this now for.

LEAH: It's end of September 2021, so we've been working on this. For all of this. We've been trying to figure out. How to handle Sunshines place in this story? So frustrated how we. Find a damn thing about. People who knew sunshine weren't willing to talk to us and there's nothing that infuriates me more than A1 sided story. I've been losing sleep, searching endlessly for anything I could find about sunshine that would give us clarity. And finally I got a bite, a tiny one. But a bite nonetheless, which is why on this autumn day last year, I'd called Georgia, so she went to. A boarding school. I found some photos, some photos posted online from a high school trip.

GEORGIA: So it looks like a rafting trip that people went on in 1992 or somebody that she went to high school stand and put online. I mean it's her her with a life jacket.

GEORGIA: On hugging her friends, sticking her tongue out like basically just being 18.

LEAH: Probably 17 or. It's a totally different picture to that FBI one where she's. Glowering, we've never seen a photo of her smiling and on these photos people have tagged. Like I've always thought of her, Josephine Sunshine Overaker and people are like, oh, Josie. Overaker.

GEORGIA: Boarding schools in the UK are pretty expensive. They're normally quite exclusive. Is that the solution?

LEAH: Yeah, it's \$54,000 a year. So yeah, it's a very expensive price. The photos give us a. Window into another version of Sunshine. A girl laughing with her friends who maybe came from money. This mug shot yeah. Shows us that she grew up with an early. Love for the. This might be the end of what we find, but maybe it's the beginning of. Something else I hope it is. We reached out to administrators both past and present at the school and they never got back to us, but from their website you get an idea of the curriculum. They say that graduates of the school will, among many things, learn to be

stewards of the environment. So maybe it's no surprise she would be the kind of person to one day take action on behalf of it. But what is this? Level of commitment. Do to someone over time.

GEORGIA: Can you described to us what you can see here?

TREE SITTER: We're looking at a woodland with mostly like sycamores.

LEAH: At a woodland protection camp in Staffordshire, England. George has been spending time with some activists who spent months occupying forests slated to be cut down.

TREE SITTER: Tents and some built structures around tents, tarps and scrap wood fence, tarps and tabs.

GEORGIA: Bit of the third one, BMT.

TREE SITTER: Big time.

LEAH: After taking part in many civil disobedience actions, these activists have spent months occupying woodland like this that's been destined to be cut down.

GEORGIA: Can you describe what it's like? I guess kind of emotionally.

TREE SITTER: Exhausting and amazing, living on camps will like simultaneously wear you down and break you. As well as. In a lot of ways, rebuild you as a totally different person.

TREE SITTER: It was like a shift from like. Activism, whatever you want to call it, being like an aspect of what you're doing to being like your totality, being everything that you do.

TREE SITTER #2: Yeah like eviction, fever and stress is a. Part of being camps and it's something that is a major contribution to burnout and stress, and it can be traumatic even before the the felling and the police invaders come just the stress of like being in a place and knowing that something is coming, that's traumatic in itself and. People go for weeks and months of justice. Anticipation of like that adrenaline building and building and then when the moment finally comes. You're already fried and your cortisol levels are like. Through the roof. And you've been living outside and the wet for six months. It's not necessarily sustainable. Long term way to live.

TREE SITTER: It can really destroy you. It can take a long time to rebuild yourself after that. Level at which you're able to rebuild yourself really depends on how strong your community is.

LEAH: The Earth Liberation Front and so-called family weren't in a camp like this, occupying a physical space, but the emotional space these activists tell Georgia about that's recognizable to us from conversations we've had with people from that time too, the actions took an emotional toll. Chelsea Gerlach:

CHELSEA: For all the years that I had been an activist, I really had been in this mentality of there's a war going on. And I'm defending the forest and that's what my life is about. I don't have time to mess around with. Oh, I'm just going to go hike in the woods and enjoy myself. I've got to be on the grind. And that was damaging to my psyche being disconnected from the source of. Love that ultimately was the reason that I was doing the actions that I was doing. Being motivated by love but not being connected to. Nature, which even to this day, is my biggest source of solace.

LEAH: Chelsea says her activism meant separating herself from the very thing that inspired her to do those actions in the 1st place. That ability to revel in the wonder of the natural world. And she talks about the stress of being away from friends and family, especially in the years she went underground.

CHELSEA: You know my family not even knowing where I was having very little contact with them. That was really difficult, yeah?

Joseph Dibee's Escape

LEAH: The one person whose story parallels Josephine Sunshine Overakers. The most is Joe Debay. Like Sunshine, Joe disappeared when the arrests happened in 2005 and spent 12 years on the run. We left Joe in the last episode on that. Day that he realized the. FBI were on to. Joe Debay had guns and the authorities knew that Joe tells us he was afraid they might come in shooting.

DIBEE: My father was like why don't you just? Go back home.

LEAH: By home, his dad meant Syria a country. Where Joe was also. A citizen by right of birth and where he had plenty of family and a country with of course no extradition to America. Joe says he. Believed the FBI were surveilling him that they had tapped his cell phone when he decided to flee the country. Joe says he had a plan.

DIBEE: I sent my phone N to Canada with an associate. The associate would light the phone up.

LEAH: To throw them off his trail. And from here things. Get pretty fast and the furious. His phone goes north and Joe goes S.

DIBEE: I had several cars I was working at Microsoft at the time and I put myself through college by driving pizza around. So I was a pretty good driver and so I took him on a run. And eventually lost a pretty good driver.

LEAH: Joe drives to Mexico, walks over the border, somehow skips past immigration and catches a flight to Syria. That story Joe? I mean it's like. I mean it's great.

Speaker 8: It's it's like a crazy story like it's almost.

LEAH: Did you like?

Speaker 9: Were you surprised you pulled it off?

LEAH: I just want to say this was impossible to Fact Check and it might sound hard to believe, but at the same time, the more we speak to him, the more I get the sense that Joe has a different threshold for danger than most people. In Syria, Joe got. A job working at the University of Kalamoun teaching computer security and renewable energy engineering. Developing the curriculum for these fields that are still being taught in the country today.

DIBEE: Yeah, I don't. Negatively on on my experience in Syria, I felt like I made a positive impact.

LEAH: But in 2010, with war about to break out, he fled to another country without extradition to the United States, Russia.

DIBEE: But the idea was that I was supposed to go there and. Wait out the war. Things just didn't quite work out the way I thought.

LEAH: The war in Syria kept going and with his face plastered on FBI wanted posters, he stayed in Russia, eventually getting residency there, and he says he pretty much built a life there. He was working developing biodiesel. He take used cooking oil from local restaurants. The factories put it through a refiner he'd built to produce a fuel for a local construction company. And he met his wife at a yoga retreat where we didn't see this one coming. People were walking on a bed of nails, which Joe always the engineer was helping construct sew and nail didn't go through someone's foot.

DIBEE: So I went to the seminar. I spent the whole day like making sure all the nails are evenly spaced with a ruler and I wanted to see somebody walk. On them. So I went to the seminar, which is one of. The people walking on. The nails buddy. No, then nobody got. Nobody got holes in their feet. Apparently it was uncomfortable, but.

Speaker 9: I don't think I've ever met anyone.

Speaker 17: Who made a bed?

LEAH: Of nails and had their future wife.

DIBEE: It's my life has taken many strange turns and that was one of them. But I'm very happy that it did.

LEAH: It's hard to know what to. Make of Joe debay This whole story is so far fetched from the car chase to the bed of nails. But on the other hand, it's kind of an unbelievable thing too. To evade the FBI for that long. Did you tell your wife, you know I?

Speaker 8: Have this. Thing that happened and.

DIBEE: No, I kind of like. I told her I. Had a past that let's just make. A future. And she accepted that.

LEAH: Were you trying to live like kind of? Keep a little bit of a low profile.

DIBEE: You know, I just sort. Of lived my life. I mean life went on.

LEAH: Life went on. But it was a different life. For over a decade. Joe had cut off contact with everyone back home, family and friends.

DIBEE: I was not in touch with anyone here.

LEAH: And while he says his old friends are still his friends when he was gone, they didn't. Even know that he was alive.

DIBEE: I talked to my friend and he basically told me that they'd had a funeral for me. It's pretty sad.

LEAH: Back in Seattle, where he is now, I get the sense that Joe's life is just a worse version of what he left behind. In 2005, he spent three years in jail, where he'd contracted COVID and had his jaw broken. He was granted release to home detention until his trial.

DIBEE: I mean definitely grasp the seriousness of the of the charges and the nature of the situation but. I still have some hopes.

Speaker 8: Is the idea of like a?

LEAH: A very stable life, scary in any. Way to you.

DIBEE: No, it's really appealing. It's really appealing. I've always been like I want a stable life, it just that's just not how things have panned out. You know, say this.

LEAH: Case goes away. What is it that? You do want.

DIBEE: And I haven't dared go during that far I. I'd really like to get a job doing something with the environment. Obviously I want to be with my wife.

LEAH: His wife still lives in Russia. And 12 years passed while Joe was away. 12 people have aged and now he's dealing with that. His father has dementia and Joe is caring for him. Your dad, I mean, is he able to? Understand your situation.

DIBEE: He it's beyond his ability right now. You know, it's it's really heartbreaking.

Speaker 8: I mean, it sounds like you you've had to.

LEAH: Get really good at remaking your life.

DIBEE: It's pretty hard like it's really sad to do that because every time you remake your life you know you lose everything you had before.

LEAH: Seven months after finding those photos of her on the Internet, I was still looking for anything more on the other fugitive sunshine or as her high school friends called her Joe. And one day a package showed. Up in my mailbox.

Speaker 8: Oh wait, yeah, can I show you something?

LEAH: Ask Georgia to call me. This is Josephine Sunshines High school yearbook issued the year she graduated. Jackson Browne played. I mean, they must have serious money. To be able. To pay these people. The yearbook isn't. Pictures of the band at football games or cheerleaders. It's a school where students learn about the. Doors in the outdoors.

Speaker 8: Part of her school was.

LEAH: It's going and disappearing. For two weeks into the. Desert, I went through the. Book and I'm like looking for her, you know, did you have where's Waldo?

GEORGIA: Yeah, where's Wally?

Speaker 9: Oh, it was well, OK so. We had where's?

LEAH: Waldo, and that's what I felt like. I was playing like where's Waldo for Josephine Sunshine Overaker? I'm pretty sure this is her. See this face right here. Funny at the top. There's like some weird poetry that says sunshine upon you. Made a long time sunshine upon you all. Love surround you and the pure light within you guide you all the way on. I mean, it's like flowers and like it feels like it feels very on. I defranco and not. Only is there Sunshine's face but a note from her family. Dear sunshine well everybody's dancing and a ring around the sun. Nobody's finished, we ain't even begun so take off your shoes child and take off your hat try on your wings and find out where it's at. Love mom, Jim and Thor. And then there's like the little Grateful Dead dancing.

Speaker 8: She's a hippie.

LEAH: Since starting on this project, we've been looking for any environmentalist from that time who might have known sunshine and might speak.

Speaker 18: Yeah, I think so.

LEAH: One day, George and I were on the line with a pretty infamous activist named Rod Coronado.
Speaker 18: I'm not used to. Never used headphones, it's just a little weird for me.

LEAH: Rod was a prominent activist in the 1980s when he sunk 2 whaling ships as a part of an action with a group called Sea Shepherd. He got involved with the Animal Liberation Front in the late 1990. In early 2000s, he says he's retired from radical activism. Now he works all of his time, protecting wolves in an above ground capacity. But back when he was, Rod was prolific, no one was ever injured in his actions, but they were serious. He bombed a Michigan State University. Lab in 1992 that did experiments on minks. He served nearly five. Years in prison for that one. And it wasn't the end for him. He also firebombed a fur farm, and when he was released from prison for that, he ended up in a halfway house in, you guessed it, Eugene, OR where he worked for the Earth. First journal.

Speaker 18: They hadn't made that connection yet, but like hey, this guy just got out of prison for all effects. Just maybe we shouldn't let him work at the Earth First journal instead, you know, I was able to be a part of all that and see these young people. And one of them being Josephine Overaker, you know, just a young kid at that time when I say young kid, but she was. Probably in her 20s or something.

LEAH: This is the first time sunshine has been brought up without my asking, so I try. To keep it cool.

Speaker 18: None of these people straight up told me what they did.

LEAH: Do you recognize the portrayal that the FBI puts out on her? Does it gel up with the person that you knew?

Speaker 18: No, absolutely not. They say the same things about me. They're now saying about Josephine, and about the propensity towards violence or disregard for life. I think that's completely opposite to who they really are. I've always felt like if we, that separates a lot of people in the direct action movement or the environment, then that you know you don't engage in physical violence. You have really intelligent, eloquent, and often, you know educated people. And Joseph was one of those people.

LEAH: As we talk to Rod, it's easy to hear his version of Sunshine as his own myth to Rod. It's like she's a woman who can do no wrong.

Speaker 18: Passionate about protecting ancient forests and animals, I think that that's probably the type of person that Josephine still is wherever she is, but they haven't caught her yet. It's probably because she's being very good at, you know, being invisible.

LEAH: And if she is out there, she'll have seen what happened to everyone else. As Joe fled to Syria and sunshine fled to somewhere the FBI was putting on the pressure on the members of the family they had behind bars to get their convictions. Retired FBI agent Jane Quimby played a major role in the takedown.

Speaker 19: When we did our arrest in 2005, it was a big deal. To be able. To say we've arrested. These people are terrorists and we're going to charge them with the terrorism enhancement because you've invested all this manpower and all this money to fight the terrorism threat and you want to have something to show for.

LEAH: But the security culture that people have told us about that extended to after the arrest too.

Speaker 17: The idea that family that was explained to us.

LEAH: FBI agent Tim Suttles.

Speaker 17: Is that if they ever get caught they would not help or cooperate law enforcement. They would protect their family.

LEAH: See that kind of secrecy in other?

Speaker 18: Groups far right.

LEAH: Far left, you know, domestic terrorism groups is unique. In that regard.

Speaker 17: I think it is unique.

LEAH: But the authorities had something they could leverage. Joe Debyes attorney, Matt Schindler.

Speaker 13: There's the practical reality of of being called the terrorist, but there's also a legal consequence to that that's very important to the United States.

LEAH: By calling the family terrorists when they were arrested, the government could invoke serious terrorism sentencing enhancements far longer, prison terms, maximum security prisons, scary things that could be used to try. To get someone to budget. On that stance of no compromise.

Speaker 13: That's where the hysteria, the language, the semantics of all of this stuff comes into play. And it gave people really long prison sentences that were really unjustified, in part because of the hype surrounding all of this. And I'll say that you don't say that, Joe. But it's true.

LEAH: FBI agent Tim Suttles.

Speaker 17: And they were looking at some serious time. Some of them were looking at life in prison.

CHELSEA: We knew right away that we were that the the prosecution was seeking a terrorism enhancement. Chelsea Gerlock the charges that I was facing carried a mandatory minimum sentence of 35 years up to I think it was like 235 years or something like that. Lot of time. So the only way to avoid a life sentence? This is the. Way that it was explained to me is. To cooperate with the government. Accept whatever plea agreement they're willing to give you.

LEAH: In the end, almost all the defendants pled guilty. When did you realize that some of your Co defendants were cooperating with the authorities?

Speaker 20: I found out. Pretty early that was just super distressing. It felt like Domino was were falling.

LEAH: Daniel McGowan from New York refused to cooperate with the authorities.

Speaker 20: As soon as we were able to put together a group of Co defendants that did not want to cooperate, and we're not willing to sell each other out, we grouped up so there ended up. Being four of. Us and that was offered to all the other codefendants but most of the lawyers said that their clients declined. So most of the most of my code. And the initial batch cooperated against the plus.

LEAH: He was sentenced to 7 years. Chelsea Gerlach did cooperate with investigators at sentencing. The judge said Chelsea still had to pay for her crimes but deserved to have some hope of redeeming her life after strong. Cooperation after her arrest. She was sentenced to 9 years. Chelsea had known one of the people who was arrested in the big FBI sweep since she was 16 years old. She met William Rogers, who went by the nickname Avalon at the big protest in Idaho. Like Chelsea, he was in jail, having been scooped up on the day of the big takedown. Retired FBI agent Jane Quimby.

Speaker 19: That would have been kind of like the Seminole case, you know, hey, this is the guy. That burned down Vail.

LEAH: Just a few weeks after the big arrests, Jane got a call from the case agent.

Speaker 19: He called and said are, you know, are you sitting down? I said no, but I can be and he said the Avalon killed himself in the in the jail.

LEAH: He had died by suicide.

Speaker 19: I said, well, I guess in some ways that simplifies the prosecution, but it just kind of created a hollowness and you know you don't. You don't wish ill will on anyone and was saddened by the fact that you know that was the the choice that he had made.

LEAH: And in the aftermath of Avalon suicide facing years and years behind bars, Chelsea hit rock bottom.

CHELSEA: I was in maximum security for I think it was the first three years of my incarceration, was crying and crying and lost and confused, and the racing thoughts about losing everything. I mean literally everything, the the material things. The relationships. My identity. Any future hope that I might have had.

LEAH: Daniel spent much of his sentence in one of the country's restrictive communication management units, designed to keep inmates typically convicted, terrorists from outside contacts.

Speaker 20: My dad visited a number of times and my dad's quite elderly and I remember this tiny little like cube that my dad had to squeeze into and this chair is like way too big for the space and my

dad just sat there uncomfortably. He's there to see me, and so it may give me very much a feeling that that's my fault, that he sends this. Comfort, my mom was not in in in very good health. She actually passed away when I was in prison. Within the communication management unit. So I had to advocate really hard to get phone calls. You know we were being monitored by the counterterrorist unit. You know I had people on the outside, my family calling and asking for a, you know, a bedtime. Excuse me, a bedside phone call and it was off schedule and at the time we were only allowed one phone call a week. So we had to fight pretty hard. And had to. You know I got my phone call and I got a phone call. With my siblings, when my mom passed away.

LEAH: Chelsea's cooperation seems to have created a schism in this movement, and Chelsea told us about the blowback she faced after.

CHELSEA: Yeah, I had given so much of my life from when I was like 14 all the way up to I think I was 20. Eight when I got arrested. You know all the years as a frontline activist and organizer to being underground and all of the sacrifices that that required being on the run and how stressful that was, and then facing a life sentence and going to prison. For this movement. Which just turned on a dime. The movement just turned on me as a snitch. I expected that I knew that that was coming. You know, I've been in the movement long enough to know that that. Was the consequences but. To go to the next level of saying. These people are enemies of the move. Backlash against the cooperators kind of became.

Speaker 17: Well, we can't really.

CHELSEA: Do anything about corporate power and the wholesale destruction of the Earth, because that's not, you know, that's not really happening, but we can say mean things on the Internet about these people. They did and now are trying to save themselves from a life sentence to become the target of the very movement that I had been very much embedded in and given. My life too. For my entire life, my entire, you know, going back to when I was 14 at that point. That was pretty rough.

LEAH: And with every deal that was taken, the government story just got stronger and louder. The family was an underground terrorist cell. They were terrorists. Joe's attorney Matt Schindler.

Speaker 13: This is no lawyers have ever asked any substantial questions.

Speaker 10: About this case ever.

Speaker 13: They all plead guilty.

LEAH: I guess I hadn't thought of that that this is just never really been argued, huh? In response to statements made in this episode that by calling the family terrorists when they were arrested, the government could invoke serious terrorism sentencing enhancements. The FBI told us the government sought the terrorism enhancement because the crimes met the definition. The unlawful use of force. Or violence committed against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives. Wondering if you think that the. Terrorists that you know life in prison, those. Things like that are those the bridge too far.

Speaker 17: No, I don't think so.

LEAH: FBI agent Tim Suttles.

Speaker 17: There's enough legal mechanisms, letter writing campaigns run for office, volunteer. Leverage those resources instead of criminal acts.

LEAH: Joe wants the case to go to trial because he doesn't want to be forced into a plea deal, one that would leave him pleading guilty to charges. He tells us he had nothing to do with. He hopes if it does, they can get answers about the plea deals with past defendants and whether. They were fair. And he also wants the government to answer questions he has about the case. Including his capture. Joe would be picked up in of all places, Cuba. There was an Interpol red notice out for him. He was flying back to Russia through Cuba after a trip to Ecuador where he says he had been starting a coffee business. He says he was biometrically catalogued in El Salvador and then he landed in Cuba.

DIBEE: It was, you know, and I don't know exactly what time, but I would assume it was around. This guy comes up to me. They Get Me Out and put. Me in this. Car I was driven to some sort of jail basically. They put me in this outdoor cage for a while.

LEAH: Until Joe says he's moved to a room, an interrogation room.

DIBEE: They've got this document and he wanted to know about arson and trying to get me to stay at this is me. And of course I'm not too eager to do that. They'd stripped me naked at this point and I was naked. They get this other guy, he unrolls a bunch of tools in front of me. We're trying to communicate through my limited Spanish, some limited English, better Russian. It had like very serious ramifications, right? The guys standing there, he's. Got his tools. And I don't get what they're trying to ask.

LEAH: Joe says they haul him off to a. Jail cell with no water it was.

DIBEE: Brutally hot, unbelievably hot, like no water. About the third day, I was in pretty tough shape. I've been going in and out of consciousness the third day, like they bring in this translator. Are you ready to talk? I'm like. Yeah, sure, let's talk.

LEAH: He would answer questions in exchange for water. He says he'd say anything to just get something to drink. This went on for around 10 days. Joe says until the CIA showed up.

DIBEE: In their Gulfstream 3 and took me away.

LEAH: We put Joe's claims about his capture and incarceration in Cuba to the FBI and the CIA. The FBI told us that they cannot comment since this case is going through court proceedings and we didn't hear back from the CIA. In a July court filing assistant US Attorney Quinn Harrington stated that Joe's quote speculation that the United States could have been aware of alleged mistreatment by Cuban authorities is nothing but conjecture. The FBI has no knowledge of any alleged mistreatment. Debo was evaluated in Havana by an FBI SWAT medic to determine whether he could fly and to quote document, any injuries he may have suffered while being detained in Cuba other than insect bites, there were none. In statement filed in July, FBI agent Tim Settles said other than claims made by Mr Debo. I am unaware of any mistreatment suffered by Mr Debo while in custody in Cuba. By the summer of 2022, George and I've been working on this project for more than 18 months. We've spoken to countless law enforcement agents about the terrorist label trying to wrap our heads around how a group who never harmed anyone became a domestic terror priority, and we thought we got. There, but you look at Dylan Roof. Who killed all those people in the church in Charleston? A black church there? I mean, and people in Prescott like like they would say this is terrorism but weren't actually charged with. Anything that enforces that perception of terrorism. You know what I'm?

GEORGIA: Saying I do. When I was looking at this, the Charleston shooting that left nine people dead.

LEAH: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGIA: And sure, it wasn't charged with terrorism and similarly, Chelsea and Daniel weren't charged with terrorism, they were charged with arson and conspiracy. And all of this. But they were threatened with these.

LEAH: Terrorism enhancements right. There are cases of white supremacists who threatened or committed violence that have gotten the terrorism, sentencing and enhancement. But I think the thing that's just really notable is there. For these cases that have not garnered a terrorism enhancement, which is just I, I just can't wrap my head around that. I think that you and I probably just have a question of like why this case and not this other case like.

GEORGIA: Exact exact thing.

LEAH: I think that it's. Very unclear, and I think it would be really good to. Have somebody?

Speaker 8: Who has like worked closer to these cases? Just talk about this. Disconnect that we're feeling.

LEAH: We got Darrell Johnson, former Homeland Security analyst, back on.

Speaker 12: I try to be objective in calling terrorism in all forms out. You know the tactic of using arson is a violent tactic, and so I think that the terrorism label applies to these types of activities.

LEAH: Darrell is clear. He says what the family did is terrorism.

Speaker 12: Nevertheless, we need to be applying the terrorism label equally.

GEORGIA: We just seem to be going round in circles. We can't understand why some things are labeled terrorism and others aren't.

Speaker 12: So unfortunately, the label of terrorism is subjective when it comes to the US government, they selectively apply it in certain circumstances and remain silent about it and other.

LEAH: Do you remember discussions about like the label terrorists being applied?

Speaker 12: Yeah, two things. Number one. You got to kind of put into the historical perspective of when these arson attacks were happening, so we were in a period where white supremacy and anti government extremism. There had been a crackdown in the aftermath of Oklahoma City and what was left as the primary domestic terrorist threat. Was these animal rights? And environmental extremist arsons and so that's why you see on the record in whatever year it was 2005 or whatever. Said that the ecoterrorism was the number one domestic terrorist threat is because they were the most active at the time. The second thing I wanted to bring into this is that. We have a very powerful industry out there that lobby Congress. To get Palma enhancements against animal rights and environmentalists who use the arson tactic against their targets and facilities. And so you had this animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, which was passed that gave penalty enhancements and called these types of activities with the label terrorism.

LEAH: The defendants arrested under Operation Backfire, weren't tried under the animal Enterprise Terrorism Act. But it's worth saying something about it here. Because it widened the definition of terrorism when related to animal rights and environmental extremists. It was passed in 2006, the year after the arrests. And what what is it, does it? Just increase the penalty.

Speaker 12: Yeah, much like hate. Crime legislation, so if somebody murders an individual, if you did this because of a person's ethnicity or gender or sexual orientation, they have hate crime legislation in many states. That gives additional years in prison because you were motivated by hate. Similarly this animal. Enterprise Terrorism Act does the same. Thing for animal rights extremists, environmental extremists?

GEORGIA: What do you?

LEAH: Think of that.

Speaker 12: I think it's a good idea, but if you're going to do it, I think there needs to be a more balanced approach. So rather than singling out animal rights and environmental extremism, just do domestic terrorism in general. Here we are. In 2022 Still trying to get a domestic terrorism prevention Act passed that's been ongoing for five years, but we don't have an industry or lobby behind it. To push it over the finish line.

LEAH: Was it all about money then in designating who is?

Speaker 8: A threat.

Speaker 12: In the case of these eco terrorists, you know they're causing financial harm and damage to these corporations, and so yes, that definitely played a role.

GEORGIA: Do you think that the threat from the Earth Liberation Front to ordinary Americans at that time was more serious than the threat from? All right?

Speaker 12: Absolutely not. You know, Earth, Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front for the most part, targeted specific industries for the most part, the general public wasn't targeted.

LEAH: What did you think of?

Speaker 8: The sentences people were received.

Speaker 12: So I do feel that the sentencing is a bit heavy-handed, especially when you compare it to white supremacists and militia members who have been arrested and prosecuted for. You know, having huge arsenals of illegal weapons, plotting attacks to kill people, things of this nature, and they seem to be getting lighter sentences. That was the plan was to, you know, break the back of the arson capability of the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front, and I think it succeeded. But it came at a cost, and that is we've got these people that are imprisoned for lengthy periods of time and they haven't killed anybody. But that's the nature of. Politics and the nature of counterterrorism.

LEAH: We asked the FBI whether political pressure played into the conviction and sentencing of the family in a written statement. They told us the evidence proved and they admitted to committing criminal acts. In the first episode of this series, we spoke to Patty Strand, a Dalmatian breeder, who runs a group called the National Animal Interest Alliance. She told us about the fear that was put into organizations like hers.

Speaker 9: I have not seen sentences that made me feel that they were being too too hard on them. These are people who destroyed people's lives and property.

LEAH: Patty had mentioned the animal Enterprise Terrorism Act. She'd said she'd supported the provisions it brought in. After speaking to Darrell, we called her back up and put to her the comment that the terrorist label was applied, partly because of industries coming together to lobby Congress.

Speaker 9: Well, I mean, that's how that's excuse me. That's how lobbying works in the United States. I have to tell you, I think that the public was so ready. To impose some sanctions and restrictions jail time for the people conducting these activities really was not that difficult. There was a real interest in finally being able to deal with the folks in this movement. We're talking Alf. Golf and all of the others with you know, myriad names. A time had come where people were just sick of it and I think lawmakers you know, no matter how good they are, one of the main goals they have in their life is just to be reelected. And so I. Think that you could say that lawmakers, a majority of lawmakers would not have supported this if they did not believe that the majority of their constituents. Wanted something done to limit these activities.

LEAH: What do you? Think that the those terrorism enhancements ended up having on the movement. Darrell Johnson

Speaker 12: I would say it's. Had a chilling effect. I think that sent. A lot of. Scare and fear throughout the movement itself, and so we haven't really seen the same level. Total of arson attacks or anything really. Since that time period. No matter how long this. Takes we're going to stop the Dakota Access pipeline.

LEAH: In 2018, protests against a 1172 mile long pipeline in North and South Dakota saw over 140 arrests, predominantly of the indigenous protesters who started the protest.

Speaker 12: We definitely saw how law enforcement freaked out during the Dakota pipeline protests and wanting to crack down on those people. And it definitely seemed like they were much more hyper responsive to that versus some. Of these mass. Shootings that we've had that actually killed people.

LEAH: A woman who dismantled construction equipment and valves had a terrorist enhancement applied to her sentence. Daniel McGowan.

Speaker 20: This individual, her name is Jessica Reznicek and she is doing 8 years for her role in sabotage of the Dakota Access pipeline. A year longer than I got, she got a terrorism enhancement and now she's living her next six or so years in federal prison. Things just repeat themselves right? And it really does seem like history repeats itself.

LEAH: But in other environmental actions, courts seem to have been siding with activists. In 2016, a small group of valve Turners shut off an oil pipeline to. Stop the flow. Of Canadian tar sands into the United States. One of them was a man named Ken Ward who was acquitted of multiple felonies by arguing something called the necessity defense essentially. He had exhausted all legal options to stop the oil flow, and so he was forced to break the law. It worked. On Georgia's side of the Atlantic in the UK. Questions over how authorities respond to activists and protesters have been making headlines in recent years. Some judges have handed out what's been described as lenient sentences, but. Last summer, George and I spoke with Rupert Reed, an academic and environmental campaigner. In the UK, who you heard? At the beginning of this episode.

RUPERT: In the UK and my country, we've got the government trying to remove judicial review, so to roll back the power of judges who have been giving some kind of remarkable rulings in favour of environmental action. We've got a really authoritarian crime bill going through. It's extremely worrying.

LEAH: In the UK, the police crime sentencing and Courts Act passed into law this year has increased penalties. For quote, willfully. Obstructing a highway. It increased the range of conditions police can

impose on public. And created powers for the police to place conditions on quote unjustifiably noisy protests. In addition, a public order bill being proposed includes measures that will quote criminalize the highly disruptive acts of locking on and tunneling and creating a new preventative court order targeting the most prolific protest. Activists we've spoken to in this series are extremely concerned about this like those George has been recording with up in the woods near Staffordshire.

TREE SITTER: I don't really know what for people who like, have no relationship with this world, like what people actually see us as. Like people who are involved in this campaign or environmental activists more generally like waste as time wasters and. I think that's been like the narrative that's tried to be pushed, certainly with the like the the police courts sentencing and crime bill assessing of like people like getting in the way of like hard working peoples lives blah. Blah blah blah.

TREE SITTER #2: Blah we are seen as the outsiders who are disrupting life for ordinary hard working. People and we are now viewed as the disruptors to this delicately balanced system that is working just fine. If only we'd play ball.

Speaker 22: I feel like with this new policing bill, I feel like we're really, really on the brink of something and like the camps like this, going to become more and more common.

LEAH: Former Home Secretary Priti Patel, who introduced the bill, declined our request for interview, but in a written statement told us.

GEORGIA: The right to protest is a fundamental principle of our democracy, but we will not tolerate guerrilla tactics that cause misery to people going about their day-to-day lives. The police crime sentencing and Courts act and the public order bill ensure that key services that the public rely on, such as transport and energy, are protected from those deliberately disruptive and dangerous protests. The bill also provides the police with new powers to better balance the rights of the general public to go about their daily lives, free from serious disruption or harm with the right to protest peacefully.

RUPERT: I really think we have to interrogate this word extreme.

LEAH: Rupert tells us he's been called an extremist for his actions which are absolutely non.

RUPERT: Because we need to remember that of course you know people who argue for women's suffrage, for example, and did quite full on stuff including window breaking and so on. They were condemned at the time, but of course it's just obvious now in retrospect, that they had right on their side. My view is that it isn't really violence unless you're harming somebody.

LEAH: As we get to halfway through this series, we have to wonder what Sunshine's place in it is. You know, with sunshine, the government says she's this terrorist. She's on the FBI's most wanted domestic terror list. They've been looking for. Her for what almost 2 decades?

GEORGIA: I think that thing to say is that. No I don't. I mean yeah, I've made programmes before about where we are looking for somebody. This doesn't feel like that and it doesn't feel it should be like that. Well, you know, I think that what we wanna do is just like flesh out. Something more about her, what's her place in the wider story we're looking at about the right way to bring about change. How far is too far to go? What can her story tell us about that? And it can't tell us very much when all we've got to go on is government narrative, I don't think.

LEAH: You know, no one's been able to just fill out the rest of the story of like who is this person? I mean, I think that there's just this veil of secrecy around her from all sides. And I think that that's like on us to try and. Somehow Pierce.

GEORGIA: You know what we've been looking at with the terrorism enhancements and this kind of, I guess what we're getting at and people are going to take away very different things on it. Is should they have been called terrorists? So the question I suppose following on from that the fact she's still on there there's that question, should she?

LEAH: Be right, yeah? I just kind of have to. Wonder like how much of that is. A myth you. Know that's been created around her to sort of enforce an idea. She's been this ghost sometimes. A hologram who props up the narrative that environmentalists can become terrorists. Perhaps a warning to others

of what might come if they go too far. I think they're just saying, here's this boogeyman. This boogie woman, you know?

Speaker 8: That's out there.

LEAH: I, I guess it's so much it.

Speaker 8: Still feels really fluid.

LEAH: So who is she really? To understand sunshine better, we decide we need to go to a place she was steeped in to the very center of this story, to the place that brought together not only the key characters you've heard from, but where their ideas came from, it's a place that's not only the epicenter of the story of the family, but the epicenter of ideas that challenge. Notions of morality of what the right thing to do is in the face of a burning plan.

ZERZAN: I don't advocate sending bombs in the mail...

LEAH: And there we find things that are not only surprising but unsettling.

ZERZAN: But were those people innocent? I don't think so.

LEAH: That's next time we make a wild discovery sunshine. It's not what we were expecting to find, but it would be like drawing the shades back on a window. And finally. Being able to see through to another world entirely.

Episode 5: The centre of the story

Oct. 4, 2022

During a visit to Eugene, Oregon - a city that brought key people and ideas in this story together - Leah and Georgia find something unexpected.

LEAH: We are driving into Eugene. I've been making the drive from Portland to Eugene for as long as I can remember. I'm just going to head toward downtown. Tons of my friends attended school at the university there to me, it's a fun hippie college town.

GEORGIA: I did I..

LEAH: Used to get drunk here when I. Was a. The more we've learned about the case of the Earth Liberation Front, the more we've realized how important Eugene is. To this story.

GEORGIA: We are kind of. Retracing a lot of the steps in the roads, the the Earth Liberation Front would.

LEAH: Have taken yeah they were. They were travelling all around this area. Close to the Willamette National Forest, where the Warner Creek blockade took place. Eugene is where everything came together where Josephine Sunshine Overaker and Chelsea, Gerlach, and Daniel McGowan all used to live.

DANIEL: It was just like basically wildflowers everywhere people digging up their lawns and creating gardens. People on bikes, punk, anarchists like lots of protests and also just really intense like street art and this little hub of resistance.

GEORGIA: Recording about this for quite a while, and it's somewhere that's come up again and again, right? So I've been. Trying to picture it. Yeah, right?

LEAH: We hope we might meet people who knew Josephine Sunshine here, but there's another reason we're coming here today too. Over the past. 18 months as we've been speaking with activists, past and present, a name has come up over and over. Someone who had nothing to do with the Earth Liberation Front.

RUPERT: So Ted Kaczynski is a fascinating person.

LEAH: Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber.

RUPERT: He actually was an eco.

LEAH: Academic and environmental campaigner Rupert Reed. Rupert is clear that he doesn't condone violence.

RUPERT: My view is that it isn't really violence unless you're harming somebody and Kaczynski was very unusual because he actually did harm people.

LEAH: Ted Kaczynski was once a math professor at a prestigious university, but eventually he just dropped out of society. He left the world. Behind and went to live in a tiny log cabin in rural Montana. From there, he waged a nearly twenty year bombing campaign in which he mailed 17 bombs to various universities, companies and individuals. 23 people were injured and three were killed and a 35,000 word manifesto entitled Industrial Society. And its future, Kaczynski wrote that technology was the downfall of humanity and that it should be destroyed to protect humans and the planet from total destruction.

RUPERT: While I do not condone his methods at all, I think what he Did was wrong. What he's written was very powerful, and it's through his words, really, that he's had an influence on the environmental movement, not through his actions. He basically calls people to a kind of seriousness.

He says. What are you willing to do to actually preserve? Of life and freedom on the earth. He makes you think about what's at stake and about what you're willing to do about it. Some people have read Kuczynski and thought you know what. Actually maybe I should do some nonviolent direct action.

LEAH: It turns out Ted Kaczynski had some connections to Eugene to ideas that germinated here. As Georgia and I tried to answer the question of what pushes people into taking radical action, we thought we'd better look into it and it would lead us somewhere very unexpected. This is burn wild episode 5. The center of the story I'm Leah Petilli.

Intro Ends

LEAH: In the 1990s, Paul Rogers was an editor of the UK Green Anarchist magazine. He calls it GA. And they published Kaczynski's manifesto.

PAUL: GA were the first to publish in the society in its future in in UK. You know, I think it was within about a week of the Washington Post carrying it in fact.

LEAH: Ted Kaczynski was eventually sentenced to life in prison and many people, like Paul, corresponded with him.

PAUL: Oh yes, I mean immediately following his arrest and during some time during his his imprisonment in Florence. But eventually we fell out principally over the issue of leftism and the sexual politics seemed to be very undeveloped as well, which. Was as disappoint.

LEAH: Kaczynski was very critical of the left in his manifesto. He wasn't particularly fond of feminism, gay rights, animal rights, disability rights, really. He kind of seemed to. Hate everyone, which is maybe why? He lived in a cabin in. The woods. Anyway, I was a. Little surprised to hear Paul Rogers say. That it was. The leftism bit that turned him off from. So, so the sort of backing away from him was sounded like was because of his opinions and leftism and sexual politics of the time, but not so much that people died because of his bombs.

PAUL: Individuals facing desperate circumstances at their backs to the wall occasionally commit a percentile of crimes. They are beyond the pale and unacceptable, but the routine, everyday violence and mass killing of governments perfectly accepted as far as these people are concerned, so they really need to look at their perspective.

LEAH: Paul dodges the question and deflects, blames the government, and that's interesting to me. In my reporting on. The far right people. Will often say similar things that their violence is justified because the government commits violence against them. We wanted to know more about the influence of Ted Kaczynski's ideas on the radical environmental movement and when we'd spoken to Chelsea Gerlach, she'd said something that was what started us on this drive down to Eugene.

CHELSEA: There came to be a pretty significant primitivist eco-anarchist movement based in Eugene that was influenced by those that type of thinking and I would certainly say that that was a significant part of my own philosophical orientation during the time of the action. The Green Anarchy magazine that was out of Eugene, John Zerzan...

LEAH: Green Anarchy magazine. This is different to Paul's Green Anarchist. But Paul had mentioned this magazine and its editor John Zerzan too.

PAUL: You probably know John Zerzan, I don't think you mentioned...

LEAH: We just didn't know who he was at the time. What we know now is that John Zerzan is a green anarchist and primitivist writer. He's anti civilization, anti technology. Basically he wants to see society dismantled and return to a wild state. I always like to. Say that behind every good piece of journalism is a great librarian, and when we looked up John Zerzan, we found the need for one. The University of Oregon Library in Eugene housed this archive of correspondence, which John Zerzan donated was a full archive of letters with Ted Kaczynski who John had written to while he was in prison. Sign here. They were sealed, not available to the public. But it turned out the seal on them was expiring this very week. By the time we got to the library, George and I were the very first people. To

see those letters. I think I have 9 boxes. We've got about 3 hours and 9 boxes to go through, so we waste no time pawing. Through the files. Scribbling down notes with pencils. Letters showed there was a strong connection between Eugene and the UK. Activists from the UK were coming to Eugene. And vice versa. Anarchy week. It's also clear that Zerzan and Kaczynski's relationship was serious. In one letter, Kaczynski told John Zerzan you're my most loyal friend. There's a lot of. Names we recognize and a lot of. References to the ELF. There was clearly a connection, but at first. We weren't sure what that was. And then we find something. When I say that. I don't need to send things.

LEAH: The word sunshine jumps off the page at us, and it wasn't just the one. What does that? Say I'm. Starting to feel like. We're all turning into you, sunshine.

LEAH: We're pawing through. Folders and then this teeny tiny slip of paper falls out of one. It's a handwritten note from sunshine.

GEORGIA: May 96. The Unabomber blog.

LEAH: There's a reference to Unabomber clock Unabomber as in the Ted Kaczynski we heard about at the beginning. It says don't get nervous and don't soak it in. Water here's a little gift because if you got to look at. A clock you might as well know. What time it is see you sunshine?

DANIEL: Feels like a Riddle.

LEAH: We leave the library. Stoked, it feels like we have a Riddle on our. Hands just one more part of this strange. Fable we're trying to understand like we went looking for a connection to.

GEORGIA: Kaczynski, which there absolutely was like.

GEORGIA: Well, it's right. There was one line where he said poor, you're my greatest.

LEAH: Yeah, you're like my most loyal friend or whatever, but within the files we found three mentions of.

GEORGIA: Mine which I was not expecting, not like.

GEORGIA: Not at all, I mean, but so the first one was. It was quite strange, wasn't it. Was somebody do I need to send?

LEAH: Do I need to send things to Jesse and sunshine? And then there was feels like we have our own little army we're building and raveled off all these names and sunshine was one of them and then the last one was that like weird Riddle which was like but like Unabomber, time.

GEORGIA: And she had a cool little.

GEORGIA: Little like yeah yeah, like.

GEORGIA: Semi sun.

LEAH: A little sun sunset or something? Yeah, yeah, weird. You know now that we've. Gone through this. Stuff, it's like really clear that this certain guy is like known globally for his views on the end of civilization and anarchy and everything. And he lives here. But my question is like sunshine would have been in her 20s. So and the word Unabomber.

GEORGIA: I find with her because you know, we've been working on this for every year and the moments we get something on her is so fleeting. So when that note fell out, I just get so excited like.

GEORGIA: It feels like a huge like, oh, we just found like this is the key, but I'm not even sure.

LEAH: What it's the key too? You know, like it's the key to something, and I also AM.

GEORGIA: Like have the FBI. Look through these files. OK yeah, let's go eat.

GEORGIA: Let's go into again.

LEAH: It's kind of one of those reporting days when it feels like all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. Like maybe, just maybe, we figured out more about sunshine than even the FBI has. We decide we need to. Speak to John Zerzan. So we go back home. Regroup and reach out to him and a few days later we're back in Eugene.

GEORGIA: Hi there coming out.

LEAH: We're not even out of the car when John Zerzan greets us on the sidewalk with a dog wagging its tail. We weren't really sure what. To expect from an anarchist eco primitivist who knows the Unabomber and wants to dismantle society. But he's got twinkle lights in his windows and a Black Lives Matter sign. John Zerzan is 79 years old. He has a rain jacket on and sneakers. With colorful

striped socks. He invites us. Into his backyard. And his wife offers us something to drink. We want to ask him about that note of course, but first we want to understand. Him a bit. Letter from the letters in the library, referencing the ELF to his name, coming up repeatedly in our interviews. John Zerzan clearly had a lot of ideas that were popular among radical activists.

ZERZAN: Like come closer.

LEAH: John describes himself as both anti tech and anti sieve, meaning anti civilization. But that's not to say he's living in some remote cabin like Kaczynski.

ZERZAN: I'm John zerzan. Old timer.

LEAH: He lives within walking distance of an organic Co-op and a major university in Oregon's third largest city. His life seems pretty normal. Have you ever thought about going off grid?

ZERZAN: Oh, not seriously. No, I was ever out in the woods for. Very warm.

LEAH: Where do you think we are right now? How how would you say things are going?

ZERZAN: We're only going so badly that it's it's hard to even keep up with it, it's. The ruin on all fronts. And yet you still have so much absurd stuff going on as if everything is sort of fine, even though everyone knows it isn't. It's just it really is the end game of civilization. In my opinion we don't have any blueprint for how to undo all this and get back to connection with nature and each other and all this stuff.

LEAH: Like Kaczynski, John thinks technology is. The root of all problems.

ZERZAN: You know? Early early industrialization. The textile factories in England. You know, that was the beginning of it all, really. In so many ways.

LEAH: But we're at a moment in time of tech, utopianism, all sorts of tech promises are being made as to fix all solutions we need to get us out of the climate crisis.

ZERZAN: Is a general. You know these people are ruining our lives anyway. Now you have these people that some people slobber over Musk and these billionaires with their sick fantasies. I mean the. Whole thing is so. Foolish isn't even the word.

LEAH: Speaking to John, he's kind of this paradox. On one hand, there's this old hippie guy with colored socks and a cute dog, and on the other hand, he continually calls police pigs as we talk, dropping it into conversations so quickly I barely notice it.

ZERZAN: The radical and the. And the pigs are just all about it. Pigs all armored up.

LEAH: It seems like he's an ideas guy, but doesn't necessarily live them himself. But in the 1990s in Eugene. Ideas like his had an audience. Chelsea said that what this man wrote helped form her radical beliefs at the time. Eugene was a place, hippies, anarchists, punks and environmentalists all came together.

ZERZAN: What we didn't know was some of the same people. We're also doing certain things at night. We didn't know we weren't supposed to know.

LEAH: When the EF was committing those arson, what were you thinking as you were, you were seeing that happen.

ZERZAN: Bill yeah. I was thrilled by that. Vail was a million. Dollars did you know those? I mean some of them.

LEAH: John, there's an asked us if we've spoken to Daniel McGowan and we tell him. We have

ZERZAN: I remember very vividly having a real fight with him about being out in the streets. And he was saying. Look, it doesn't make much sense. We don't need more people arrested and I was arguing we can't back down. And then I found out later. He was doing the real stuff man. That and I wasn't doing it.

LEAH: Daniel McGowan has told us at length about how much work it was to keep up the layers of secrecy around the ELF.

DANIEL: I kind of cultivated a bit of a like I like hiking on the weekends. That's what I want to do. I'm gonna get out of town. I want to hike right? So because it's like how do you go and case a place out for hours on end and then not? You know not have a story like where. Were you if people would notice like? It's a small town. People like where did you go? Where what do you do with your?

LEAH: And from what John says, that really was the case. Even he had no idea. So the Earth Liberation Front. Obviously the FBI considers them to be terrorists. I'm curious to get your response to that.

ZERZAN: If no one has ever been injured, that's terrorism. It's just the most crude kind of propaganda.

GEORGIA: You've been doing some reporting around some of the sites of the arsons. And what a lot of people from the community say is, why did they choose us?

ZERZAN: What targets do you mean?

LEAH: The popular farm out in Clatskanie and they were like we don't understand like why they came here and really like scared us like and it didn't change anything.

ZERZAN: Well, it would have changed things as if it kept going. Sometimes you got to make. A choice do you want to inconvenience people? Even the dental. You know people were honking their horns. They want to get home from work or whatever it is and be all ***** *** that they have to be stalled in traffic. Is it worth it just to keep every? Routine going and. Without any thinking happening, probably not in my view.

LEAH: We tell John. We've just been to the archives and seen his correspondence with Ted Kaczynski. He called you like his most loyal friend. Are you still friends at this point?

ZERZAN: No, sadly enough, he wasn't intuitive. His perspective is it's about technology and it must be only about technology. So we kind of we parted ways.

LEAH: Again, just like with Paul Rogers, they're falling out, wasn't about the violence. It was about an academic disagreement. It's interesting to me that that that's what it came down to for you. I want to hear a bit more about your opinion on the use of harm. You know the violence and. This this question. Of violence keeps coming up in in regards to. Was the Earth Liberation Front committing violence? Where do you stand on?

ZERZAN: That well, it should be a constant question, not taken lightly at all. I think ELF never caused violence to any life in my opinion. You can't violate a building or a window or what. Although some friends of mine would say it is violence, and we're not shrinking from the violence that we think is necessary. That's one way to look at it. You know, when I used to be asked in terms of the Unabomber case, for example. So what about killing people and my way of answering mostly was? I don't advocate sending bombs in the mail, but were those people innocent? I don't think so. Doesn't mean I advocate sending bombs in. The mail but. You know, and that usually dissatisfied the. Journalist or something you know?

LEAH: Do you think committing violence is ever excusable?

ZERZAN: I don't know about that. I'm in favor of property damage, focused property destruction, but I don't think peaceful milling around on the streets. I don't think it's ever changed anything.

LEAH: He tells us about an anti Vietnam War protest. He marched in when they ran up against riot police.

ZERZAN: In the 60s in Berkeley. There was this huge foex of pigs. All armored up. Everybody went home, nothing happened, but we'll meet tomorrow. You know, we're not giving. Up and blah blah blah. Well, that's when the war on Vietnam cranked. I think the government saw these. People aren't for real. They're going to have their little parade. Doesn't mean anything. War went on for 10 years after that, so looking back on it we should have. I mean, I don't know. People might have gotten killed. You know they might have gotten killed if we would just pushed on. But it might have shown the government you can't do this without a price, but we gave up and went home.

LEAH: It's interesting you say that these. You said the government said you know these people. Aren't for real. Do you think there is Liberation Front was for real?

TIM: Oh yeah, Oh yeah.

LEAH: Before we go, I have one more question. I want to show you a note that we found in your files that was intriguing to us.

GEORGIA: I pulled up.

LEAH: My phone of that note we. Found in the library.

ZERZAN: Oh sunshine, don't get nervous and don't soak it in water, yeah?

LEAH: What does that mean and who is this person?

ZERZAN: Sunshine was the main ickies person ickies teahouse. Over there that was just huge. That was just huge.

LEAH: Dickey's Tea House, John says, was a place in Eugene. That was like a physical home for the ideas he's been talking about, a place where local counterculture thrived and this guy, sunshine was the guy behind it.

ZERZAN: So much revolved around him. Everybody come to sunshine. What do we do here?

LEAH: This note John says it's from a sunshine but not the sunshine. So what did he send to you here? What does the Unabomber clock mean?

TIM: I don't. I don't recall boy.

ZERZAN: I wish I could remember that.

LEAH: I have to say so. I thought this was someone else. Josephine Sunshine Overaker. They called her sunshine.

GEORGIA: Something that I was.

LEAH: Like is this? A note from sunshine.

ZERZAN: It doesn't ring a bell. But ignore.

GEORGIA: I think people might be surprised you didn't know of Josephine Sunshine. Overreaching is that because of how they operated? Or would you not tell us if you didn't know her to give it?

ZERZAN: Well, that that's. I think the latter is the case.

LEAH: Before we left Eugene, we wanted to go. To the Whitaker neighborhood. It's a section of town where so many in the story once called home. This was once the. World of Chelsea Gerlach and Daniel McGowan and maybe sunshine. Josephine Sunshine. We got in touch with a guy named Tim Lewis. People said there was no one better to show us around than him and so we pull up and spot him chatting to a family in a pickup truck.

TIM: They're a big furry thing.

LEAH: Tim Lewis is wearing a pair of work coveralls and tall rubber rain boots, and he's just got this warm vibe.

TIM: Yeah, nice to. Meet you.

GEORGIA: We appreciate it.

TIM: Yeah, well, we'll see how it goes, you know?

LEAH: I'm just the houses in the Whittaker neighborhood are painted in bright colors.

TIM: We see what we get in the can, right? This is the best part of the way to. Retail, yeah, because I still got.

GEORGIA: Yeah, what's that?

TIM: Character good.

LEAH: Tim says goodbye to his friends in the truck.

TIM: Pump kill those rats we got.

TIM: She's got rats.

LEAH: You are brave. No, I don't.

LEAH: He lives in a shack in the yard here, close to some railway tracks. He instructs us. To follow him, to walk across a plank of wood that spans across a muddy yard.

TIM: My old shack and of course my whole stick. Look the show.

TIM: That's all Cascadia lives up there.

LEAH: For a long time Tim ran a show on. The local public access station. And here it was called Cascadia alive.

TIM: 100 and some haven't digitized them all those like 400 and some episodes.

LEAH: And it was a wacky show of all things counterculture, a mix of art and politics and poetry, anarchism, environmentalism, and punk rock in the yard. Tim's got a campfire going. We settle around it.

TIM: You know, keep a fire going if.

TIM: You want.

LEAH: Tim lives communally here with a few. Other people and they share an outdoor kitchen. And this fire pit is kind of like their sitting room.

TIM: Kept it all only \$200.00 a month rent so I don't have to worry about a. ***** job that stinks and.

LEAH: And up on the wall, there's a big. Road sign that reads.

Speaker 11: Warner Creek I saw that there.

LEAH: Warner Creek was. At Forest blockade in the 1990s where many of the characters in this story met. And Tim was there.

GEORGIA: Do you have described yourself as like an activist, environmentalist when you went up? To Warner Creek.

TIM: No, I mean when I went up to Warner Creek, I was a video producer. You know? I mean, initially I was just looking to make a buck and so I didn't really consider myself an activist at all at that time. But as I spent more and more time with these characters, they became my friends and I guess after a time I did feel like I became sort of an activist.

LEAH: Like the authorities we've spoken. Too, Tim also says he recognizes the importance of Warner Creek in the formation of the so-called family.

TIM: One thing that the feds did wrong was not go in and bust it right away because it started creating the community of people, a community of resistance. What I saw after Warner Creek was over and we won and we protected the place. A lot of that power and energy came to the Whitaker neighborhood.

LEAH: We're sitting around the fire talking when I noticed time's eyes flash over my shoulder.

TIM: That's another guy you might want to be interested in. Yeah, sunshine.

LEAH: Wait, what sunshine?

TIM: Yeah, some.

LEAH: For a second, I'm confused through the back gate walks in a guy in a brown boiler suit, a wool hat and a scraggly beard. His name is sunshine.

TIM: Thank you.

GEORGIA: In fact.

TIM: From John Zerzan

LEAH: He was telling us all about Icky's tea house and it sounded like that place was like super important. Yeah, yeah.

SUNSHINE: Yeah, it was actually.

GEORGIA: What were you?

LEAH: Trying to do there.

SUNSHINE: Well, initially I just wanted to have a place where some. Tramp, like me could. Hang out.

TIM: It was the outcast of the whole area around these outcast creeks.

SUNSHINE: They're do wells.

LEAH: Sunshine has been around Eugene on and off since the 1980s around the corner. From here just a few blocks from where icky's Tea House once stood. He lives in a tent under a tarp.

SUNSHINE: I was just a tramp my whole life tramping around, talking around the country after I left home at 16. I was just homeless in this neighborhood, mostly really, just because it was a poor neighborhood. I guess living in cars or whatever. This is all. Different now how the homeless is now? That really sucks. The others is bad **** happening as far as I can tell. I don't see how. It couldn't be fixed, you know?

GEORGIA: Why do people call you sunshine?

SUNSHINE: The carnival name?

LEAH: And the name sunshine. He says it's just a nickname that's stuck.

SUNSHINE: Could have been worse I guess.

LEAH: I pull up. The photo of the note he sent John on my phone and show it to. Was asking John Zerzan about a note that you sent to him and I was wondering what it meant actually.

GEORGIA: He's like no.

LEAH: It says John don't get nervous and don't soak it in water. Here's a little gift because if you got to look at a clock, you might as well know what time it is. See you sunshine.

SUNSHINE: Oh, it's I made him a clock like an alarm clock. Has some Unabomber motif.

LEAH: An alarm clock with a Unabomber motif, this reference to Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. It's not the only reference to the man who killed three people that we're confronted with as we sit around the campfire. On the outside of Tim Shack, we notice a poster of Ted Kaczynski in one of his windows. It's a photo and it reads be like Ted. Did you feel like if?

LEAH: People in the scene here. Did they have general feelings of agreement? With what presents people believe.

SUNSHINE: Well, I've been through a lot of changes since then. I've come to the conclusion that ideology is the enemy really, and I think that's dangerous apparently. When ideas become static.

LEAH: Tim told us he believes Ted did have an influence on Eugene's radical community writing to us. After the recording, he told us all the direct action letter writing marches. Peaceful protests were not preventing the slaughter of the wild places we all loved here in the northwest, he said, quote. The bust and trial created a buzz about what's violent and nonviolent, what tactics should be used to save wild places? Making this series we've talked for hours with people about what constitutes violence. If violence is only what Ted Kaczynski did, killing and maiming people or if it's wider than that sunshine, this person, John Zerzan told us was so central to Eugene's counterculture. This is something that surprises us.

SUNSHINE: Yeah, I think that was just the general idea was costing something. Makes things too much of a hassle. You know it's terrorism really. Ultimately is what it is. I think it's terrorism. You know. I always thought. It was, you know.

GEORGIA: You mean like?

LEAH: I'm sorry I want. To make sure his name like property, that's.

TIM: Property instruction is kind.

SUNSHINE: Of yeah, yeah yeah that's I think that's what.

TIM: Some people will argue no, it's not.

SUNSHINE: It is. Yeah, why people would. Do it would.

TIM: Be like I agree with sunshine. Yeah, frankly, I do think it's violent also, but I don't mind them using that tactic, but just call it what it is.

GEORGIA: Do you think agree the same that it is terrorism but that doesn't?

SUNSHINE: Matter well, I think it does, I'm. Not supportive of that anymore, you know.

LEAH: Tim and Sunshine might be past that violence now, but at the time the LF were lighting those fires, there was a different feeling in Eugene.

TIM: I mean, I was all of us were hearing about what was happening all of Vail, Co being burned. You know the Ranger stations being burned and a lot of us were excited about. It you know somebody was trying to be a vanguard trying to get other people moving in that. But we didn't know I didn't know who these cats were. I didn't know that they were friends of ours. I didn't have any idea. They kept it pretty tight and I had my fingers in sort of deep.

LEAH: Now that you know who the family was, did you know those people? I mean, yeah.

TIM: Yeah, and I had some respect for that whole crew.

GEORGIA: Did you guys know that sunshine?

GEORGIA: Can you tell us about her?

SUNSHINE: I don't really know that much about her, I. Guess really, it's. Been so long anyway. You know and.

LEAH: Just like everybody else we've talked to. You they shut down.

TIM: Down the street where Ickies used to be.

LEAH: Tim suggests we take a walk, sunshine and Tim. Point out a park. Where there was a big skirmish with police.

TIM: Sunshine gotten rested here with about another 20 other people.

LEAH: A restaurant where the Cascadia live, folks would gather each week after the show aired.

SUNSHINE: Because we started bringing furniture out, we be sitting out there all. Day drinking coffee.

LEAH: As we walk, we chat about sunshine, the sunshine we actually came here looking to learn more about.

Speaker 1: Is she?

GEORGIA: He kind of got a sort of any status in the movement.

TIM: Now she does with me. I think it's pretty cool man. She still hasn't been busted. It goes pretty bad ASF.

LEAH: Tim shares his memory of her hauling around these contraptions called Black Bears.

TIM: They were carrying the black, you know, black bears, which is just all heavy metal.

GEORGIA: What does that look like? It's like, OK, OK.

TIM: This is an owl shape and you put your arms in it and you lock yourself to it and you attach yourself to a vehicle or it's a pretty heavy.

SUNSHINE: Like cast iron like drain pipes or something.

TIM: Yeah, she's carrying it. Yeah, along a hiking trail. And yeah, cast her head around her shoulders and just buff or just hiking along at a fast clip with. Buddy and they look *****. They were wearing masks. Come on. That was hot.

SUNSHINE: I had quite a crush. On her I got said.

LEAH: Then we get to the side of ickies ickies. Yeah, oh OK, it's a stucco building with a tiled roof and a blue Dome covered in stars with a cross. That Dome and the cross are new now.

SUNSHINE: It's a Russian Orthodox Church. It is weird, yeah, and I hardly ever come. This close to it, yeah.

LEAH: 20 years ago, this city must have felt like the center of everything. Each week Here were protests and face offs with police. And Warner Creek. A time when protests really achieved something big, they won and started something massive.

SUNSHINE: Really had control of the neighborhood. Seemed like it seemed like our neighborhood for a minute. There, you know?

LEAH: Today, these guys, they're a relic of that time. Eugene has in a lot of ways, moved on. After Operation Backfire, the movement was taken out at the knees.

Speaker 16: They were following anybody that appeared to be. A radical environmentalist around.

LEAH: Former ELF spokesperson Leslie Pickering.

Speaker 16: Just run-of-the-mill radical. Environmentalists in you know in activist hotbeds around the country. So when that started happening, all those people had to make the kind of decisions that I had to make years before about. Well, how much does this mean to me? How much am I willing? To risk how committed am I? And that really had the chilling effect. It's not so much that there was anything immediate that can be traced to. Operation Backfire or 911. As much as it is that. You started seeing. These sort of. Hotbeds of radical environments that people were disappearing, they were giving up. They were going home. They were scared. They couldn't be found anymore.

LEAH: The arsons had stopped long before the arrests of the family, but after they all went down, no one else was keeping the fires burning, and I think too. It's like people got fatigued like Joe Debay. He's been waiting years for a trial but now. He just seems tired. Like he just wants a quiet life. And I think sunshine, this sunshine we've randomly met tells us a lot about how. This movement aged. All

these years later, even he's not on board with the tactics his friends took back in the day. In the sunshine we want to find more about Josephine Sunshine Overaker. At times it sounds like she's just a glory day story. For them, a mythical *** ***** from the past. That escaped the law. And as we're walking, Tim stops and crouches down points at a scratch in the sidewalk.

TIM: This thing right here.

TIM: It's still there. But the idea did. That's what says freedom. Right there. Yeah, yeah, I wrote that *****. Freedom the ideal.

TIM: Was that you know everybody the DL was brings you down. Yeah, and nobody really felt comfortable like I can't burn shut down. I don't want to be slow the prison forever.

TIM: So the idea was just do a chunk.

Speaker 17: Of day this is simple little.

TIM: Thing just go out there, it's like a.

TIM: 100 people just doing a chunk of day. It might add up.

TIM: All the war.

TIM: Of the fleet, I think it's like you know, all these little *****. Fleas all over a massive dog. Just driving it nuts. Please just start doing a chunk of day and. That was the concept.

GEORGIA: How many of these are there?

TIM: Didn't really take off.

LEAH: It didn't really take off. 20 years on, there haven't been any more fires. That oil in the oil.

LEAH: A new type of environmental activism has dominated.

GEORGIA: That couldn't look.

LEAH: More different to the actions of the ELF.

Speaker 18: So what's the point of studying for a future that doesn't exist?

LEAH: Mass civil disobedience protests in the. Open thousands on board things like school walk-outs.

Speaker 17: Swedish 14 year old.

LEAH: Or showing there's another way of getting attention to climate issues.

Speaker 18: Because we can't leave more responsibility up to the politicians anymore because they're clearly not doing their job.

LEAH: That with enough people you don't need to resort to violence to fire to get your voice heard. Leslie Pickering again.

Speaker 16: I'm a bit of a dinosaur and it's hard for me to understand. How somebody like gratitude Berg could get like so much international exposure? You know, I'm a little bit blown away like we had to blow up buildings in order to get that attention.

LEAH: But in some circles this dominating type of environmentalism. It's a reaction to what came before it, and in some people's eyes, like those activists camped out in the woodland and Staffordshire. There's questions over how effective those sorts of tactics. Are at bringing about change.

Speaker 17: It's interesting to think yeah, like about like what like the current context like the current. Environmental action, like how much is that response to like repression and failures of of the movements that came before they don't actually cause any meaningful stoppage of work. Any meaningful damage to an organization?

LEAH: The LF in so-called family pushed the needle on that question of how far is too far to go, but in doing so something happened that would challenge the notion of effective change. And it's something that's still dividing activists now. Next time.

TIM: The key question of our time is how the **** are we?

RUPERT: Going to survive.

Speaker 16: I mean, what happens when all of these students who went on school strike grow up and the governments have still not made any meaningful change to stop, you know what's going on in the climate? You know you're given the same options that we were all given.

TIM: The race is on. The race is certainly on.

Episode 6: The Line

Oct. 11, 2022

As they visit the site of an ELF arson twenty-five years ago, Leah and Georgia meet inhabitants of a town that two years ago was lost to forest fire. The Earth Liberation Front had a clear line they wouldn't cross: they would never cause any physical harm. And they never did. As climate change bears down they ask - where is the line now? A time when the stakes have gotten higher, the consequences sharper. Leah and Georgia hear from those who spent years behind bars as a result of their actions in the name of the ELF, and environmental activists today - including the founders of mass civil disobedience movement Extinction Rebellion.

LEAH: In the summer of 2020, Dave Warden and his son were hunting deep up on Mount Jefferson. It's one of the most dramatic peaks in Oregon. 's Cascade Mountains, a sharp point flanked by dense forests.

DAVE: 29th with my son's birthday we went bow hunting up there on Mount Jeff. And we were chasing bull out. With the bow and arrow. We were camped right at the base of the Lions head prior to my son and I we stayed the night. He was so tired I couldn't get him out. I just sat and watched him all night and watched over him. Watched the fire. And I got to tell you, a full moon came up behind Mount Jeff and it was red out there. You know it was just red. At first I've seen a little light. If I woke my son up and said, hey. Man you have oh. Yeah, I got my gun. I said it's too late. And then pretty soon I've seen another. And that big. Red Moon come up behind that mountain I got. To tell you I never forget it.

LEAH: If you live in wildfire country, which is most of the Western United States, you know what a red moon or a red sun means. It means there's a big wildfire burning somewhere nearby. It means you're going to be choking on smoke for a few days or a few weeks, or. Might mean something worse. The fire might be coming for you. In the summer of 2020, Dave Warden's, part of the world that Red Moon, was a warning. The fire was coming.

DAVE: The winds changed. Coming down over this hill and down French Creek right there, it sounds like a train. The whole world changed.

LEAH: Dave and his son rushed back down the mountain as the Flames reached the edge of the only place he'd ever called home.

DAVE: We go to hell for 35 miles to get out of here. And we had everything that we ever worked for. I left every we left everything it's all gone.

LEAH: Dave lives in a little town called Detroit, Oregon, which is in the middle of the Willamette National Forest. It's in this forest. The government says that the so-called family set its first couple of arsons in 1996. In January 2022, producer George and I headed down to the government run Detroit Ranger Station. It was the site of the second ELF. Prosecutors say that early in the morning, on October 28, 1996, a Forest Service truck in the parking lot was on fire and spray painted on the side of the Ranger station and other vehicles in the lot where the words Earth Liberation Front. Later, the government says an incendiary device was found on the roof. Of the building, but it failed to go. They say Josephine Sunshine Overaker was there that day. And as we try and piece together her role in this story. We wanted to see. It on the drive there. I can't help but notice how fire has transformed this place.

GEORGIA: Nice because everything looks different.

LEAH: In the last few years, wildfires have been ripping the Western United States apart, entire towns lost burned to the ground, homes lost, people killed, and when you drive through Detroit now, you wouldn't even know a town. Here, but then you'll see a brick chimney and then another chimney and this. Starts to feel. More like a cemetery like these chimneys are all gravestones to climate change and then we get to the Ranger Station.

GEORGIA: This is probably the stuff that's closed because of so like this.

LEAH: There's nothing about the arson, though. When we're there, just information about all the areas still closed off because of those forest fires 2 years before.

Speaker 5: And it goes way back closed because of the final, yeah?

GEORGIA: So it's funny to think that like. Wildfire closed this whole area. You know just a couple of years ago, but when Elf was here, they used fire.

LEAH: When the earth. Liberation Front lit their fires around America. They wanted people to know just how serious they were about seeing their demands met. They wanted people to know that they were willing to take things a lot further than other environmental activists had. This series is a lot bigger than the story of the fire. Is the El F lit and the consequences those fire starters paid at its heart is a moral question. How far is too far to go to save the planet? And it's something we've. Asked nearly everyone we've spoken to. Where I guess is the line for you like where, how far are you willing to take things?

PAUL: I think anything that doesn't actually alienate the participation of the majority of others.

LEAH: This is Paul Rogers, an environmental activist in the UK.

PAUL: The ethical constraints of each society are defined by that society, and it would be. Foolish to go beyond that point, you would be surprised what people will tolerate under the circumstances. We're facing a rising geological crisis. If we if people don't actually will die.

LEAH: This is burn wild episode 6. The line I'm Leah petilli. There's a school of thought and activism that says that all movements need our radical flank to succeed. Chelsea Gerlach.

Intro Ends

CHELSEA: Martin Luther King had Malcolm X civil rights movement. Had the Black Panther Party successful movements for social change are often accompanied by a radical wing that is willing to take things a bit further, and that can push the needle.

LEAH: And that was what the eel left, and the so-called family were trying to do. Making this series we've heard from a. Lot of people. Who said that they had a line to never injure anyone, and they never did? But we've heard something else too. The sense that.

GEORGIA: If they've gotten away with the arsons that it. Was going to go further than that.

PAUL: Yes, yeah, I. I think so.

LEAH: FBI agent Tim Suttles.

SUTTLES: Yeah, I think it would have continued to escalate.

DANIEL: I think that there were a lot of discussions about what next.

LEAH: Daniel McGowan.

DANIEL: And I didn't like. All the options that were being discussed. But I can't. I'm really uncomfortable talking a lot about what other people said or did.

LEAH: But Daniel would talk about his own path, his own escalation of tactics.

DANIEL: You could look at like my activist career like. OK he did all this protesting. He wrote letters to to congressional representatives. OK, he protested, uh, he just said let's obedience. OK, he did ping, uh, he broke windows. So it's. Like, well, what what comes after arson? Like killing people. And I'll be honest, I thought about it, I talked about it. You know I was like is this? What's next? It was discussed, not in any real way, not in any like planning way, but I. Had a lot of theoretical conversations and I. Was just like, yeah, it's not me. To be honest, I was kind of. Horrified by it? I didn't want to kill

people I didn't want. To injure people. I felt like what happened. Is I got to my no. No point really fast. I mean, we're. Talking about like. Two years, you know, and there was a certain part of me that wanted to like. Step it back in the sense of like hey. You want to sabotage some locking roads and people. We're like, yeah, you don't step it back from arson and I just and I, I and I at the time had a. Little bit of regret have been like damn. You know, I wish I would have just like. I wish I would have just. Like on some level not been so fast to accelerate the tactics. The more militant the tactic doesn't necessarily mean it would be more effective. I think we were creating sympathy for our opponents. I think we were playing into like a boogeyman role. We were not inspiring people. I mean, in enough numbers to do things themselves. I mean, you know, in time after reading my indictments, I realized holy ****. A lot of these actions are the same people.

LEAH: That was sobering for Daniel.

DANIEL: We're a tiny group of people. I mean, how many people were inside 17? Something I thought. We didn't inspire a bunch of people, you know, we turned around and there's. Like nobody else.

LEAH: They turned around and there was nobody else. It's a powerful thing to hear from Daniel. Someone who was sucked in pretty quickly by radical. Not only did people not join up and start lighting fires of their own, the Earth Liberation Front seemed to only bring heat onto the wider environmental movement. Chelsea Gerlach

CHELSEA: In Vail in particular, we, unbeknownst to us, there were activists on the mountain the night of the arson, preparing to do civil disobedience, and so, of course, they were the first suspects. They had the FBI at their door and their offices and homes ransacked. Cops were knocking on doors and asking questions, and now everyone suspicious of each other. And of course everyone was thrown into confusion and chaos, and immediately everyone suspicious of. OK, we're having an organizing meeting. Who is the FBI agent in the meeting? Because we know there is one the disruptive impact that that had made it impossible for them to continue with their organizing efforts. It pretty much destroyed the movement. That mattered, you know, we all had. Made our decision to do a different type of activism to remove ourselves from the above ground community. But it was not fair of us to not pay more attention to the impacts our actions would have had on environmental activists. I think our action destroyed the local environmental movement. It's hard to admit that and really sad to me that an action that I took had that impact on people.

LEAH: We went to the FBI with these claims that as the FBI were looking for leads, groups were infiltrated in a statement. They told us the FBI works within the confines of the United States Constitution. Retired FBI agent Jane Quimby was one of the main players in the operation that busted the family. It was Jane who put Chelsea in prison.

JANE: You know the Vail. Ski Resort expanded even bigger and better than it might have if they hadn't burned down what they burned down so I don't think that they necessarily really achieved their goal. It brought a lot of attention to movement.

LEAH: EOF spokesperson Leslie Pickering. Do you have any?

GEORGIA: Regrets about anything that that you've been a part of.

LESLIE: Yeah, sure. I mean, you know I don't haven't always made the best decisions. On that but. In terms of, I think what you're asking no. You know, a lot of people want us to apologize for what happened and don't think there's anything to apologize for. I mean, no one has even hurt. So what is there to really apologize for? There's no apologies that need to be made on our side, it's just not a fair question to be asked to be to apologize. I have nothing to apologize for.

LEAH: In this series, we'd set out to try to figure out who the LF and the so-called family were, and we wanted to understand more about 2 characters who kept the EOF case open. For all this time, two people who've been a mystery just mugshots on the FBI's most wanted. Domestic terrorist Paige Joe Dibe and Josephine Sunshine Overaker, and we've learned a lot from Joe, but we weren't getting very far on sunshine. And then in autumn 2021. So I was surprised for you, I called Georgia.

LEAH: Oh my God.

LEAH: Every month I send out a monthly newsletter, articles and essays. I write like morning here and I was just drinking my coffee and I checked my e-mail. I noticed I had a new sign up and there was this e-mail. And it just it was. A name, and it made me think like. That name is rare enough and I am looking for someone with that name. So I wrote and I just said. Hi, apologies for the very random e-mail, I just saw you subscribe to my sub staff this weekend. Is this by chance? Elizabeth Fay. Well, I just got an e-mail a few minutes ago that said Leah, yes, I am Elizabeth Overaker Faye, Josephine Sunshine Overakers very own mom. All this time I've been searching.

LEAH: Oh my goodness, I was lost.

LEAH: Suddenly we feel like we might be getting somewhere.

GEORGIA: I just can't believe it.

LEAH: On the day we went to Detroit, Oregon and stopped by the Ranger station, we passed by miles and miles. Of burned forest. Whole towns burned to the ground by recent wildfires. It was on this. Day that we met Dave Warden, who you heard at the beginning. Of this episode. Watching the Red Moon rise and hearing a fire so massive approach, it sounded like a train. When we pulled up alongside him, he was standing amidst a burned out landscape, rebuilding his home. He calls his wife Michelle over.

DAVE: If you'll get over here, I need some more sound.

LEAH: Barton, Dave, and Michelle both grew up here. They've lived here all of their lives, but in 2020 they had to flee. They lost everything.

DAVE: Her high school sweetheart over there. Yeah, we grabbed.

LEAH: Including their home.

DAVE: It's all gone.

Speaker 5: Let's make if you just scrape it.

DAVE: The house two-story kind of boxy. We loved it though because sunrise is there to the east. You know we. Have our coffee.

LESLIE: If you're doing something on global warming, I can tell you after living here for 50 years, it's been only I would say in the last five years that every summer we've had so much smoke up here because of fires. It's like you're either in your house or you're driving down the hill trying to get some clean air because it wasn't that way growing up as a kid. So I absolutely think global warming and the summers have been getting hotter and hotter.

JANE: Something else is going on.

LEAH: Lots of the towns around here, like lots of the towns in rural Western Oregon are logging towns. Dave told us yeah, he's worked as a logger for most of his life up in the mountains around Detroit or in the sawmills right here in this area.

Speaker 5: Detroit Rangers in the 90s.

LEAH: Back in the 90s.

LESLIE: Yep else Yep.

LEAH: And they remember when the Earth liberation. Front were lighting their fires.

LESLIE: Like they're hurting the big corporations I'm sure, but really, it's the little people that suffer that can't get a paycheck that you know it's got to be another way.

DAVE: You can't hurt them guys. We going on.

LEAH: As a logging family, Dave and Michelle tell us that the restrictions that have been introduced on logging some of those in the wake of blockades like Warner Creek. Have really impacted them.

DAVE: They got all these woods shut down. They can't won't let me out here, you know let us out here so we lost our way of life what we do. And what we've always done? They're happy because the woods are shut down, they do. Not want them opened up. These are all woods. We went through a lot to live this life right here and I logged all over Pacific Northwest and there's a lot to be here. It takes a lot to live this. Life we live. We don't know anything else so yeah, I've got some opinions because. We were here. 50 years.

LEAH: And just like with some of the radical activists we've spoken to, who express a physical pain at the loss of the forests, I noticed that same pain pass across Michelle and Dave Warden's faces. This forest was their home.

DAVE: Environments that go too far. I appreciate where they're trying to go with it. Yeah, I know about the global warming. And I don't have no doubt. However, we're here. Living this life, we could all sit down together. There's no one's listening. No one gives a ****.

LEAH: He talks about. The wooden homes that even environmentalists live in. He calls them stick homes. And he's a guy who right now has no home.

LESLIE: Should be a happy. Because we love the forest, we love the.

DAVE: Yeah, can we be sensible, right?

LESLIE: Woods, I mean.

DAVE: That's what we lost then what we lost.

LESLIE: I'm quite indigenous and I'm like.

DAVE: You have no idea what we lost. You know they're living in sick homes. I'd like to see one environmentally show up over here and show show a little affection for our pain, or but maybe they would see it because everybody's doing something. Try to make a go and you tell me ain't burning false. If you'll tell me you ain't doing things you know these folks are living in stick homes or doing all this but man they sure run and ran through this Canyon man they tried. To destroy our lives. That's what they accomplished in my view.

LEAH: That's his experience with environmentalists, he says, and he's no big corporation. No massive polluter. He's a guy who's felt the impact of climate change more acutely than anyone else we've spoken to in this series. And he thinks he should be allowed to cut down the trees. Today, activists have proven that they don't need to light fires to get attention, and in Europe there's one environmental movement that is absolutely dominated the public's attention, extinction, rebellion or XR for sure. They're about disruption, not destruction.

Speaker 2: I have been interested in how things change for a long, long time.

LEAH: Doctor GAIL Bradbrook is a scientist and activist. She's one of the founders of Extinction, Rebellion, and.

Speaker 2: Understood that change wouldn't come about without. Mass civil disobedience. Power doesn't cede without a demand, right?

LEAH: For XR, true mobilization is a numbers game. It's about having broad based appeal and getting enough people out in the streets to put on something big and bold and massively disruptive.

Speaker 2: It kind of. Reminds me of trying to roll a snowball together. You know, to get any kind of momentum, takes a while and then when it gets big enough it it sets off on its own and that's how it's felt.

LEAH: In October 2018, Extinction Rebellion started getting that snowball together in a pretty dramatic way. They took five bridges across London, cutting off traffic into the city in what would be one of the biggest acts of peaceful civil disobedience in the UK in decades.

Speaker 15: We knew if you only took one bridge, no one would be bothered, right?

LEAH: This is Roger Hallam, also a co-founder of Exar. Though he no longer holds any formal.

JANE: Role with the.

LEAH: We'll get to that.

Speaker 15: It was the daring outrageousness of it, right? Here's London. They're going to take the bridges with 5000 people. 1000 people on each bridge. We don't even know whether they're going to turn up or not. We're still gonna do it. What the ****? This is the end of the world. Let's take some risks, bang. This is extinction rebellion. We don't do things by heart. Bang Bang.

Speaker 2: We thought that maybe 100 people would come and 1000 people came and we thought ohh seems like something's happening here.

LEAH: People with multi colored flags with slogans like no fun on a dead planet and rebel for life alongside the XR logo. An hourglass and circle, some locked themselves together and chant. The following year there were more protests blocking off the capital's main shopping and financial districts.

Speaker 15: 1000 people get arrested for the first time since the suffragettes. Bridges, right? We're not doing boring revolutionary crap we're doing, you know, let's have a laugh and, you know, have some music.

Speaker 2: It was all a little bit winging it.

LEAH: Extinction Rebellion is nonviolent mass civil disobedience. They've been brought up without our asking in many conversations for this series, like when we got on a call with Scott Stewart who works in terrorism intelligence.

SUTTLES: I started out as a tactical intelligence officer with the Army 1980.

LEAH: Scott first worked with the army, then at the diplomatic security. Service and now works at a private security company for high net worth individuals and organizations.

SUTTLES: You know, basically investigations and do assessments on groups for the threats that they posed against.

LEAH: While making this series, we've considered whether climate change can count as an ideology when it's based. In fact, Scott thinks so. He talks about grievance narratives.

SUTTLES: I, I think that we need to really pay attention to the grievance. Is when you do that it it's easy to see how people can become really mobilized to the point of violence.

LEAH: And without prompting, Scott brings up XR.

SUTTLES: You know, groups like Extinction, Rebellion and just that kind of apocalyptic grievance narrative. That they have. Actually, this is their declaration of rebellion. Humanity finds itself embroiled in an event unprecedented in its history, one which, unless immediately address, will catapult us further into the destruction of all we hold. Here this nation, our peoples, our ecosystems, and the future generations to come. The sciences is clear. We are the sixth mass extinction event and we will face catastrophe if we do not act swiftly as you follow those grievance narratives, you can kind of see how people that that you know kind of adopt them can be mobilized to violence. It's not a far step for someone who's a true believer to develop the understanding that violence is necessary to stop this. This greater evil, that is going to happen.

LEAH: I want to ask a question though. I mean, am I reporting on the far right the grievance narrative can be, you know, so many different things. It can be that the federal government is inherently corrupt and shouldn't own land. Or, you know it can be racist. I'm curious though, with climate change. Is that a grievance narrative I? Mean we know. That this is a huge threat and. And you know, scientists continually, you know, through the two years that George and I have been working on this. So many reports have. Been issued about the time to. Act is now, tell me. If you see that as much as.

Speaker 2: Of of a.

LEAH: Of a grievance narrative cause to me narrative, it implies that maybe there's a bit of fiction to.

GEORGIA: It well no no.

SUTTLES: It and it's how it's being presented. It's one thing to. To kind of put the truth out there about what's happening right, you you can convey the facts, but it's another thing when you start portraying. That in a way that is overly kind of dramatic and dire. I don't think that everyone who participates in Extinction Rebellion is going to become a terrorist. I think a lot of them are just kind of well meaning individuals that want climate change, you know to to be addressed. I, I don't believe all of them. Necessarily hold on to the entire concept of of overthrowing the current global system that the XR founders do. However, when people hold on to the narrative and really believe it deeply, and then they become very frustrated that their legal. Protest activities aren't, you know, making a difference and so that has a tendency to drive them towards more extreme behaviors and they justify it based upon you know the direness of that grievance narrative.

Speaker 2: Well, there's some interesting terms in there, aren't they?

LEAH: Doctor GAIL Bradbrook, one of the XR founders.

Speaker 2: Overthrow society, I find it a little bit ridiculous like who's going to be overthrowing anything. You know the system. It doesn't need overthrown. It's overthrown itself. Looking at food systems collapse the you know multi bread basket failures of what the academics talk about when food systems collapse happen. This is when people riot and the collapse of civilisation is a possibility. These aren't extreme. Views that Extinction Rebellion is sharing. Yeah, some people may move from right into their MP's to come into Extinction, Rebellion and gluing themselves to the road. Whatever to blocking oil refineries. And some people might go underground and start to sabotage oil infrastructure. I think again, if it's done as carefully as possible without the intention of any harm, I think they are. These are all acts of protection that people are taking. This kind of action needs to be seen in context. As Greta says, being led by the science and go and read it and then you'd be. As scared as we are.

Speaker 5: Do you think that there is a danger that after the blockades that aren't harming people there? But they could then take things further and we could see things that are physically harmful to people.

Speaker 2: Again, I want I want people to understand that people who are defending their lands across the world die every day. You know there are there. There are people protecting their rivers, their their land, the the indigenous people having their land stolen off them right now. Now they stand in the way of these. You know whether it's palm oil plantations or mining or fossil fuels or whatever, and. They get killed. That's what happens. There may be acts of self defence within that I don't know how this is going to go. What we need to do is stop it and what we're talking about is the extremism. The potential extremism of of protesters and those defending their lands. And it has to be seen in context of it's it's absolutely about self defence.

LEAH: But where Extinction Rebellion is seen as extreme by some to others. It's the opposite. They say they don't have to hide though protest in broad daylight and they'll do it by the thousands, which is the opposite of what ELF member Daniel McGowan saw. After their fires, they weren't being joined by anyone. And yet when we spoke to him, it was clear that XR still sticks in his craw.

DANIEL: Oh, I wanted to ask you something. I was surprised you guys need to bring it up to me. I thought you were. Gonna hit me. With the like, what do you think of Extinction Rebellion?

Speaker 5: Well I was.

DANIEL: Just literally thinking it's all theater, right? I think they're they're kind of perceived as like kind of just doing doing that activist thing, holding signs. And I mean, I know they're not taken seriously amongst like radicals. But I talk about just society in general. When people see that on TV, I think they just like kind of suck their teeth and.

Speaker 5: Just first and foremost being extinction, Rebellion and getting coverage.

PAUL: They're getting a lot of coverage, so. I think that's what they exist for, isn't it?

LEAH: Paul Rogers of Green Anarchist magazine.

PAUL: Outrageous publicity stunts don't make meaningful social change.

Speaker 5: You never did that.

PAUL: No, no, we we would be sneaking around at night with balaclavas on you.

LEAH: Making this podcast, it really seemed like everyone has an opinion on XR, including those Georgia met at the protest camp in Staffordshire, England.

Speaker 16: Things that get called direct action nowadays I would say are very big media stunts. They perform do exactly. They don't actually challenge anything, they don't actually cause any meaningful stoppage of work. Any meaningful damage to an organization that is causing harm?

Speaker 5: Are you talking about like things?

Speaker 16: Like XR yeah, things like XR but like it's. It's I think it's shifted the whole language like anything. The way you sort of like have a a target that you then do a thing to do. If people call it a direct action. It's like, well, is it like did you? Tangibly impact their financial bottom line. Like did you stop things being made no well? Was it direct action? I don't know like. I'm interested in that

and in what role that plays in like the pacification of movements in like this change in. In what people understand as direct action.

Speaker 17: Some days I feel like there are more people who want to do something and other days I feel like people are just. More overwhelmed now. That actually no one knows what to do, and this pacifying of like what actions you can do to stop things. Is in a way made that worse? Because people feel like they'll just do. Just do any, just do something and it. Will it will make a change? I think that's dangerous, like I think that's my big critiques of XR. It's just like lots of people just going out and just being like. Just do something lying in the road. It's gonna. Make a difference. You know it's not.

Speaker 2: Well, I I think they've got some reasonable points there to be honest.

LEAH: We took the. Criticisms we've heard to XR co-founder Dr GAIL Bradbrook, who has herself gone further than most of the XR protesters. She's broken windows at Barclays Bank in the UK. Transport ministry

Speaker 2: Whenever I explain to people why I've broken 2 window panes. And and I and I take them through it. And at the end of it, I would say, why on Earth have I only broken 2 window panes, given what we're dealing with, I think it comes down to theories of change and how you think change happens and where you most feel that you could be effective. And what other responsibilities? You also have in your life.

LEAH: And if XR are controversial, one of their other founders is. Very controversial when we spoke with terrorism analyst Scott Stewart, he brought up Roger Hallam, one of the Co founders of XR. You heard earlier.

SUTTLES: Here's a quote from the advice to young people as they face annihilation.

LEAH: Scott reads part of an essay Roger wrote.

SUTTLES: Public order will breakdown and it will happen quickly because people get hungry. People will break into stores and into houses and take what they can and kill those who stand in their way. The endpoint of social collapse, then is war played out in every city, every neighborhood, every street.

LEAH: It talks about a gang breaking into your home.

SUTTLES: This is what's going to happen to your generator. And this is.

LEAH: There's references to rape, torture, murder.

SUTTLES: They'll take a cigarette and burn out your eyes with it. You will not be able to see anything again. This is the reality of climate change. That's what I would call a A you know apocalyptic grievance narrative based on the science of climate change.

LEAH: You would classify him then as an extremist.

SUTTLES: I yes.

LEAH: We asked Roger about Scott's comments and in an e-mail he told us welcome to reality Scott quote from that other terrorist. Sir David King, former chief scientific adviser to the British government in 2021, we have to act quickly. What we do. I believe in the next three to four years will determine the future. Of humanity as a trained sociologist, I would interrupt this Oxbridge. Speak as billions will be slaughtered and starved to death. Roger Hallam is provocative. That's his whole schtick. But he goes. Way beyond pointing at the fact that polar ice is melting and fires are tearing up the planet. He sparked fury when it was reported that he said certain members of Parliament should have bullets put through their heads and outrage when he made comments about the Holocaust. Roger told us I did not say that people should have bullets put through their heads. I was making a sociological prediction that people would be killed through social breakdown if we allow government to continue carbon emissions on the Holocaust. Comments I have done over 150 interviews and this was three words taken out of context. I was having an argument with the journalist who refused to emotionally connect with the injustice of what we are doing to the poor in the global S it is self-evident that I am neither anti-Semitic nor belittling the Holocaust. In 2020, XR distanced themselves from Roger, issuing a statement of separation, stating he no longer held any formal role in the movement. Since then, Roger Hallam has started several new movements that aim to be even more disruptive than XR. You might have heard

of insulate Britain, which campaigns to ensure homes. Are insulated to be low energy and just stop oil, which kind of does what it says under his steer. Protesters block oil terminals and motorways at rush hour. One day last summer, before we'd spoken to Scott, Georgia had ridden her bike down to Roger's office when Georgia had arrived, he was on a zoom call.

Speaker 15: You can upset people if you don't upset people enough then nothing happens right? And then if you upset people too much like you know traditionally with violence for the sake of argument, then you're dead as well. And then there's a sweet spot in between. Now no one actually knows where that sweet spot is, but it's a general rule of thumb. It's a lot higher up than you think.

LEAH: Roger tells me how he came to be an activist.

Speaker 15: I mean, I've been an organic farmer for 20 years, so I suppose my relationship to the earth is something like grudging respect. Got a pretty intimate knowledge of what nature is. I did have a sort of penny drops moment when it rained every day for seven weeks, so I lost 15 acres of vegetables and four weeks about 100,000 pounds. 20 odd people lost their jobs and had a semi nervous breakdown. It is sort of shatters your humanistic sort of pretense, as it were, that everything's fine, and it was at that point where I knew, in a visual sense we're heading for mass starvation.

LEAH: We asked Roger about the actions of the Earth Liberation Front 20 years ago.

Speaker 15: What those guys failed to do was to get to take off right whatever 10 or 20 people do is never going to change history. Any changes history to the extent that it lights a fire right? And not making a moral judgment of what they did, I'm just saying that it's highly unlikely. That it was ever going to create take off. The optimal design is this civil resistance rapid mobilisation model, which is totally possible at the present moment because unlike 20 years ago, as you all know everyone's, you know ***** themselves now.

LEAH: And that's what he's doing with his new movements, what he was doing on that zoom call trying to get people on board.

Speaker 15: If you want to save the next generation, this is absolutely what you want to be listening to, right? You don't want to be listening to another podcast about. You know why killing Salmon is a bad idea? Everyone knows killing Salmon is a bad idea, right? The key question of our time is how the **** are we going to survive? You can basically say the next generation with 2% of the American population mobilised, engage in a intense interrelationship between high level disruption and intense mobilization. So if you're just doing one or the other, you're not going to get anywhere.

LEAH: Earlier in the series. You heard from Rupert Reed he. Was also on the ground floor of Extinction Rebellion, but he's gone in a different direction too.

Speaker 18: The reality is that a lot of people feel that there are significant barriers of entry for them, with radical environmental activism.

LEAH: But unlike Roger, advocating for actions that are more disruptive than Xaar, Rupert argues that for direct action to really work needs to be more mainstream and moderate. Everyone should want to join in. He calls this the moderate flank.

Speaker 18: The environmental movement has been doing quite a good job recently of trying to be more inclusive towards people of colour towards people from historically oppressed groups, but it I think has not done such a good job of being inclusive towards people with differing. Political opinions and it's not done a terribly good job either. Frankly of being inclusive towards people from a different class background. What I want to see and what I believe will occur, is a much larger mobilization of people who are more moderate than, say, extinction rebellion, but more radical than almost any other existing mainstream groups. So I don't think that most people need to engage in non nonviolent direct action. If we had a lot more people. Being determined, for example, that their employers or the institution where they spend most of their time should be serious about moving really fast to reduce its climate and biodiversity impacts. That would be a a game changer if we're going to win, we need a hell of a lot more people on board. As opposed to the the radical flank effect, I'm trying to create this moderate flank. The climate movement has to be ready to grow exponentially, and that means it can't be puristic.

It can't just be the same old. Build insiders, and if that makes people feel uncomfortable, well then get ready to feel uncomfortable. We have to lower barriers to entry.

Speaker 14: We have to.

LEAH: Wonder what activism might look like going forward?

Speaker 1: As the heat.

LEAH: Slowly gets turned up under the planet as we all start to feel a little bit more like we're lobsters and a pot of simmering water. Five years ago, no one knew the name XR before they burst onto the streets with their direct action and disruption. So what comes after as the next incarnation of environmental groups find themselves asking the same questions. Chelsea, Daniel, Joe and maybe sunshine once did. What's the most effective? Way to bring about change. How far is too far to go?

Speaker 13: Where we're at now. You've got a world that is talking about this is real.

LEAH: Former spokesperson of the Earth Liberation Front. Leslie Pickering.

Speaker 13: The science is real and we need to do something about it and then not a whole lot of follow up while the clock is ticking, so that's a stressful situation that creates desperate people that I believe if people aren't satisfied with the kind of movement towards change that they feel needs to happen, then sooner or later you see people finding other ways to bring that change about. If things don't change, someday we might be doing something besides destroying property and I don't want to be pointing the finger at those people and saying you're not justified because we've tried so many things all. Along the way.

LEAH: Every now and then you hear about violence being committed in the name of the environment. In Mexico, a group called individualists tending to the wild. Inspired by Ted Kaczynski have mailed bombs to people. This year in Scotland a man planted a bomb filled with nails in a park in the name. Of that group. I live in Oregon and last year we had the temperatures got to 115 degrees Fahrenheit and a bunch of farm workers here died and you. Know they're. Just die in the heat.

Speaker 2: So, so this is the thing, right? They didn't die, they were killed.

LEAH: XR founder Doctor GAIL bradbrook.

Speaker 2: People aren't just dying. The decisions that people are making are killing people. It's not as direct as going up to somebody with a gun and shooting them, of course. But it's resulting in people's deaths. Do you think? That we could.

LEAH: See more militant actions as climate change becomes more desperate. The ante may get. Up a bit.

Speaker 2: Well, I would hope the ante gets UPS, but I think there are different ways to up the ante. There can be that fierce protection energy that can be misplaced into activities that risk life. And that may happen, but I think what's really needed in these times is for people to wake up to their own agency and to our togetherness. That work is in some ways softer is relational. And it's. Not always as appealing to those that want to. Do feel that they're doing something out there and getting something done. It doesn't need every person to be the proverbial gluing yourself to the building. Even if it's feels like a really small act of of repair, you know go and plant some wildflower bulbs in a in a place to help help nature. You know we're a keystone species. We're a ecosystem engineers. We're here to make it more beautiful. Go and do a a a piece of that. And and find your agency do it for selfish reasons because it's joyful.

LEAH: We have heard about so much destruction so it's refreshing to hear what Gail's saying that maybe a softer approach gives each individual person some semblance of control and violence ultimately turns human beings into enemies. That's how wars start. Asked Roger Hallam. I do worry that violence could be something that people. Would resort to in an active desperation.

Speaker 15: People can be as desperate as hell, but it doesn't mean their turn. To violence, the degeneration of violence is really the adoption of a philosophy that justifies othering So as soon as your philosophy can justify saying that someone's intrinsically a *****, then you're along the road saying that you can kill that. Person to answer your question, will they or won't they? Well, you know

it's pretty indeterminate, right? But the race is on. The race is certainly on. That the civil resistance methodology needs to prove its worth in the next two to three years.

LEAH: Roger told us about the dangers of othering people we've spoken to for this series. Have told us similar things that they've been othered or looked down on by environmentalists or seen the activists as middle class woke urban liberals who are projecting their values. And to rural or working class. Life in clatskanie OR where the Earth Liberation Front lit. The fires at the tree farm people's definition of environmentalism comes from that particular time in history. They remember things like Warner Creek and the fire at the Poplar Tree Farm. Did it color how people thought of environmentalists?

Speaker 14: Yeah, I think it did.

LEAH: Deborah Steele hazen, the former editor at the newspaper in Klatskin I.

Speaker 14: Most people that work in the logging and fishing industry consider themselves conservationists. You know they consider they're doing a good job at sustaining the resource, so it's so they look at it differently than you know within what they consider. The more extreme kind of environmentalist, so. Right and tell you tell you you're ***** the forest when you know you know that four or five generations of your family have degrees in forestry from Oregon State University and are sustaining this resource.

LEAH: So you take it personally when people come.

Speaker 2: In and tell.

GEORGIA: You how to live?

Speaker 14: Yeah, you bet I do.

Speaker 19: They probably should have to come and live in the. Community and work here.

LEAH: Mike Seeley, the mint farmer.

Speaker 19: And see really what people are like. We're all just trying to make a living and we're trying to do it right. They need to understand that we all. We want this to be around for a long, long time.

LEAH: And Michelle and Dave Warden, standing outside the. Burnt Shell of their.

GEORGIA: House they don't.

DAVE: Live in our world. I don't know where they're at, what they're doing, but it's not out here.

LEAH: And some of the members of the family and activists from that time have told us how sure of themselves they once were.

Speaker 20: There was a certain arrogance with activism.

LEAH: Tim Lewis and Eugene.

Speaker 20: There is a certain self-righteous ***** that goes on well. How do I know that is because I? Was that myself? I was this arrogant, self-righteous *** ** * *****.

LEAH: Daniel Max.

DANIEL: I was pretty insufferable. I pretty much thought I had all the answers.

LEAH: And Chelsea Gerlach. What an insufferable self-righteous.

CHELSEA: Jerk I was. I had a degree of certainty about my view of the world and didn't feel any need to listen to other perspectives. Was certain to the degree that I was willing to force my will on.

LEAH: The certainty they were on the right side wasn't only in the part of the Earth Liberation Front either. Jane Quimby, the FBI agent who would go on to charge and arrest Chelsea Gerlock and see to. It that she. And the other members of the family were locked up.

JANE: It was really challenging, but a lot of fun to put a major case like that together.

LEAH: She made it. No secret. She wanted these people brought down.

JANE: You know, at the. Time you're really hard charging, you're thinking, gosh, this is the biggest thing ever. And what these? People did is so wrong.

LEAH: And something she said stuck out to Georgia and I.

JANE: As I've maybe mellowed a little bit, you know some of these folks. I would rather maybe at this point sit down and have a. Beer with them as. Opposed to putting handcuffs on them.

LEAH: Months later, as we talked to Jane for what we thought would be the final time, George and I wondered how serious she. Was about that. Would she really sit down and have a beer with the person she worked so hard to put behind bars? Turns out, yeah, she meant it. Next time the retired ecoterrorist

CHELSEA: Like I got the impression that.

LEAH: She didn't like me and the retired FBI agent who jailed her.

JANE: It would not surprise me if I was her. I would probably vote a.

LEAH: Will toward me sit down together for the first time in 20 years and talk?

DANIEL: Test, test, test test test test.

JANE: Some you know funny.

Speaker 16: Some of my. Friends, but I'm talking. They're like you're doing.

Episode 7: When the Fed met the Radical. Again.

Oct. 18, 2022

Jane Quimby was one of the FBI agents on Operation Backfire, the investigation that busted the Earth Liberation Front and so-called Family. One of those she put behind bars was Chelsea Gerlach – sentenced to nine years and now living with the weight of that word ‘terrorist’.

Now, they’re ready to talk in a way they couldn’t before.

LEAH: Back in the summer of 2021, the first time I sat down for an interview with Chelsea Gerlock She painted. A picture of. Her early childhood running around in the woods, camping, hiking.

CHELSEA: And I have pictures of me as. A baby just. Naked in the river learning to swim.

LEAH: She remembers everyone in her town just getting along. Forest kids, like her side by side with timber kids.

CHELSEA: I had a strong sense of myself and my values and also an awareness that those values were not universally shared by my peers and I was OK with that. My best friend in elementary school. Listen to country music. Her family took me 4 Wheeling on the sand dunes. We were just best friends and we were having fun together and the cultural differences and political differences between our family didn’t keep us from being best friends.

LEAH: It’s so interesting, yeah? Yeah, yeah.

CHELSEA: I don’t. I don’t know when it when it turned nasty though, the type of complete polarization. That we see now was not my experience growing up.

LEAH: It’s a far cry from right now where the environmental movement seems politicized, politicized. What you what you should say on the side of the. Road make your legitimate protest.

JANE: This reminds you what’s going in politics, he.

Speaker 9: Gave this big separation this side that side quite that far right?

Speaker 10: The degeneration of violence is really the adoption of a philosophy that justifies othering

Speaker 9: And everybody thinks you write the book of Jack houses. What was what’s completely clear is that the current system isn’t working whatever is happening, it’s not working right now.

LEAH: When Georgia came out to Oregon when we spoke to people about the actions of the Earth Liberation Front and the so-called family was clear. The divisions were everywhere here too. Did it color how people thought of environmentalists?

OREGON RESIDENT: Yeah, I think it did.

LEAH: People in this story have been speaking about each other? What it does is create more hate and discontent. In my opinion, there’s slower ways, but there’s better avenues.

LEAH: But very rarely to each other.

JANE: Environments they go too far because. They don’t live in the old World, I.

Speaker 10: Don't know where.

JANE: They're at what they're doing, but it's not. Out here.

LEAH: And this gave us an idea. Early on in our reporting retired FBI agent Jane Quimby, one of the leads on Operation Backfire, the investigation that put the family in prison told us that 20 years on.

JANE: You know some of these folks. I would rather maybe at this point sit down and have a beer with them as opposed to putting handcuffs on them.

LEAH: So we asked her how serious she was.

CHELSEA: Test, test, test test test test.

LEAH: This is burn wild episode 7 when the Fed met the radical. Again, I'm Leah petilli.

Ex-ELF member meets her Investigator

OK, I'm sure she'll. Be here any minute.

GEORGIA: Should I get the tea now then?

LEAH: On a cold January morning in Portland, Jane came up from Colorado and Chelsea drove into town and that afternoon we brought them together at George's Hotel. The last time they saw each. Other Chelsea was in handcuffs, Jane with a badge and a gun. Chelsea would end up cooperating with investigators in the case. And would be sentenced to 9 years in prison.

CHELSEA: I was in maximum security for I think it was the first three years of my incarceration losing everything. I mean literally everything. The material things, the relationships. Any future, the hope that I might have had.

LEAH: We decided to speak. With them separately first.

CHELSEA: OK.

LEAH: So I stay outside with Chelsea.

CHELSEA: Recall her my memory of her was she saw me as a bad criminal and that she was out to make sure that I went to prison. I got the impression that she didn't like me.

LEAH: Georgia goes in with. Jane, she certainly was.

JANE: Very intelligent, that was obvious. She truly was committed to the.

GEORGIA: Why do you want to? I hope want to. Do this today.

JANE: You rarely ever get the opportunity as an investigator to go back and talk to someone that you were responsible for putting in prison and having that kind of impact on our life. It's never happened in my career. It would not surprise me if I was her. I would probably vote a little toward me. So 20 years later, here we are.

LEAH: Why are you doing this?

CHELSEA: Curiosity, I'm curious to hear from someone who had a very different experience around these events.

JANE: It's even some you know funny some. Of my friends I'm talking to and they're like you're doing what? does anyone trying to say you shouldn't.

JANE: No, wouldn't have persuaded me.

LEAH: Georgia and Jane emerge and Chelsea and I stand up to shake her hand.

JANE: Chelsea, it's been a long time.

CHELSEA: It has been quite some time.

JANE: Yes it has.

LEAH: OK, so here we are sitting outside, bundled up in blankets and jackets, gloves and hats because it's January and the latest COVID mariant is surging in Oregon. It's a little early for beers, and it's cold, so we get a few mugs of hot tea instead. We have to thank you Jane because I think when we were interviewing you you said, you know, I sort of wish I had had. A a a beer with someone. We'll take a hot tea. Turns to face Chelsea.

JANE: I appreciate you being willing to sit down with me because this rarely ever happens where you have an investigator that's been. Really entrenched in investigation and then have the opportunity to actually sit down and have a conversation with the person that was truly impacted by something that I did.

CHELSEA: You know, for many years, was just trying to move past it and now have the opportunity to look back at that time.

LEAH: George and I tell them we're going to sit back and let them speak. We said we'll pipe up with questions here and there. But as it turns out, we didn't need. To say much at all.

JANE: I always said when I was working this case I would consider myself as kind of environmentalist. But you know I'm very anti destruction of the environment and so in some respects we probably have a lot of the same beliefs and ethics.

CHELSEA: Did you feel that conflict at the time that?

JANE: Yeah, definitely. Specifically speaking to the arson at Vail, I probably didn't have the same degree of contempt for Vail, but I still recognize the beauty of the environment and think that we as people have an obligation to protect that environment. But I think for me it was. That's OK if you want to voice that opinion and you want to demonstrate or protest. But once the decision has been made, then they've gone through the necessary approvals. Then when you're starting to obstruct that to the point that the criminal acts got committed at that point in time. For me, that was the bridge too far.

CHELSEA: You know, during the period of time that the Earth Liberation Front was identified as the number one domestic terrorist threat in the country? Was just a couple of years after the Oklahoma City bombing, where what was 168 people were killed by a right wing militia connected person and that movement that we see now has continue to grow has continued to radicalize. I wonder if you at the time noticed that disparity between how left wing radicals were treated by law enforcement versus right wing radicals?

JANE: I saw things change over that whole time period and I think it's really driven by. I want to say it's kind of the flavor of the day, but you know, at the time in Denver we had a pretty active neo-Nazi movement. And then that would draw the Bureau's attention and then the pressure would mount, those people need to be charged with something, and then they would just kind of go away. And so then that would cease to be the flavor of the day. And it's like, OK, like who's out there doing something? Now that's in the public eye that creates attention. And then you're like, OK, it's almost kind of like you're chasing. You know whatever the latest threat is.

CHELSEA: There weren't a lot of actions at the time of our arrest, and as you know, we weren't doing actions anymore, so I'm curious your thoughts on that as well that at the time there were so many resources towards this cold case because it was given that terrorist. Table and we went to prison for a long time and we have a, you know, a terrorist label on us forever now. Because of that we paid a big price.

JANE: Well, I think, and I'm not sure how much I was cognizant of it at the time, but certainly as I've had time to reflect back, it was very obvious. Now you've passed these. Laws you've authorized additional personnel, and then there was of course the attorney general making this big announcement about how this terrorist group had been taken out of Commission and getting the terrorism enhancement as part of sentencing and so then they want results.

CHELSEA: I was debriefing with the understanding that. Hopefully I will be offered something less than a life sentence, but that was never guaranteed. So that felt really scary.

JANE: You know like you're talking, sitting here, talking to me about you had this genuine fear about maybe a life sentence. I just don't. I don't think in good conscience. That's something that I ever could have supported. And I would have vociferously. Argued against it because I really think that in the grand scheme of things. That would not have been a reasonable outcome from my perspective. You know, even now I'm wondering if nine years was appropriate.

Jo Dibee

LEAH: I want to pause here for a second. We're going to return to this conversation, but first. To Joe debay The man who evaded capture for 12 years. Unlike Chelsea, he's very much not on the other side of his alleged. Crimes just a couple of days after getting Jane and Chelsea together over a pot of tea, we drove to meet him at a Wildlife Refuge near Olympia, WA. It's a really awful day more than rain, something we in Oregon increasingly know as an atmospheric river for the past three years, he's been awaiting trial. But the dates of. It keep getting pushed back, but the government has loosened the terms of Joe's home incarceration and. For the first time, we're going to meet him in. Person speaking to him. When was the first time we? Talked to him OK and we saw him. The last time.

GEORGIA: Was January hearing right?

LEAH: That's right, OK, yes. And he had COVID.

GEORGIA: For the past year we've been. Like this, never really. Have to be like waiting to hear, yeah.

LEAH: This Wildlife Refuge we're driving towards is essentially the southernmost point of where he can go without his ankle monitor going off by then. Be there in 3.

LEAH: We've been talking to him for a year but had never met in person. When we meet him, he's friendly, seems happy to finally meet us.

GEORGIA: OK.

LEAH: How are you? Thanks for making the. And because it really is amazing scenery here, even in the midst of an atmospheric river, and maybe because it's good to meet in real life after so long, online Georgia goes peak bright on us. I love I love I love when you're British. Start that.

LEAH: We decide to go for a walk. We're all decked out in rain gear and. We hit the. Trail Joe has been here before a lot. He tells us about going kayaking with a friend at this very spot in 2004, one year before the takedown of the family, one year before he fled America.

DIBEE: Like this area. Used to be a bunch of pumpkin farms. We came down we launched the boat so we launched out here we were paddling around and the whole area was flooded like everything was flooded so you're looking over the side of the the kayak and there's pumpkins there and periodically you see salmon swimming between them. It was a very unusual thing. It was one of my favorite battles, like when I think back on it.

LEAH: When Joe talks about. Engineering or nature. His face lights up.

DIBEE: Give me a sense. Calm and peace and and place cities are so abstracted from humanity and from what we are as creatures and this kind of like reground us. I'm being Americans and there is like a look at it and say, wow, there's the golden ratio and like I understand why you know this tree grows here and that tree grows and all that. But at the same time. It's just, it's just beautiful to look at. It's like there's a. Lot of wonder in it. It was going to be a child. Like with like as a child, the entire world is something. To explore it's this thing of wonder.

LEAH: We realized on the way up here that we started talking to you. About a year ago. So tell us what's been going. We last spoke.

DIBEE: Well, in June I started up projects and we're working with indigenous people and I'm producing smart. Movies for them. We're going to grow kelp actually grow about 400 times faster than a comparable tree. And now I mean you always watch it to grow, and we're hoping for a massive drawdown of CO2 out of the atmosphere, because obviously climate change. Isn't just a hoax, it really exists. Wow, who would have thought you know math didn't lie?

LEAH: When Joe talks about climbing mountains or ocean kayaking or kelp, he gets really excited and he talks about all of these things a lot.

DIBEE: Collecting kayaks and saving out. They're all broken, so I got to fix. You got.

DIBEE: Them all minky. Whales come up by you or Gray whales. I like science. It's like there's a. There's a right answer to everything. Having sea lions all around you. So you're the stop.

LEAH: We get the sense that these things science engineering solutions and nature.

DIBEE: Push numbers through an equation and come up with an answer. It's sort of that weird smell of the ocean or an explosion of life all around you.

LEAH: These are the things he lives for.

DIBEE: It's an experience, you gotta have it.

GEORGIA: When you read in jail that you couldn't see them, do you feel like a couple 100?

DIBEE: Yeah, I mean all I was. When I was in jail I had to focus on. Other than where I was and so I dug really deep into all those subjects. I just absolutely hated when I was in university, right? It's like I literally read the organic chemistry book from cover to cover and it was like 1400 pages. Just the most. Dry boring stuff that you could ever imagine. You know it's like.

LEAH: Why do you torture yourself further?

JANE: You're already in jail.

DIBEE: What else, under what other circumstances would you voluntarily read organic chemistry?

LEAH: And now he's on home. But the trial he's waiting for seems like it will never come.

JANE: Has been moved, how many times?

DIBEE: I can't count that many.

LEAH: He hobbles around with the ankle monitor, says that wearing it for months has affected the way he walks. So no hiking. He can't get it wet, so no kayaking, and the weight is solitary, and it's lonely. How are things going on with?

DIBEE: You know, like my father had a downturn over the summer and we end up having to move him to a adult family home.

CHELSEA: I'm sorry about that, is he?

LEAH: Doing OK, are you able to see him?

DIBEE: Oh yeah, we visited him like two or three times a week. He's grumpy as ever.

GEORGIA: Have you?

LEAH: Has your wife been able to come over from?

CHELSEA: Russia, I'm sorry.

DIBEE: She left me. Yeah, I mean obviously like she was like. Well, I can't come here you can't go to Russia. I don't know what. What's going to happen in the future? Yeah, I'm happy to have 2021 in the rearview.

GEORGIA: And you say much about nature and the outside and something like doing. I guess there is a chance that they could be incarcerated does that?

DIBEE: Sure, they look pretty. Yeah, there's definitely more than a chance, it's.

GEORGIA: And how does that like? Is that something that are you trying not to dwell on it?

DIBEE: Well, you know through this whole process going back to 2005. I've tried to like morph my current existence around my conditions to bring as much normalcy as as I can.

LEAH: Which is why Joe likes coming to places like this. It's his escape. We'll be totally soaked through like a real Northwest type. As we walk, Joe talks about the landscape about trees.

DIBEE: Look at a tree that was here before, like AD started. And it's pretty hard to justify cutting it. That thing is. Literally been here 2 millennia and you're going to make. Shingles out of it.

LEAH: Do you see, like cutting down a tree that old? Do you see that as a form? Of violence.

DIBEE: It's violence you're going to see environment. It's violence against the future generations that. Would enjoy that tree. You know, and we really are stealing from the next generation. When we, when we do these kinds of things and no one speaks for that. I guess I was. Compelled like to do something about the destruction that was happening. It was irreversible, right? I mean you can't tell me you cut a 2000 year old tree down and then grow a new one tomorrow. If I don't do it, who will?

Chelsea & Jane's Conversation Part 2

LEAH: Back in Portland with Jane and Chelsea, the conversation turns to the question of terrorism. In this series we've been grappling with the question of how a group who never caused anyone physical harm became a domestic terror priority in America. And then James says something to Chelsea that really surprises us.

JANE: I think there was tremendous political pressure and in retrospect I think you guys were victims of political timing and circumstance. I think in a lot of ways.

LEAH: It's incredible to hear Jane, a retired FBI agent, say there was political pressure to get the Earth Liberation Front. That's something we asked Tim Suttles, the FBI agent currently making it his life goal to hunt down Sunshine.

LEAH: Have you felt political pressure at all to kind of finish this if you had a conviction,

LEAH: No, no, I don't. I mean, I put enough pressure on myself that I want I want to finish the case, but no.

JANE: When I was in the heat of battle. I didn't see it that way. But when I look back now, I think you you ever sentenced to 9 years. That's a significant amount of time for. Someone to go to federal prison. Based on the actions that you did. And I think that. The terrorism enhancement and the terrorism designation was really what drove those high sentences.

LEAH: In this series, we've heard how the government were able to evoke high sentences because of that terrorism sentencing enhancement.

JANE: That was supposed to be a win, you know. And the law enforcement was like, hey, we have the case where the attorney general got to step up and say these people have been charged. Been convicted and the terrorism enhancement has come into play. You know the terrorism enhancement and the label at the time. I remember thinking this is the right thing to do. In the heat of the moment. And I don't think that at the time I would have been capable of taking a step back and saying, wait a minute, you know, is this really a just result or not? It's taken, you know, time away and time you know to pass and kind of have a better I think overall perspective on things. But personally, when I reflect back. I don't. I don't really feel good about it and I'm sure there's some of my colleagues that. Would say how can you say that? And I'm sure there will be people that will look at me and say, you know, be disappointed. Maybe that these are the conclusions I've now come to, but I stand by and what I say.

CHELSEA: That's interesting to hear. I appreciate you being able to look back and say, well, it wasn't this terrorism was this like? Was this the appropriate response to these types of actions? Maybe not, maybe it was overreach and it's good, but maybe there has been that reflection that maybe actions like this shouldn't be treated as terrorism. And and that that's unfortunate that that overreach had a dampening impact on. A legal you know above ground environmental movement which which was doing really important work and that work is still important, you know? So how does that prevent society from moving in positive directions in some? Ways you know.

LEAH: Jane looks close to tears. We're all in silence. What we've just heard. It's something when we started recording this that we didn't expect, especially not from someone on Jane's side to hear that Chelsea was a victim of political timing and circumstance, and that changed her life forever.

CHELSEA: I mean, that's what we assumed at the time, and certainly you know, even after our arrests, the seeking of the terrorism enhancement and just the ways that it was that the case was being handled felt political, yeah.

LEAH: And here Chelsea is doing the comforting. Saying maybe it's good, you're reflecting.

CHELSEA: It does feel affirming in some ways to hear that from you, you know having been involved in it does feel like I appreciate it.

Dibee Again

LEAH: Once in an interview to us that you, how did he say it was like I want to live like you said something like I really actually just want to live like a pretty steady life, that was it.

DIBEE: Normal, yeah, I want to live in normal like stable, uneventful life. Well, I don't know uneventful, invariably like hiking with my friend always has events.

LEAH: Someone said to us that you would be the kind of figurative become like an elder in the environmental movement, or like a figurehead, do you feel that way?

DIBEE: No! {laughs}

GEORGIA: Would you want that?

DIBEE: No! {laughs} I'm quite happy growing kelp and doing tech stuff.

LEAH: Since we last spoke, the temperature became like 109 degrees, 100 and 115. People you know dying in floods, snow like crazy freezing. I'm wondering if when you're seeing these things are you thinking about that time of your life?

DIBEE: Yeah, we we knew that climate change was happening back in the early 90s, like. I mean, we've seen it like in the last decade you. Know it's been always the worst year on record for droughts and tornadoes and hurricanes and floods and. On and on and on. Like it was 70 degrees in Alaska last week.

LEAH: As we're walking, we pass a lake and Joe shares this childhood memory that he has of here.

DIBEE: I remember being a kid out here and. I remember my grandmother came from Syria. I really was. A lot of salmon in the in the river. There was so much salmon in the locks that they were literally jumping out of the water. They jumped onto a stanchion and I went and pushed it. Back into the. Water and my my grandmother was like, well, why'd? You do that. With food, right? Like my grandmother from Syria, I was like because. Fish belong in. The water. You know they had 120 fish come back back last year out of millions. So The salmon just don't come back anymore.

LEAH: Joe chokes up. He tries to keep it down, but you can see it in his eyes. Hear it catching his throat. We've spoken to Joe. A lot at this point, and I've seen him cry twice, not when he's talked about his upcoming trial or the possibility of returning to prison, but when he told us of the forest. He used to visit, disappearing, being cut down, and now when he thinks back to that salmon run, he saw as a child.

DIBEE: I know that the generation that's born today will not ever see salmon runs like that. They'll never know what migratory salmon look like, and that's sad. We are the last generation of people who will know what that looks like and that's horrible when you think about it. Like how many millions of years did it take to develop that and we pissed it away and literally in a generation. I feel for young people today because they're inheriting world that we messed up.

GEORGIA: Given that, do you do you? Feel like you're on the right side, when you look back at actions.

DIBEE: Yeah, I think so, and I think that people stood by and just watched it happen, or we're going to be on the wrong side of history.

Chelsea & Jane Part 3

LEAH: Back in Portland with Chelsea and Jane, it's cold and windy, but the unlikely pair are in high spirits. One of George's microphones keeps running out of batteries and they're chuckling away like old friends as Chelsea shares an anecdote from Vail.

CHELSEA: So we did try to use electronic timers at Vail and found that batteries don't work well in the cold! {laughs}

JANE: Don't work well in the cold! {laughs}

CHELSEA: My terrorist expertise.

LEAH: The retired FBI agent and retired eco terrorists, are laughing really. Laughing about the practicalities of making the fuse, which would go on to start a fire on that. Mountain in Colorado. Fuse which would light. The chain of events that would see Chelsea branded a terrorist and put behind bars.

CHELSEA: Butter in your hand. This is what I learned. It'll warm it.

LEAH: Up, we honestly didn't know what to expect that maybe one of them would want. To scold or lecture the. Other, but there was none of that. It felt like a rare moment of civility of two people from two different worlds coming together for reconciliation. Chelsea doesn't even shut down when Jane asked her something. Which to us? She replied, no comment.

JANE: From your standpoint, because you know that sunshine has never been contacted, but I'm curious just from your perspective, are you surprised that she has not surfaced? All this time.

CHELSEA: No, no, so I hadn't seen or spoken to her in years prior to my arrest, so I have no, I had no direct knowledge about her whereabouts or what. Become of her. But just knowing myself for you know those of us who have lived in that off the grid environment. It's not that hard. And and also is a way that feels I don't know like authentic to who I am and want to be anyway, you know, like living kind of out of these systems of control, where people would pop up onto law enforcement radar.

So yeah, I think it's possible for to remain a fugitive for quite some time. But also it's really tiring to be away from the people and the things that are familiar and that you know and having to look over your shoulder and having to is stressful. So for me personally, I'm glad that I was able to do my time and get it over with and be on the other side of it now and I'm. You know can can have another life.

LEAH: Jane and Chelsea are wrapping up. We've been chatting together for over 3 hours.

JANE: We've lost the ability to have civil conversations with each other because we're so divided that even though you might disagree about something, we can't even talk about it. Now you know we're so divided, so polarized that just having those kinds of discussions is not happening. I think that doesn't bode well. For our future as much and so it does scare me about the the political divide. That I see in the polarization of of people and I'm not sure that I know the answer or what. I see you know, for the foreseeable future, I'm not very optimistic, and that scares me.

CHELSEA: Yeah, I do think that that polarization existed before. Like I was involved in a civil disobedience campaign in rural Idaho when I was a teenager and I was yelled at, like screamed at and insulted by you know local loggers, but I, as I'm writing a book, I'm going back to some places that have significance for me and so would like to go back to that part of Idaho. And I'm scared to you now like I feel like that polarization that's gotten very much. Worse, and that it's been ratcheted up so much. That it's it's really scary.

People being in our kind of social bubbles that it's contributed to the dehumanization of the other side, and that enables violence. You know when you don't know anyone that has these different beliefs, it's easier to have demonizing ideas about them which enables violent acts.

This conversation actually gives me hope for that that you know, one might think that we're on opposite sides that we would be naturally enemies, and you know, certainly there was a time when we were on, you know, somewhat opposing sides of an experience you know, and I have worked on forgiveness and but that is really difficult, but I don't want to hold on to bitterness towards you, so it's encouraging to me that we could sit down and have a conversation and actually find that we agree on a lot of things and that we both were doing the best that we could at the time. And believing that we were doing good things, it you know gives me hope that such dialogue is possible. That there is that common ground that can be found. It feels like that's a rare thing to happen these days, but every really important one for the future of our country and for the future of the planet.

I'm trying to look back at my actions and be honest about the places where I feel bad for the harm that I've done and the things that I regret. And also I feel a tension in that of you know, still believing that we had some good motives and you know what we were trying to do, and I think that's becoming more and more clear. The concerns that we had around the destruction of the natural world are as critical now as they ever have been. So in wanting to be honest about my regrets, I feel like I want to balance that with also holding to you. Also, we really have. We were right about the level of destruction

that was happening and that continues to happen is very very bad. This is a global crisis that we're in the midst of.

Dibee Again

LEAH: Chelsea served her time, but in some ways she's free now. Unlike Joe.

GEORGIA: If you went back to the first action or the 1st protest that you went on so back to Walnut Creek in 95 and you're going to do it all again would you do it?

DIBEE: Yeah, I probably would. The fighting like we were going to get targeted by a bunch of three letter acronyms in the government. No, no, I wouldn't, and I think that's what they wanted, right? To send a message to other people who are crossing it. I mean, I think that was the the idea here is like. See this this vandalism we're gonna call that arson and you're going to confess to it. And you're going to take a terrorism enhancement. And that's the message they wanted to get to the environmental movement, and I think it was pretty. It was heard. Pretty well. Did we keep the ancient forests in the northwest from getting cut down, but for the most part, no. Do we stop climate change or even begin to address it? No, there's just a multitude of different, did we and? Pretty much all the answers are no. It just didn't work.

LEAH: What is that?

DIBEE: It's an Eagle.

LEAH: It is?

DIBEE: The little birds will gang up on the Eagles and the Hawks.

LEAH: It's probably all they have, safety in numbers, right?

DIBEE: It's pretty odd to see them, you'll see a bunch of starlings or crows pecking at an eagle.

LEAH: Standing there looking at the birds with Joe's big raindrops pelting all around us, it reminded me of Tim Lewis back in Eugene, how he carved the word freedom into the wet concrete, how he said that for resistance to work, people needed to be like a million little fleas on the back of a dog.

I think maybe we're more like these little birds. On their own they're small, but in this group they mop up on Hawks and owls. Who get too? Close to their nests and they chase after them like they're aware that even a predator isn't invincible, like they know their strength together is more powerful. But right now, Joe is a bird out on his own.

All this time, as we've talked to Joe. While he hasn't denied being involved in direct action of even being there at the site of the arson at the horse Meat processing plant, he's maintained he is not guilty of the things the government accuses him of. But then, 15 months after we first spoke to him, there was a new hearing. All of a sudden that changed. Next time a confession from Joe.

DIBEE: You know, for the longest time and then like oh, I will never talk about that night.

LEAH: Suddenly we're able to get answers to things we weren't able to before about what happened that night.

DIBEE: I guess I was terrified, you know, I never done anything like that.

LEAH: And it's not just Joe's role in this story that's about to be brought into focus. Someone who knows the last remaining fugitive better than anyone tells her story for the first time.

ELSEPTH: My name is Elspeth Overaker-Fay. I'm the mother of a young woman who was very active and believed in saving the ancient redwoods. The mother of a missing child, is devastating every single day.

Episode 8: Just like the rest of us

Oct. 25, 2022

The mother of Josephine Sunshine Overaker - the remaining fugitive environmentalist - tells her story.

And a change of plea from Joseph Dibee means he's able to talk in a way he hasn't before, including about a night he said he'd never speak of.

LEAH: I want to end this story by going back to something we talked about at the beginning.

FBI OFFICER: The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$50,000 for information.

LEAH: Those two mug shots that for more than a decade were on the FBI's most wanted domestic terrorist website. The faces of Josephine Sunshine Overaker and Joseph Mahmoud Dibe were listed among airplane hijackers and murderers.

DIBEE: How do I get on the most wanted people in the entire country of the United States?

LEAH: As we've made this series, we've been trying to understand who those two people really were, what the group the government says they were a part of stood for.

FBI OFFICER: From 1996 to 2001, these individuals participated in a sale of approximately 20 individuals that were known as the.

LEAH: The eco-terrorist movement they were identified as the number one domestic terror threat in America.

FBI OFFICER: Any way you look at it, these individuals are considered as terrorists.

CHELSEA: The terrorist label being applied to activists who take kind of extreme measures to ensure that no one is. Injured I think. It reveals the priorities of our government.

FBI OFFICER: Terrorism doesn't have to have a body count.

DIBEE: From the moment they started like we're going to put you in prison for 35 years as well, that was pretty serious and that hasn't really relented any.

LEAH: From the time we started making this series, Joe has always said he's not guilty, which means we've never been given a straight story on what really happened at the slaughterhouse that burned to the ground.

MATT: I represent a terrorist who's accused of burning down a horse meat processing facility. Those reactions are. Horse meat?

LEAH: And for Sunshine's side of things, people don't tell us the thing about. Her, and it's like she's earned this mythical status.

Speaker 11: The ultimate is Josephine Overaker, who did all this and she is still in the wind. She would be a queen to them.

LEAH: We think the stories of these two individuals are critical to understanding the most pressing issue of our time. Climate change is the thing every single human. We'll have to face one way or another.

NEWS COVERAGE: You have no right. You should say on the side of the road and make your legitimate protest.

LEAH: We wanted to know. What drove them to take radical? We wanted to know how far is too far to go to save the planet.

DIBEE: If it's not me, then it's who if it's not now, then it's when.

LEAH: This is burn wild episode 8. Just like the rest of us. I'm Leah petilli.

Intro Ends

LEAH: For this series, our conversations with Joe Debay spanned more than a year and a half from just after the time he was shackled and masked in jail.

MATT: If Joe was a terrorist, we wouldn't be here.

LEAH: To being on strict house arrest.

DIBEE: I actually don't touch the phone because I'm not allowed to touch.

LEAH: To finally being able to see him in person. It is.

LEAH: The government accuses Joe of multiple charges, including three counts of conspiracy to commit arson, and they say he participated in two arsons, including the burning of a horse slaughterhouse called Cavel West. He's been pleading not guilty to. All of them. But one day in April, things changed his attorney, Matt Schindler, emailed us to say that Joe was changing his plea from not guilty to guilty. We got straight on the phone. With Matt

MATT: Oh, I'm doing just fine. Other than someone smashed in the window of my car and.

LEAH: As Matt drives down the freeway without a window, he explains to us that for months he's been trying to negotiate a deal with the government.

MATT: If we were to not reach an agreement with the government, it would mean going to trial in three different districts on three different. Cases and by the. Way if he goes back to prison. I guarantee you. That they would treat him as a terrorist and that he would go to a maximum security prison for someone like him who's not actually a terrorist who's just an environmentalist. They're going to treat him like a terrorist.

LEAH: So instead of gambling at trial, risking being found guilty, and the potential of going back to a maximum security prison, Matt and Joe decided to negotiate a plea agreement because the best case scenario. There is he. Could get credit for the time he's already served behind bars, and the government might say that was plenty.

MATT: If the judge decided to sentence him to time served, then they. Would live with. That so that was.

LEAH: Not only that, but the government agreed to mitigate the restitution. The amount of money Joe has to pay.

MATT: You know that potentially gets him out from underneath millions of dollars, but the risk of going back to prison for him is not insubstantial. The demons going to ask for him to spend years more in prison. You know it's a deal that involves some risk, but at the same time, if we hadn't gone to this mediation we. Would be going to trial.

Speaker 12: What's his mood? How is he?

MATT: I think he's torn up. I think he's conflicted you. He's not happy. It doesn't overjoy me. I'd much rather go and rip the government's *** in the trial. But it's not the right result for him. Since he did have a last. I mean he did it.

LEAH: Matt's talking about the horse slaughterhouse in Oregon. Throughout all our conversations with Joe, we've been in a slightly strange position with him, pleading not guilty to Cavel W while also not really denying he was there.

MATT: It's hard enough to win when there's some questions about your involvement or. There's no question in this case that he was guilty of a conspiracy to commit arson and guilty of an arson as well. Not going to be an arson case that my client is guilty of and effectively confessed to. I mean, he I don't know that he would admit it or acknowledge it, but it's like imagine that you know for for 25 years. You've been living under the shadow of this thing. That's a long time.

LEAH: In April, it was the court hearing.

ELSPETH: While we were.

LEAH: Allowed to watch via zoom. We couldn't record it. We heard Joe and Matt click through. Joe's rights were read and the indictment recounted. We heard that Joe was quote part of a conspiracy beginning in October 1996 and continuing through December 2005 to commit arsons on government

properties, as well as properties involved in Interstate commerce. That a group of individuals, including Joe, made an agreement to destroy properties as a part of their ideology. And, as quote part of direct actions. We heard how Joe poured gasoline mixed with gel through holes and into the building at Cavel W slaughterhouse and ignited it to start a fire. And at the end. The judge asked how Joe pleaded. He said guilty, Your honor.

Speaker 3: Hey Jane hi how are you?

LEAH: After Joe changed his plea, we get on the phone with him one more time.

DIBEE: I'm good, I'm good.

LEAH: Like that first time we spoke, George is in London Joe's in Seattle. Matt is on the road and I'm in Portland. With the change. Of plea. One thing George and I were hoping to talk to you about Joe, and I'm sure if you can't, Matt will jump in here, but. Can you talk about the night of Cavel West?

MATT: Let me interrupt you for a. 2nd I have no problem with you answering. This question just. For your information, Leah and Georgia, I have never had this discussion with Joe.

Speaker 4: OK.

MATT: So this will be the first time I'm hearing. Him describe these. Things I'm interested to hear what you have to. Say Joe, go ahead with your answer.

DIBEE: It was first time I. Ever did any sort of serious direct action that was like super illegal? I didn't come to it lightly. I was approached a while back by a guy and he said, hey, you know there's this situation and we need your help and you know I was like no I don't think so and then. I started researching. It, and eventually it was like, OK, well, we just we felt. Like there was. No legitimate or legal outlet for our grievance.

LEAH: When Joe read that wild horses were being killed at Cavel West, he was outraged not only because of the slaughter, but because he says he felt the democratic process was being disregarded. He tells us that the environmental movement did everything to try and stop the wild horses from being sold off to cavel West they went to the police they went to the courts, they protested.

DIBEE: That was part of the chain that kind of led to the evening at Cal West.

LEAH: We approached the former owner of Cavel W with the claims made in this series and he didn't get back to us.

So for the first time, Joe describes that night, July 21st, 1997.

No people or animals were hurt, but the building was destroyed.

DIBEE: I guess I was terrified, you know, I never done anything like that and I remember being scared like the whole time I was there was like, oh. My God, this was terrifying. I can't believe I'm doing this. Originally the idea was that we're going to poke holes in the building and pour fuel through the holes so that it would contain it effectively inside.

LEAH: But Joe says a number of things went wrong. He tells us one of the other arsonists had made the mixture that turned the fuel into a gel.

DIBEE: And it wouldn't go through the funnel that we were trying to put it into the building with. And so I was sitting there trying to cut the funnel so that it wouldn't get stuck. And of course it was like covered in gas. And next thing I look over and everything's on fire. It was quite terrifying.

LEAH: He tells us how one of the others there had broken a timer they had rigged up to ignite their homemade firebombs.

DIBEE: And so someone like tried to connect them together and did it wrong and it caught fire and the fire actually was not a timed thing. It literally caught fire in the process. You know I was off like in a corner and all of a sudden this bucket of fuel was on fire. 10 gallons worth of fuel sitting there and it just caught fire all of a sudden. You know and it just shot up the side of the building, and so it was time to leave basically. We ran. Got to the car and the whole thing was in. Golf we got in the car and left. As we're driving out, we pass cable West on the right side and we're looking out the window of the van and. Flame was above the. Roof and it was fully engulfed. And now you know, in a couple of minutes it was gone. So yeah, I mean it was terrifying, like it was terrifying.

The day after that, or the morning of I guess I walked into at work and, you know, turned my computer on and sat down and wrote software. That point I knew I'd gone through a door that you know had closed behind me and that part really bothered me.

LEAH: We're going to come back to Joe. His mugshot sat on the FBI's page of most wanted domestic terrorists for years alongside another, and their names were about to be brought back together again.

Less than 1/2 an hour after Joe's guilty plea was entered, without missing a beat, press release came into my e-mail from the US Attorney's Office it read. Pacific Northwest environmental extremist and arsonist pleads guilty.

One of Debbie's Co. Conspirators remains at large Josephine Sunshine Overaker. All this time, as we've chipped away at the story behind Joe Debbie's case, we've been tugging at every possible string we can to find out more about. Shine the defendants. We've spoken to in the case of the so-called family, Chelsea, Daniel and Joe. They haven't said much, if anything, about her, but sometimes strange things happen. Back in September 2021, I'd noticed that new sign up on my newsletter.

And I just said, Hi, apologies for the very random e-mail. The person to check. My hunch not. Really expecting lunch and I couldn't believe it when they wrote back and confirmed it was who I was thinking got an e-mail few minutes ago that said Leah, yes I am. Elsbeth Overaker Faye, mother of Josephine Sunshine, Overaker sunshine Overakers. Very own mom for many months. We talked on the phone we talked a lot about her life, her daughter, her life. After her daughter went on the run. But she didn't want to be interview. It was clear she'd been through a lot, so we gave it time nearly a year. And then in the summer of 2022, George and I asked one more time. Did Elizabeth want to? This time she agreed to it.

Josephine Sunshine's Mother Talks

ELSPETH: My name is Elspeth Overtaker say.

LEAH: Elsbeth Overaker Faye.

ELSPETH: I'm the mother of young woman who was very active and believed in saving the ancient redwoods. I'm 79 years old and 50 years ago Roe versus Wade was passed. I find that just mind boggling. Some 50 years after marching on the streets for women's rights, they've now been taken away from us in the United States. I just find. Unbelievable and appalling and totally, totally dumbfounded and devastated.

LEAH: One of the reasons we've spent so much time speaking with her is that not only is Elizabeth the mother of sunshine, she too has a long history of activism. And that's where Elizabeth starts.

ELSPETH: My first experience with protesting was I have three younger brothers. We were all just a couple of years apart and as my brothers graduated they were terrified. As they turned 18 because they were getting their draft cards to fight in the Vietnam War. Many of my graduating class contemporaries were drafted and through the years learned that they never made it back either physically or mentally and I didn't want that to happen to my brothers. So I decided the best thing to do was immigrate to. Canada and I was going to offer a safe house to any of those young men or women that were claiming to be peaceful protesters, and I would give them a safe place and a place of refuge if they decided they wanted to leave the United States and not. Like in the Vietnam War. I was also involved in defense of the Chicago Seven. It was quite a frightening time.

LEAH: Later on, Elizabeth would move to Berkeley, CA.

ELSPETH: Berkeley have brushes where they would bust people up to certain protests to protest the clear cutting and I would go to as many of those protests I could. I truly believed I wouldn't be out there doing it if I didn't. I think that it would have some changes enacted and at least bring awareness to a lot more.

LEAH: This is the. World that Josephine Sunshine grew up in.

ELSPETH: Being close to San Francisco at this point became involved in a lot of peace rallies in San Francisco, and she came with me and from there on she made her own choices. I'm very proud that she. Took a stand and stood up for what she believed in and was willing to fight for it. As a mother. I'm very very proud of that. You know it's becomes.

LEAH: Very very clear to us as we've worked on this project for almost two years that for the better part of two decades, the FBI has controlled the narrative on who Josephine. Is you know we? Have spoken to FBI agents for this series. You know, we've we've heard over and over what they. Say that she is, and I guess I'm curious to ask you what would you want people to know about her.

ELSPETH: I see the FBI most wanted poster with her picture and description of destruction and violence. And that's not who I know Josephine is. There's a lot of misinformation out there. She was young, she was passionate. She was very sensitive. She was not a violent person. She believed in peaceful protest. She believed strongly that protesting would bring change.

LEAH: Can you tell us what it's like to have a daughter who's gone?

ELSPETH: Well, the first part of my answer would be I was called before a grand jury that was going to question me about the whereabouts of my daughter. And they did not know where Josephine was, and they insisted that I did.

I was told that if I didn't appear before the grand jury, I could be put in jail for 18 months. All of the advice and help that I was getting from a number of attorneys and activists and you don't want to go to jail.

At the end my regret is that I didn't put up a bigger protest. If I have one regret in my life with that still haunts me is I wasn't willing to go to jail for this when I went before the grand jury. I could not have anyone in the grand jury win with. I couldn't have an attorney. I couldn't have my husband I have was in there totally alone being bombarded with these questions. Extremely emotional questions for a mother.

I wish I knew where my daughter was. I would have a lot less heartache and sleepless nights but I don't. The mother of a missing child is. Devastating every single day. And my heart breaks a little more every single day. Not knowing if she's healthy, she's hurting. I know the other thing can take care of herself, but. If something happens, I don't know who she's with or who would be there taking care of her. And there's no closure. I don't know if I'll ever know what happened to my daughter.

End of Call Segment

LEAH: To the claim that Elsbeth was threatened with 18 months imprisonment for not testifying and that she wasn't allowed to have anyone with her. The FBI told us in a statement that federal law prohibits anyone except the testifier in the grand jury room.

DIBEE: Yeah, I mean it was something to just compare my eyes off. It was like, OK, well we did that. That wasn't a good idea.

LEAH: In all of our conversations with Joe Debay, we got a keen sense of what it's like to disappear from your life and try to remake it all over again. How even when you do remake it, you never stop being nervous or looking over your shoulder.

DIBEE: It was definitely like one of those experience. This is where Yep did that. Don't want to do that. One again.

LEAH: After Joe Debay changed his plea, George and I noticed this change in his voice. It's interesting, Jerry. I gotta say, hearing you talk about this, you you sound. A little relieved. I mean, do you feel a little bit of relief being able to just talk about it with a little bit of freedom.

DIBEE: Yeah, I mean it's sort of weird, it's it's sort of. It's really bizarre. Like you know, for the longest time I've been like, oh, I will never talk about. That night And you know, now I'm in a position to do that. I guess there is some relief or it's just unusual. I think it's really unusual. I think everything I you know myself talk about it. Yeah, it's just strange.

LEAH: Finally, for the first time since the early 2000s, he can actually talk openly about something. He's kept a secret for decades.

When we started this project, Georgia and I went through the communiqués sent out by the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front.

"What happened should shock no one" "this year 2001. Let this be a lesson to the international issue. "The oblivion as. The legal corporations who don't respect their ecosystems. The elves will say. He said. Choose an earth rapier and destroy them. The cavel W communique claimed the action would bring to a screeching halt what countless protests and letter writing campaigns could never stop."

And it was true that it effectively shut Cavel West down, but it also freaked people out. One thing that George and I found in our reporting is like there are clearly no one was hurt. You know physically injured. That's very clear, but there were perceptions of ecoterrorists that that kind of like really made people scared, I mean. Do you see those that as victims victimizing people you know.

DIBEE: I don't necessarily think that the whole eco-terrorism thing can be completely pinned on people who engage in those actions. The government created this myth and this fantasy and sold it through the media. It's the government creating this hype. I get that some people are afraid of that. It wasn't our intent to freak anybody out or scare anybody. It was literally just stop wild horses which are federally protected. From being sent to slaughterhouses, and specifically the only slaughterhouse on the West Coast which was in Redmond, it was really the government that was creating the fear and the and the perception that has permeated this discussion.

LEAH: I want to hear you tell me a little bit. About what the line is for you. So I'm just curious. You know, with all of these years behind you, you know what? Where is the line now for you?

DIBEE: You know, I've never. Been an advocate of injuring people of physical violence that's always been aligned. I've never straight over. I guess like that line moves a lot. For me, a lot of what, at the time, many years ago I felt was justified was I would definitely shy away from doing things that are extremely illegal without extreme something I saw as an extreme need, you know, I'm fairly pessimistic about our prognosis for the future. Like as a species. I've done my. Best to try and prevent. That you know. For three decades. You know, would I burn something down again? No, I would not like. I didn't feel like it. It produced the type of change that I wanted to see. It may have produced it in the case of Cal W, where you know we got rid of the only slaughterhouse effectively in the country and refocused the public's attention on or slaughter, but it also opened the floodgates to a bunch of other things I thought were real. Not very productive or counterproductive, actually.

LEAH: Early on in our recordings, Joe told us how as a teenager he saw clear cuts in a place he loved. The Cascade Mountain range. That's what stirred him to do something. If it's not me. Then it's who, if it's not now, then it's when?

Elspeth Part 2

LEAH: We can't ask Josephine Sunshine what drove her to take the action she did, but speaking to her mother, Elspeth, it's clear that activism direct action. That's something that runs deep.

LEAH: What do you think drives people to toward trying to make change and I think what? I mean by. That is like taking things beyond, you know, signing the petition on a street street corner and then just getting on with the rat race to participate in a protest and maybe get arrested or to sit in a tree for months? What do you think is the thing that drives people to take it.

ELSPETH: I think it's an interesting question, and I've thought about it and actually, for me, my father was born in Germany. He came to this country when he was 17 and during the height of the war he felt he needed to give back. So he got back into Germany and was very instrumental in. Radio Free Europe getting broadcast to the German people. I mean he didn't talk a whole lot about it, but. There must be something in our genetic makeup and I see it passed on to my daughter. There must be some

predisposition to. Fighting for your own rights or the rights of other people and being willing to take a stand publicly.

LEAH: So now when you see like these youth climate protests they walk out just like teenagers.

NEWSREADER: All of this was inspired by a Swedish 14 year old.

LEAH: Doing these big environmental, I mean, what are you thinking when you're seeing that?

ELSPETH: I'm excited about that. I think without this kind of protest, nothing would be changed. It makes my heart feel a little bit better to know. They're carrying out and have the same beliefs that my daughter did and that I do.

But I also worry because I know I miss my daughter terribly and I see these young people doing the same thing.

LEAH: Do you have hope for the next generation I guess for the next generation of people, but also for the future of the planet?

ELSPETH: Future of the planet. I think it's frightening because we aren't paying attention to fires and water and. The environment. I think a lot of people just become complacent. I think we've had warnings for a long time.

Dibee Part 2

LEAH: Do you think there's a risk? That will see more extreme environmental actions as the effects of climate change around the world become more severe?

DIBEE: You know, I. I don't know what you call extreme like. If somebody comes in your house with a firearm and says I want all your stuff or I'm going to destroy your house. And you fight back. Is that extreme? I think that we're we're entering an era where the things that we were saying for the last three decades are starting to come true. You know every year literally is the worst year on record for hurricanes, droughts, wildfires. So yeah, I do think that. There will probably be more significant types of or extreme types of actions against climate change.

LEAH: Joe is still awaiting sentencing. The story of what happened to the family is sobering. Life spent cut off from the very things that inspired them in the 1st place. The weight of secrets. Prison time. Jail suicide Lives spent alone on the run, funerals for people assumed dead. And Joe's in limbo. Chelsea Gerlock living out of her car.

CHELSEA: I mean we got hit so hard that there is some just weirdness.

LEAH: Sure, yeah.

CHELSEA: You know it's like. Oh, it's just. I just don't have it in me. To keep you know and it. Did feel like. Banging my head against the wall to some extent of like really working hard and not seeing any change that I just at some point just can't do it anymore, you know?

LEAH: They tried everything Chelsea says they tried the legal routes, they didn't work.

CHELSEA: So what else are we gonna do? Well, we'll try this and then we found that that didn't work. Either and then we stopped doing it. So that instead. Have a posture that's more like I'm just going to water the garden every day and I'm going to see plants grow, you know.

LEAH: She's going to water the. Garden and help it grow. This one teeny tiny action she can control. And then there's Daniel McGowan, who went from paying executives to breaking windows to arson. So what's your life now? Right now.

DANIEL: Well, my life now is very it's very different than it had been paralegal. I have a very normal life, whatever that.

LEAH: Do you have any connections to the environmental movement still?

DANIEL: I don't have much connection to environmental work anymore. I'm not consciously avoiding it, it's that I just have not. I don't want to say I haven't had an interest, but I just do not see a place for me necessarily. Another thing that has given me pause is what my involvement in the current environmental campaign can do. You know, to hurt the campaign. I don't want my association

to harm people. I don't want people to think like oh, and they got this terrorist because that's always kind of press. I find. Reading about climate and the crisis. Really unnerving. Super disconcerting.

CHELSEA: Do you?

LEAH: I've never ended an interview asking this question, but do you have hope for the future of the Earth?

DANIEL: I don't, I don't know. I have I have more hope for the Earth than I do for humanity you know? That is what scares me is the this still being future? That exists for. Humanity and just less biodiversity and and. And to the point that you know the planet is so hot that I don't know, we just can't really survive where we survive in the most miserable scenarios. So I don't know how to change that. I don't know how to cool the planet down. I you know, it's something that gives me a lot of distress, so I don't really know what we're supposed to do. I was afraid depressing.

LEAH: No, I mean it's this is the question that's sort of at the center of this entire project we're working on is like what what do what. Do many of us do? You know we're all journalists or not journalists like we are we're on this planet too. And it's a pressing issue so...

DANIEL: I wish I knew I mean, I don't want to punk out and give you this crap answer, but I wish I knew. I mean, I'm sitting in a bedroom right now and I have a fan on because it's like 80 degrees out. It is September 23rd. It should not be 80 degrees out in my lifetime. We actually had seasons in the Northeast and that is just completely gone. I mean that we would see a change to our climate in one person's lifetime. Is is kind of shocking, so I don't know. How do we change? That, like retreating into your household, just making lifestyle changes on their own. To me that feels very like. Just self satisfying. We compost we recycle we do. All that stuff but like. I don't confuse that for political action. And so most of. The political action around climate or about the environment. You know, it really seems to be about getting politicians to do something and that is like herding kittens. What we're talking about, like real change to the environment, is that or the way we engage. It's kind of at odds with the kind of economy that we have, which is predicated on constant growth, and so there's a part of me that's like, well, don't participate in that, you know, and that's great. But like, again, that's like individual action. So I have to. Say I don't feel. I don't really know what we're supposed to do.

LEAH: So do you think maybe what you did is the right answer?

DANIEL: Perhaps. You know, I've thought about this a lot over the years. I mean, of course I have because it's like I went to prison for this and it was a major thing I care about. But I wish I had some firm answers. I like to think that there's perhaps a time that. That answer will come, but I don't, I don't. Really know if that's true.

LEAH: That guy who was once smashing windows and burning things down is now composting. Just like the rest of us. It's like he's in this paralysis, just like the rest of us. The guy who the government said was scary is now scared for the future. Just like the rest of us, Chelsea, Daniel, Joe, strong activists who were once so sure of themselves now don't know what to do. The planets getting hotter and no one can agree on what to do? And it's not just these protesters of the past saying this, the new generation of activists like those at the protest camp in the woods in the UK echoed their fear.

TREE SITTER: Yes, you're speaking to us at an interesting time. I think like for me this is. A point where I'm like needing to go and take some time away. From camps I hope we try like we try and like. Take on board some of the things that that went wrong or that one thing that we've often talked about is that. The Environmental Direct action movement in the 90s and stuff. It didn't always take seriously. Like burnout and looking after each other and the emotional toll of this stuff, I think we're slightly more aware of that stuff now. A bit more aware. So I hope that like yeah, we are moving in a good direction and like learning from our histories.

LEAH: But on the big question of what the right thing to do is they too say they don't really know?

TREE SITTER: Maybe there are more people who really want to do whatever is necessary to make change, I don't know what that is either because it's like quite a lot more complicated, I think than just like even if you know you know, smash up loads of machinery or whatever. Like, does that

actually tangibly make change? I don't know like it's my own personal existential crisis, so so I don't know.

LEAH: Making the series. At times Georgia and I have felt overwhelmed by what we've heard and. The issues raised. We've gone around and around and around arguing over what the point. Of all, this is. Behind the personal stories is something depressing, bleak and big. In many of our interviews, people said they were daunted by the task of what to do about climate change, but one person, one of the cofounders of Extinction Rebellion, Dr Gail Bradbrook, told us something when we spoke to her that puts a slightly different light on it. This is a very daunting task that you've taken on, I mean do you ever feel like you it it's it's too big like? What do you say to people who are feeling daunted by the task at hand?

GAIL: Oh, come on, I think it's what an exciting time to be alive. There's this thing called the five whys. Ask why something's the way it is, and then when you've got yourself an answer, ask why that answer and then ask why again, and then again and then and then within that. What's mine to do? Who would another great question life is short as far as we understand it and what makes life worth living is living with meaning living with purpose. So I I'm not daunted, I'm I'm feeling livened by these times.

LEAH: The future is daunting, yes, but to Gale the present, this moment right now is electrifying. At age 79, Elizabeth Overaker still finds ways to be an activist. To feel electrified in ways that fit her life. Each week she volunteers at her local food pantry.

ELSPETH: It's something at my age that I can do, which I believe is a form of activism. I'm in an agricultural area. And as the food prices escalates, the field workers who put in 812 hours a day can't afford to feed their family. But what I find ironic in this particular food bank is we pack fruit and vegetable. Rocks and canned goods frozen made in empty wine boxes. Now these field workers. Are out in the vineyards. Pruning keeping the weeds down, cooking the grapes. And they contribute to making this wine, which is very expensive, especially if you're. Going to buy a case. And they're getting free food. In the wine boxes. That held the wine. That they were out in the fields in the hot sun, many hours producing, and yet they can't feed their families. I was thinking it would be a good song, would be a good Bob Dylan song. That's my activism now making sure food doesn't go to waste. In my little corner of the world.

LEAH: Elspeth Overaker says she tries to simply focus on her corner of the world. She tries to make a difference where she can, in a way that feels tangible to her. And I think there's something to that that for big changes to happen they have to start as small changes that if everyone was trying to make a small change. That might add up to a big change. A million fleas on the back of a dog changes the way it moves. 100 small birds alter the behavior of 1 predator.

In the summer of 2022, so long after we started down the road to make this podcast, it seemed like maybe the fleas were changing things. The President of the United States, Joe Biden, put his signature on a \$369 billion climate bill that would cut 6.3 billion metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions. It would mean the country would be well on its way to dramatically cutting emissions. It was a huge. Still, it was hard not to think that maybe it happened because environmental activists, big and small, had been fighting for change for so long. That back when the Earth Liberation Front was lighting its fires, the issue was still radical to people, but over time, activists made caring about the planet and everyday. Issue climate change has become a cornerstone of elections around the world. It's being repeated that we must do something. That's a long way from the 1990s when the ELF were lighting their fires.

But will this be enough for the planet and the protesters?

I mean, how do you look back on this period? Do you think that the Earth liberation Front was successful?

LESLIE: Yeah, without a doubt.

LEAH: Leslie Pickering, former spokesperson for the ELF.

LESLIE: Yeah, I mean you remember global warming and the conversation that was being had during this time period. You couldn't find a politician you couldn't find anyone in any significant place

in media who was willing to say it was anything but a theory. Usually they were saying it was a hoax. Yeah, we shut down some companies. We put some fear in the hearts of some of the people who were doing the worst things to the environment in the area at the time, right? Those are all tangible achievements. But the biggest achievements are that we created something that would grow after and continue to grow after we left. And that's a, and that's a sort of an awareness and a dialogue and understanding that this is something we need to. Talk about.

LEAH: On that last interview with him, Joe DeBay said something about why he started the fire at the horse meat processing plant.

DIBEE: It wasn't exclusively about horses. It was about all things are connected truly and we're seeing the ramifications of that. You know, with trees and how trees provide moisture and create. The climate and outlook climate moderates temperature and how the moderation of temperature allows salmon to breathe in our streams and. All things are connected, and if we couldn't even get wild horses protected, how are we going to get ecosystems protected?

LEAH: It was Joe says, about having a voice.

DIBEE: I think a lot of the direct action is based in that people don't wake up one morning and say, oh I'm going to burn. Down a slaughterhouse. They go through a process. I think a number of people would have loved rather than engage in illegal activity to follow through a process. And and how their voice is heard. A lot of. The actions that happened in the 90s by environmentalists. They had specific targets. This particular company was doing this bad thing against this finite defined space. Climate change is quite different, right? It doesn't know borders, it's not. A company doing it, although there are certainly companies that are much more culpable than others. But it's the collective action of everyone that's causing it until. Governments are held accountable for their actions. We're not going to have any meaningful solution to climate change. You know, and that's the unfortunate truth.

LEAH: Whatever your take away is on what the so-called family did was a story that couldn't be told in those mug shots alone. Perhaps their story is a warning from history, a parable of how direct action can lead to some very indirect consequences about how good intentions backfire, how human nature sometimes conflicts with Mother Nature, about how doing the right thing isn't as easy. Or as clear as it appears, people will find themselves on either side of that big question of our time. How far is too far to go? Some might fear the eco terrorists, others the crackdown brought on them and perhaps over time that will change. Just as when the Earth Liberation Front could have never known how far reaching their actions and the consequences of their actions would be when they lit those fires. Today we find ourselves confronting the same truths they were. Now as then the fight is here. The cause is known. The consequences are not.

ELSPETH: I think everything came to her activism from a place of love. For all living things, it was from a place of peace and love that she wanted for all, including the trees. There is no reason to cut these ancient ancient trees down just for someone to process from the lumber sale. So there's anger in their truth, but mostly from a place of peace and love. What do you what?

LEAH: Do you hope has happened to her?

ELSPETH: I hope she's madly in love and growing her own vegetables and. Helping other people. Being creative, dancing, singing, having a wonderful life. Wherever she is.

LEAH: While Elsbeth spoke, I grabbed Sunshines yearbook. I'd found months earlier off my shelf and flipped to the page I'd found. I've got a copy of Josephine's High school yearbook. I tracked it down behind the back that there is a little ad when she graduated that had looked like it was from you. It had a Grateful Dead quote in it. Do you remember that?

ELSPETH: Yes I do, I Don't remember specifically the quote that to be grateful that Ben and she was too.

LEAH: It was dear sunshine. Well everybody's dancing in a ring around the sun nobody's finished we even the guns to take off your shoes child and take off your hat try on your wings and find out where it's at. The Golden Rd Grateful Dead 67. Love mom Jim and Thor.

ELSPETH: Thank you. Thank you for reminding me, that's who she was and. That's what I thought I remember. Hope she's grabbing life and. You know having a good time? Preventing drama and trauma and pain. Dancing in the sun.

Episode 8-and-a-half: Extraordinary collateral consequences

Nov. 10, 2022

The mother of Josephine Sunshine Overaker - the remaining fugitive environmentalist - tells her story.

And a change of plea from Joseph Dibee means he's able to talk in a way he hasn't before, including about a night he said he'd never speak of.

LEAH: In the two weeks since Episode 8 of Burn Wild went out, a lot has happened and in this short episode we want to catch you up. This is burn wild episode 8 1/2 extraordinary collateral consequences. I'm Leah citelli. Joe Debay's sentencing was scheduled for November 1st, 2022, eight days after episode 8 of Burn Wild went out. It had been. Moved so many times before we weren't sure it would even take place. But it did. Before we get to what happened, we've got to tell you some other things. First, Joe Debay on the run for 12 years and captured in Cuba in 2018, had taken a plea bargain in April, changing his plea to guilty. Since then, he's been putting in requests for information around his case. He said were important to his sentencing, and on September 21st this year, there's been a hearing. Joe told us he was excited for this as all the details of his capture were going to come out. In court But Judge Aikens said regarding his capture and incarceration in Cuba. I don't think the information will bear on the sentencing of this case. Joe told us he was disappointed. He said it hadn't gone the way he'd hoped and he sounded deflated. Like maybe this was the end for him and he would be on his way back to prison. But then Joe got a win earlier in 2022 when he met Joe at that Wildlife Refuge in Washington. He told producer Georgia Cat and I how he was working on a project with indigenous communities in Alaska. It involved capturing carbon from the atmosphere through kelp.

DIBEE: We're going to grow kelp. It can actually grow about 400 times faster than a comparable tree, I know. I mean, you can always watch it. To grow, he was building what?

LEAH: He called smart buoys to measure the drawdown of CO2 from the atmosphere. Back then he told us he hoped he'd be allowed to travel to Alaska for the project far outside the boundaries of where he'd previously been able to go, but he wasn't sure if it would happen as a guy who had been on the run for 12 years, the government was already giving him a lot of leeway. And then in mid-october we got news from him. In a message the morning he was due to be leaving October 18th. He told us packing frantically he'd had his electronic ankle monitor removed. He was, he hoped, going to get to Alaska. He told us he was taking 150 kilograms of kit, 3 duffel bags and a. The next day he sent a message saying he was there and it was quote wonderful. Georgia gave him a call and. He was there. After weeks of.

DIBEE: I still do.

LEAH: Pretty intense preparation. He's in Alaska with a box of his homemade buoys.

LEAH: I'm recording is that OK and does it feel exciting to be out there?

DIBEE: That's OK. It is exciting, it's it's. The last week and a half, two weeks before I left. It was literally like. Load eat sleep for four hours. Get up, do it all over again. The Earth was moving underneath me, so to speak.

LEAH: Because when you were leaving for the airport you were saying you didn't even know if you were going to be allowed to get on the plane. OHS Seattle.

DIBEE: Yeah, I didn't. Know if they would allow me on that on the plane the government put me on a terrorist watch list. The TSA searched me for two hours and 17 minutes X-rayed me twice.

LEAH: But he was allowed on the plane, and now he's finally there.

DIBEE: Everything is so pristine out here and so beautiful and it's so far from like. You know the hustle and bustle of the a big city. The other day I went up in the morning and we stopped and watched salmon spawning. They were just Eagles. Everywhere just looking out the window, you know, like they look out and there's this. Lake that the house is on and there's seals that come up the river into the lake. It's just everything is so amazingly wild.

LEAH: But in just over a week, there's the sentencing something he's been waiting three years for.

DIBEE: I've been so busy with the boys they. Ever I haven't thought much about. Sentencing it, you know. It's I don't know like the last hearing was not really encouraging.

The Sentencing

LEAH: And two days after he returned home November 1st, it was actually happy. George and I listened in, but as usual, we weren't able to record. Judge Ann Aiken has been on the case of the Earth Liberation Front and the so-called family since the start in 2007. She presided over the sentencing of Daniel McGowan and Chelsea Gerlach, who you heard in this series Daniel. Was sentenced to 7 years. Chelsea, who ended up cooperating with investigators, was sentenced to 9. And now it was finally Joe's turn. The United States government made the case for an 87 month sentence more than seven years. Assistant US Attorney Quinn Harrington said that quote we're here today because of the decisions that Mr Debay made over the last several decades. He didn't make these decisions out of desperation. Or out of circumstances, he willingly made the choices to engage in arson and to run away from his responsibility. Jose attorney, Matt Schindler asked for time. Served, he said quote in my 25 years of federal practice. I have never met anybody like Mr Debay. I think his qualities as a human being are something that I never expected in the context of representing someone in a case like this, and then Judge Aiken started to speak. Her words. Are read by an actor.

AIKEN: Mr Debay, I know this has been a very long time and you have been patient and I would like there's something you want me to know before I impose this sentence that you have this chance to tell me.

LEAH: Joe responded that it has been a very difficult case, quote difficult for me, and most importantly. Difficult for my family. And as he spoke, his voice cracked, he said, quote, I'm truly sorry for all the events that have happened, I haven't been involved in any of this activity for many decades, and I've moved on with my life was a mistake many years ago, many, many years ago, and I paid a really heavy price. For it

LEAH: That's pretty much all I. Have to say your honor. Judge Aikens spoke for more than 20 minutes about how she had come to her decision and it's worth hearing some of what she said here again. Her words are read by an actor.

AIKEN: This case straddles time. It straddles time in a very interesting way, because the criminal justice system has changed dramatically since this case first occurred. 30 years ago at the time of the trial that these crimes were committed was very different, yet similar to today's date, where people are taking decisions into their own hands and acting out in ways that are both criminal and inappropriate and dangerous. And I know that all of us were fearful as we saw this unravel, and I actually think I believe you and you have demonstrated that you have learned lessons, although belatedly, that to quote some truly tremendous leaders, great anger and violence can never build a nation. And I know the goals of your loosely fitted but yet connected organization was to attempt to move towards a different, greater good, and that you felt you weren't being heard, and what you did was take the steps to act out in

anger and with violence, because there's no doubt that these acts were violent and meant to intimidate. And create fear.

LEAH: Judge Aiken talked about the sentences of past defendants in this case, she said.

AIKEN: Back in the day when we had to make a determination under the guidelines and there's a specific guideline provision regarding terrorism, those that are still around can remember the hearing that we had, where it was clear that the guidelines applied. And that guideline then really drove much of the agendas.

LEAH: She talked about the high rates of imprisonment in the United States.

AIKEN: Today the increasing use of incarceration to the point we are the largest industrialized nation in the world. Incarcerating people. And with regard to sentencing guideline policy, it is a very different time today than it was back then.

LEAH: And then she said something that surprised us.

AIKEN: I would also have to note that there have been extraordinary collateral consequences in this case.

LEAH: Extraordinary Judge Aikens said back in 2005 when Joe realized the authorities were on to him when he left for Syria and Russia. Joe had made a choice to.

AIKEN: Leave behind your family. That's a punishment.

LEAH: Back in episode four, we heard Joe's account of his capture and incarceration in Cuba. After the hearing in September, it seemed like what happened. There was of no concern to Judge Aiken, but then at the sentencing, Aiken said.

AIKEN: We've had a lot of. Discussion about what happened in Cuba. And I'm going to indicate that I'm taking that into account because I don't have any doubt that Mr. Debay was not well cared for. The conditions under which he was maintained. Frankly, I don't think that an imagination could dream up what occurred, and so I believe that his conditions in Cuba were extraordinary, and that the whole situation regarding Cuba is also extraordinary, and that we're never going to know the story to that, again extraordinary collateral consequences.

LEAH: Judge Aiken talked. About the 29 months Joe spent in Oregon in jail where George and I saw him on that first zoom. Hearing in the middle of the pandemic. She said, how he was...

AIKEN: Beaten to a pulp and had a fractured jaw and frankly inappropriate negligent medical care. And that was astounding to me, because the courts role is we put people in custody, we expect them to be cared for in an appropriate fashion that did not. Happened, that was a very difficult time. The fact that he's already served 29 very difficult months. Those not just being held in custody the months that he was held and brutalized and injured. All of those factors have to weigh in.

LEAH: And as she spoke, I thought back to that image of him on my screen, masked, shackled, tired, sick. After his release to house arrest back in January 2021. Judge Aikens said that Joe...

AIKEN: Has been a model. I've not had one instance of failure to follow a rule or failure to ask permission to do something, and in fact, what Mr Debay has done is pick up and take on some additional challenges that are needed in the community. Community to create a common good and to make a difference, pledging that he is done with using violence and anger because it never builds a nation.

LEAH: And she talked about his rehabilitation...

AIKEN: What Mr. Debay has done to attempt to rehabilitate himself and give back for all the damage he has done in Syria in Russia in Ecuador and now in Alaska, and his attempt to balance the scales from the damage that was done 30 years ago. The work he's trying to do now to pay back to society. To work towards the common good has to be acknowledged, and again, quoting another major leader, "there can be no greater gift or rehabilitation than the giving of 1's time and energy to the helping of others without expecting anything in return. I am concerned about the collateral consequences of this felony conviction for someone who I think has the ability to make a big difference and should have the ability to have opportunities. And frankly, this country needs some of the technologies he's able to craft, and we need that.

LEAH: And then Judge Aiken read the sentence, not the 87 months the government was asking for. But, time served on both counts and. 1000 hours community service. Joseph Mahmoud Debay, a man whose mugshot sat on the list of America's Most Wanted domestic terrorists for so long, won't be going back to prison. And Judge Aiken rounded up her sentencing with the following:

AIKEN: Very few people have the kind of talent you have. I guess what you have to prove the rest of your life is the fact that what counts in life is not the fact that we have lived. It's what difference we have made in the lives of others that will determine the significance of your life. You have a chance for the rest of your life to change the contribution that you have made and continue to make for the greater good. And that's what I hope you will do. In honor of what you tell me is important in your face. Family life and the values that you walked away from and have walked back to it is my hope that one day you'll be able to write about how again, anger and violence is never the way to create change.

The Aftermath

GEORGIA: Hey Joe hello hello. I was listening in to all the tests.

LEAH: After sentencing, Georgia got on. A call with Joe.

GEORGIA: How you're feeling.

DIBEE: I am feeling really relieved. You know, it's like I'm not going back to prison. That's, but, yeah, it was a good outcome. Like I'm not going back to prison. I'm really happy about that.

GEORGIA: Has it all sunk in?

DIBEE: It's slowly sinking in like I've just gotten like about 8090 messages of congratulations. Just like reading. Through them.

GEORGIA: Was there anything that Judge Aiken said to you that stuck out to you?

DIBEE: You know, I. I was kind of frustrated that. To some extent I'm being blamed for an arson that I vehemently opposed.

LEAH: Joe's talking about the 2nd arson 1 after Cavel W, which he pled guilty to as part of the plea deal. One he's always said is still saying he had nothing to do with.

DIBEE: But I did confess to it and I took responsibility for it. So I, you know. I get that. It kind of speaks to the system. As a whole, right? It it speaks to why and the fact that the judge acknowledged it as well, the United States has become the largest incarcerated or of people on the planet. You know that the system is broken, and it's you're never going to get back the time that that you got jailed for.

LEAH: Georgia asked Joe how it felt that the judge referenced what had happened. In Cuba.

DIBEE: Yeah, I mean, I was really glad that that came out. I was really happy that she acknowledged at least that those aspects of it.

GEORGIA: What would you have lost if you were going back to prison?

DIBEE: Well, I think it would have crushed the the project that I'm working on currently in Alaska. There aren't a lot of people. Who do what I do and most of them want six and seven figures to do it. We have a sort. Of a understanding that I'd be back in the spring, and I believe that you know if I'd been incarcerated that that project would have been significantly impacted. You know, obviously, like it certainly wouldn't hurt my family. A lot of my decision to resolve the case really focused around not further impacting my family.

GEORGIA: And your father as well, means you can see.

DIBEE: Him, yes, definitely like he's in a pretty advanced state of dementia. And my sister and I are kind of like the cornerstones that ground him to the world. He recognizes other people through us. It was really important that I be there for him.

GEORGIA: And what's next? I'm going to go back to that quote that you said about wanting a steady life. Do you feel now? You've got a shot at that.

DIBEE: Yeah, maybe it's a. Lot, it's a lot more stable than what it was. You know, a few hours ago.

GEORGIA: Look Joe, I'll let you go because I can hear your. Phone going crazy in the background.

DIBEE: Yes it is.

GEORGIA: It's been a long Rd.

DIBEE: It has. It has.

LEAH: Joe, will he hopes, get back to Alaska this spring and we're looking forward to hearing how that goes? But that line Judge Aiken said in sentencing extraordinary collateral consequences, sticks with us because that's what we've heard. In so many different ways, making this series unknown outcomes and uncertain futures. And now there's just one left from the group still out there whose case hasn't been heard in court, that of Josephine Sunshine. Overaker sunshine. Judge Aiken said that this case straddles time straddles time in an interesting way, and times have changed a lot since those fires. If I think it's a big if sunshine has ever found, I can't help but wonder. Where we'll be? What sort of world we'll be living in then.

Credits

Burn Wild was presented by me, Leah Petilli. The producer is Georgia. Please share and let others know about us and do leave a review to help. Other people find us. Music is specially composed by Echo Collective, composed, performed and produced by Neil Leider and Margaret Hermont and recorded, mixed and produced by Fabian Mazur with additional music and sound design. At filled channel, the commissioning executive is Dylan Haskins. The editor is Phillip Sellers. Burn Wild is a BBC audio documentaries production for BBC Radio 5 live and BBC Sounds.

Other Podcasts by the same team

GEORGIA: This is Georgia, just chiming in to let you know about another BBC podcast which Lear and I have made. It's called 2 minutes past nine and it examines the legacy of the Oklahoma City bombing 25 years on. It was on that show where we first spoke with Darryl Johnson, who you heard in this episode. And it's all available to listen to. Now, here's Leah.

LEAH: At the beginning of 2020 I set out to try and understand what led 26 year old Timothy McVeigh to commit American's deadliest domestic terrorism attack.

Speaker 21: When he gets talking about the US government, he gets this look in his eyes that will chill you to the bone.

LEAH: But then the world change, and so did our podcast.

Speaker 18: There are now vigilantes, claiming they're protecting property.

Speaker 19: And draw a straight line from the incidence of today, right back to Timothy McVeigh. 25 years later, we've moved on.

Speaker 21: I think we would rather not deal with it.

LEAH: Two Minutes Past Nine from BBC Radio 4. Make sure to subscribe on BBC Sounds.



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Leah Sottile and Georgia Catt
Burn Wild
Aug-Nov, 2022

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Daniel McGowen claims how Chelsea explained the Vail action happened is contradicted by all other accounts. Also, some speaker names could do with adding, automatic transcription errors fixing and more section headings added.

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