

Aboard the Ark

“Grandpa, where are we going?”

Julie is 6 years old. Her grandfather Dan is in his early 60s, taking her on a field trip of some sort. Julie has gone on these trips before, often getting bored with Dan’s love of museums and art of a time that might as well be centuries ago for her. But this museum is different. Dan has pulled some strings to not only get a private tour of the museum, but a tour run by the museum’s founder.

Dan approaches a gate in his solar powered car and the gate quickly opens. He drives into an estate where a building as big as two football stadiums stands. On the outside are a variety of animals both painted on the building as well as statues standing in front of it. He looks in the rearview mirror to see Julie in a trance, intrigued to see where he has taken her.

They approach the front of the building and open the door. An older man, in his late 80s but not looking it, waits for them. His name is Joel Sartore.

The three exchange pleasantries, Julie makes it clear she is 6 and 3 quarters, much more mature than those immature 6-year-olds.

“Of course. Your maturity radiates off you,” says Joel with a smile. Joel then begins to tell his story to Julie as Dan, already a big fan, gets a refresher.

A long time ago Joel had started a project called the photo ark. He wanted to photograph 12,000 different species of animals. From his mid-40s to his early 70s this was his mission. “Did you do it?” says Julie, anxious to hear the answer.

He grabs a tablet off a nearby table and taps the screen. “You tell me,” says Joel, as his face fills with excitement to share his work. After a flash of blue light, countless animal holograms appear. Birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, all moving around.

“Woah!” Julie yells. She can’t believe it. Neither can Dan. Each animal walks around in their own contained area, on a loop of the recording session when Joel took their picture for the ark. The three start walking. Julie starts running. “Stay close,” says Dan.

Joel has a story for each animal. Some sessions were effortless while others were troublesome, as Dan and Joel pass the chimp who ripped the white background off the wall and took it with him. Joel used a white or black background for all the animals, making sure each animal had the same visual experience. He cared just as much photographing a tiger beetle as a tiger and he wanted those who followed the ark’s journey to do the same.

Joel tells Dan how taxing the journey to 12,000 was. He got to 9,000 species just over 30 years prior in 2018, at 56 years old.

“Especially those later years my family was hesitant for me to continue. My wife wanted me to stay home and let the kids take over, but they were just starting families of their own and if anyone was accustomed to the lifestyle it was me. A little more tired and sore than my younger days, but let’s be honest I started the ark at 44. Wasn’t too athletic then either.”

Dan and Joel laugh. They see Julie continuing to run around, neither with the energy to keep up. “I actually saw you speak in Chicago at a Ted talk, the year I graduated college,” says Dan.

Joel has to think back. Over his career he's done many speeches in countless cities, but it actually comes back to him.

"It was around that time I started to really push people to care. How could I make them care about the environment and conservation as much as football? We needed to act, or else countless species were going to go extinct," says Joel.

And that came to pass. The Sumatran rhino, rabbs fringed limb tree frog, Columbia basin pygmy rabbit, California condor, black footed ferret, whooping crane and white Bengal tiger. All animals Dan and Joel pass. All extinct.

The two catch up to Julie who has stopped, looking at two giant panda cubs rolling around. Next to them sits an adult panda hologram from another session.

"I've never seen one before. Why aren't they in zoos?" says Julie. Dan and Joel make eye contact, hesitating to speak. "They're all gone," says Joel with slight emotion. "We were down to one the last few years. His name was Po."

Julie turns to her grandfather. "How many here are all gone?"

Dan tries to compose himself for Julie. "Many. But this place is what we have to remember them by. Mr. Sartore made sure we wouldn't forget them." Julie turns back to the pandas. "I won't forget them," says Julie.

Trying to transition to a new topic, Joel sees the Coquerel's sifaka lemur across the way. "But there are still many here that you can see out there in the world. Like this guy. I'm thankful he's still swinging around."

The sight of the lemur makes Dan visibly happy, excited he gets to share this experience with Julie. "My little brother would watch a show with a lemur just like this one. He was named Zoboomafoo. I'd watch with him every now and again," says Dan with a smile. Julie smiles back. "That's a funny name," says Julie.

The three continue walking around looking at a variety of species both still living and extinct. For Dan and Joel, it's a reminder of why conservation is important, why we can't sit idly by and let others take control. Joel took control and Dan wishes he did the same. Julie runs down the hallway.

Dan looks around at some of the animals he got to see in his lifetime that Julie never will. He may not have seen all of them in person but if he traveled more he could have. Julie doesn't have that chance.

"In my 20s I remember the last male northern white rhino died. Pretty specific but it stuck with me. People shared it on social media. Remember Twitter? We shared with outrage but didn't act. All around us animals were dying and we just lashed out against climate change deniers and poachers thinking that was enough. There were organizations we could have helped and we didn't," says Dan.

Joel has heard this guilt before.

"It's hard to see at first," says Joel, putting his hand on Dan's shoulder. "Since this opened last year it's easy for people a little younger than you up to my age to come in here and see a graveyard. They feel guilty and people don't like feeling guilty. But I didn't create the ark

to have a book full of pictures to throw at someone to let them know they blew it. As you told her..."

Julie has made her way to the African elephant. She stands in awe at its size as it moves around.

"They will be remembered. I was just a man with pictures and videos. The right people with the right sized wallets got involved, which is why we stand in a coliseum or whatever you want to call it, dedicated to remembering and reminding people that conservation of our planet matters." Joel speaks with the cadence of a much younger man. Dan is amazed by his words.

The end of the tour has come, at least all they could fit in a few hours. The three of them go past some animals in the critically endangered section: the Indian rhinoceros, Bornean orangutan, giant anteater, Malayan tapir and the St. Andrew beach mouse. All have miraculously not been wiped from the planet thanks to Joel and people like him. However, the fight continues.

As Dan and Julie drive away Joel looks back to a polar bear moving around before he turns off the holograms. It's the summer of 2050 and it's the first summer when there's no ice in the Arctic. He wonders how soon a girl like Julie will ask why she has never seen a polar bear, with their habitat destroyed and numbers plummeting. He looks across the way to a group of amphibians who have been all virtually wiped out by the chytrid fungus *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* or a variant of it, that human activity helped spread.

He hopes the ark will continue to raise awareness and motivate people to act. Hopefully Julie or kids like her will grow up and take action in preserving animal lives because it's one fight that will never stop.

Julie sits in the car and opens a copy of the photo ark Joel gave her. In the inside cover she reads a quote from Margaret Mead, a quote Joel said at the Ted talk Dan saw him at all those years ago.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”