

#59 - Leaving It All Behind with Travel Writer Zanny Merullo Steffgen

Donna Ferris: [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens.

Today's guest is writer Zanny Merullo Steffgen. A little about Zanny. Zanny is the epitome of the road less traveled, literally. She's a freelance writer whose journey is as extraordinary as it is inspiring. After high school, Zanny packed her bags and set off to see the world, eventually landing in Cambodia.

There, between servings of street food and stunning sunsets, she kick-started her writing career. Now Zanny's, bylines grace, publications like Business Insider, Shondaland and Newsweek to name just a few. And let's not forget those two travel writing award nominations. No small feat, especially for someone whose travels are anything but conventional, in part because she has cystic fibrosis. Today, Zanny's based in Colorado, where she continues to write stories that [00:01:00] bring people together across cultural divides. So whether you're feeling stuck or just need a reminder that life's twists can lead to some pretty incredible destinations, this is the interview for you.

Zanny, thank you so much for being on the podcast. It's an honor to speak with you.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Thanks for having me, Donna.

Donna Ferris: It's great to have you, and we had your father on, I guess it'll be about a month ago, and it was lovely to talk to him, and we talked a little bit about your Substack that you are doing with him.

Do you want to take a moment to talk about that up front?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah, so we have a Substack called “Hi, Zan Hi, Pa,” and it's basically an extension of our personal conversations. We've had really in-depth conversations since I was a little kid, and now we just share them with an audience and we talk about everything from what is happiness and why do love one another to some of the things we have in common, which is

getting lost. We have a [00:02:00] terrible sense of direction. So we, we go all over the map and just have a nice time exploring these topics together.

Donna Ferris: What a great thing to do with your father. And you share the love of writing too, which must be really awesome to have a mentor like him.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Definitely. Even, I didn't always know that I would follow in his footsteps in some way, but since I have, he's been so helpful to me and just always very supportive, has looked over some of my writing and is always in my corner.

Donna Ferris: That's great. And, maybe let's take a step further from that. Why did you choose travel and work over college?

I think there's a lot of people thinking about that today. And, as a parent, even as having my youngest just finished college, and then you come out and there's not a job ready for you, especially in this [00:03:00] climate. Just interesting to hear your take on that.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah, so I would say when I was a young girl and a teenager, it's not like I set out to not go to college.

I think it was always expected just in the circles I was in that I would go to college. So I think it started when I was 14 years old, and I have cystic fibrosis, which I think we'll talk about later, but I have had a lot of other health issues in my life too. And when I was 14, I developed kind of a mysterious illness.

So I was exhausted all the time, in pain. Very suddenly from one day to the next, and I didn't find a diagnosis until months later, but I was eventually diagnosed with postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, or POTS, which is now common among long COVID patients, but that actually [00:04:00] completely changed my life when I was 14.

I missed the majority of my first two years of high school, and there was a time when I didn't think I would finish high school, let alone go to college. So, it was that that kind of took me from being an ambitious young teenager who was top of her class and in all of these extracurricular activities to being on the couch and having no idea what was coming.

Donna Ferris: Wow.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: And so, that already changed my perspective on life. So when I did make my way back to high school for the last two years, I did graduate, have a diploma. I thought differently about the whole process and about my future, and I watched as my classmates were going through the application process, and it was a major source of stress for them.

And I felt like, after all my body had been through, I really didn't need that. And it was my [00:05:00] original plan to go to college in Italy, where I studied abroad in high school, but that fell through and I just kind of stumbled into a life of travel instead.

Donna Ferris: That's amazing. And makes sense too, in a way you had been kind of stuck in the house for that time, kind of unable to travel?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah, I was on the couch for much of that time. And that meant being completely withdrawn from a social life. I really missed school by the end of that. I wanted to go to classes and do homework but in many ways it was a gift because it kind of took me off the highway that I was on.

And I feel like when you're a teenager, it very much feels like a highway and you see the exits up ahead. And when you finish grade nine, you're going to grade 10 and eventually you'll go to college and it's all very clear. And [00:06:00] then I was taken off that road and put on kind of a side dirt track and I had no idea what was coming ahead.

And I learned a lot from that experience. I learned how to bounce back and be resilient. And from there, I think I had the courage to make some more unconventional decisions.

Donna Ferris: Which you wouldn't have otherwise.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah, I wonder.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, a lot of people keep following the track that everybody follows and then finds in their mid-40s that they, aren't sure that they like the life that they've created.

So it's interesting that you got that opportunity to do that at a much younger age.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah, I feel very lucky in many ways, although I would say that the road less traveled has a lot of ups and downs. It's not.

necessarily easy, especially because, you're not on a track and you don't, you can't see what's coming your way.

But [00:07:00] for me, it's been worth it.

Donna Ferris: What do you think some of the hardest things to manage when you take a different path? You know, Robert Frost makes it sound so easy, but I'm not sure, taking that road less traveled, as you kind of alluded to, is all that easy sometimes.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: I think the hardest part is not having an example.

Maybe you haven't met someone who chose not to go to college. So you don't know what that looks like. Or I remember in the period after I graduated from high school, I felt totally overwhelmed. It felt like every option in the world was open to me and I didn't know which way to step, which decisions to make, how that might affect the rest of my life.

I think there were too many options and that made it more difficult. Whereas if you go to college and you choose a major, your options are slightly narrowed at that point. So that was really difficult for me. And [00:08:00] there have been lots of other ups and downs since. It's not always easy to get a job when you don't have a college degree.

Unfortunately, I have met with some judgment about that, although I try not to take it personally because I completely love this life that I've built for myself. But, some people don't understand that, especially coming from - I went to a prep school where it was much expected that I would apply to an Ivy League college instead of not applying to college at all.

So overcoming some of those expectations has been challenging. But it's also been very freeing.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I can see how that would be the case. And how much did your diagnosis affect what you've chosen to do and how you think about writing and, all of the things that affect you as a creator?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: I think my health problems have shaped a lot of my life and in some ways that's because I [00:09:00] have a, a different relationship to my body than other people might. So I guess I don't take it for granted when I'm healthy and I try to make the most of those periods. And I'm also very aware

of not just my own mortality, but also the fact that I might not always be capable of doing all of the things I want to do.

So there's this mix of feeling some pressure to squeeze the most out of every healthy moment, and also being at peace with the fact that my body might not always be able to meet my expectations for my life.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, it's interesting. I'm like, thinking about this mortality thing too. We're all like figuring out ways that we can do stuff in the next, five years or something to kind of make sure that we can leverage our health and mobility as long as we can.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Right. And I think a lot of people can relate to that because no one really knows where they'll be [00:10:00] in five years or even five minutes.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I think it's a double edged sword, right? To use a well-worn phrase, because you realize it, but then you also, are in it too, at the same time.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. So maybe let's talk a little bit about travel. The Cambodia trip was just an amazing journey, I would think, right?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah, so I, took what I thought was a gap year after finishing high school because I thought I would go to university in Italy. And during that time, I took some of my first real solo adventures around the world.

So I spent a few months in Europe. I went to a Buddhist retreat in Ireland. I volunteered in Italy and walked the Camino de Santiago in Spain.

Donna Ferris: Wow.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: I grew up traveling because my father's an author, so I already knew I was comfortable with [00:11:00] travel. Loved it. But discovering that on my own was a different experience.

When I returned from that, I actually did apply to college in Italy, but there was an issue with the visas and the timing of it all, so that fell through. I tried to apply to a different university in Malta with a later deadline that also fell through. So from there, I was left with, okay, I'm not going to college.

What am I going to do instead? And at that point, I had built a restaurant career. I worked as a manager, bartender, and server in restaurants. And I decided I would work a little longer and then use that money to travel again. And the next time I traveled, I wanted to go to a Buddhist country because I've always been fascinated with Buddhism and really wanted to immerse myself in that.

And that's what drew me to Southeast Asia and I came across an opportunity to [00:12:00] bartend in a hostel in Cambodia in exchange for room and board and just went for it. And I would say my parents were a little nervous. And I think there was, you know, a bit of a bad moment with my father when I told him that was my plan, but it ended up working out.

And yeah, I went to Cambodia as a backpacker, bartending in a hostel, and ended up moving there when I was 20 years old.

Donna Ferris: That's amazing.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah.

Donna Ferris: What's your favorite memory from that time? There are probably multiple memories, but what sticks out?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: I remember there was a local Cambodian man who was also bartending at the hostel. And at first, it had been really hard to get to know him. Just there was a language barrier, a cultural barrier.

And then, one day, when it was Khmer New Year, which is the big holiday in Cambodia, he invited me to his house, and he took me through the [00:13:00] countryside to his home. Which was really shocking to me at that time because it was dirt floors, one room, he had two children at the time - no refrigerator or electricity, no running water, no bathroom. He welcomed me into his home, and I could tell he was a little bit embarrassed because I think he knew that my living standards were slightly higher than that. But he welcomed me into his home. We had dinner, we sang karaoke all night, we drank beers, we celebrated, and it was just this beautiful moment of seeing this huge cultural divide, and we had found a way across it. And from that day on, we became good friends, and he's still someone I consider a friend.

Donna Ferris: That's great. Did you write about that?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Not that moment in particular, but similar experiences, yes.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, and as Buddhism says, [00:14:00] we're all the same, right? And that was one of those moments. that you really, really got that.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Exactly. See a light of humanity in everyone.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. That's really amazing that he brought you home like that. That's a big gift.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: It was. It was. I think for both of us in some way. Yeah.

Donna Ferris: Oh yeah. Yeah. I bet you he still talks about it too.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Oh yeah, and I've been to his house many times since.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, that's very, very cool. This is a good segue into the next topic, which is writing stories that bridge cultural differences. Tell me a little bit about your writing and you've been nominated for a couple of awards, right?.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Sure. When I was growing up, I always loved to write, and that's because I saw my father writing.

So, you know, I would try to imitate him, sit at his computer, and type away. Okay. And because I grew [00:15:00] up with an author as a father, I thought I wouldn't follow in his footsteps. I thought I was going to forge my own path through life. It was a surprise to me when I started making money from writing and realized that that's actually what I wanted to do.

So I started pretty young. I was a teenager when I had some of my first pieces published, and then once I decided to spend some time in Cambodia, I began writing a regular column for a travel publication about what it was like to bartend in a hostel in Cambodia. And then from there, when I lived in Cambodia, I wrote a few articles for various publications about my time there, and then I got into copywriting, which is just a marketing form of writing, and from there, I have built a freelance writing career. Now, I focus mostly on travel journalism, and I do some [00:16:00] copywriting on the side as well.

Donna Ferris: Where have you been traveling recently?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Let's see, a lot of my travel has been domestic recently. So I was in Utah. I just got back from a trip from North and South

Dakota that I'm going to try to write about. I went to Cambodia earlier this year for the first time since I moved away, which was really nice.

And I've written a bunch of stories about that trip. Before that, it was Peru. I have some upcoming adventures in Central and South America in October and November. So, all over the place.

Donna Ferris: Oh, wonderful. Yeah, the Utah and the North and South Dakota. Your following Breakfast with Buddha trip.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Actually, I returned to some of the places I went as a child to research those books, so that was fun.

Donna Ferris: That's funny. I've actually said to my husband since doing that interview, I said I think I have; I visited 43 states, I have seven to go, something like that. And I said, you know, I could do the Breakfast with Buddha [00:17:00] trip.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah, that would be fun.

Donna Ferris: Yeah I'm sure I'm not the only person that's ever done that out of those books.

The Buddhist thing, it'd be interesting to know more about the Buddhist interests if you want to share anything there.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: When I was a young girl, my father had been meditating for many years, I think before I was born.

And from a young age, he taught me how to meditate. So I remember he would lead me through a guided meditation if I had trouble sleeping or were upset about something. And so that was always a part of my life. And when I got older, I studied abroad in Italy. So I also experienced Catholicism, and I really liked looking for the common ground between those religions.

And since I've studied other religions on my own time as well, I'm just fascinated with [00:18:00] spirituality and where these religions intersect. But Buddhism has always been a big part of my life. I went to a couple of Buddhist retreats as a young woman. I tried to incorporate Buddhist meditation when I was walking the Camino de Santiago, which is a Catholic pilgrimage.

And yeah, I was really interested in seeing what that looked like as a lifestyle and a culture because it's not exactly a religion; it's a practice or way of life. So I was really interested and really blown away by what I experienced in Cambodia. Just to see that in action is so fascinating to me.

Donna Ferris: What stuck out?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: I think I would say an acceptance of death that we don't have in the West. So, there were a couple of times when someone loosely related to my circle in Cambodia passed away, and just [00:19:00] watching how they marked that occasion was interesting. There's a cremation and a ceremony, and they talk about it, and they would show me pictures of the body being cremated.

And that's not something that I grew up with. It was really surprising to me. And there's also a gentleness to the people in Cambodia. There's fairly low crime there. I mean, I felt very safe at all times. Being a young woman alone there just because there's this understanding of karma and how your actions reflect upon you and come back to you in some way, shape, or form at some point.

So, it was really beautiful to see the gentle way people interacted with each other.

Donna Ferris: It's funny. I think that's the first time karma has come up on this podcast, which is ironic because I have a long history of talking about it. Yeah, it's an important one.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. Wow. [00:20:00] I have interviewed a lot of Buddhists, and what I find is there are longer pauses.

If you look at their recordings, the speech is perfect in many ways. There are very few things that I have to cut, but the pauses are longer. It's an interesting thing to notice.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: That makes sense to me. Yeah, it does.

Donna Ferris: Because if you're meditating, you're going to have a little bit more thought in your speaking, right?

And, if you can get into a zone, you're able to keep yourself calmer. And you want to make sure you get the words right. You want to be very careful with your words. So, yeah, I can't imagine what it'd be like to have, thousands of people like that around me. I can see the draw.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah. Have you ever been to a Buddhist country?

Donna Ferris: I haven't. I would love to do that. I can so totally understand it. Wanting to go. Yeah. I've wanted to go to Tibet. I haven't been to [00:21:00] Tibet. Have you been to Tibet?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: No, that's on my list for sure.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. Me too. I know a lot of people have gone, and they love it.

Maybe let's talk a little bit about what's next.

We talked a little bit about some of your travel pieces. Is there any other work that you're doing?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: At this point, I'm really hoping to make my way back to Cambodia for an extended period of time. A few months. There's a reporting project that I'm trying to get funded. Because there's so much more to explore in Cambodia in terms of their history. I mean, the Khmer Rouge was fairly recent.

That happened in the 1970s and, you know, a genocide in Cambodia. I'm really fascinated. Of course, it's not my place exactly to dive into that too much, but I do want to explore [00:22:00] how the people are continuing to heal from that time and also how the trauma from that time filters down through generations and impacts people who were not alive during the genocide.

So that's something that I'm working on

Donna Ferris: That'd be some interesting research and applicable elsewhere.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah. And I think with my understanding of the Khmer culture, I know a little bit of the language. I think that I could have some great conversations about that.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, well, it sounds like they would trust you.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Hope so.

Donna Ferris: Is there anything that I didn't ask for, or would you like to share it before we close?

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: I just want to say that taking the road less traveled is really challenging but can be worth it. And I think [00:23:00] I've had a lot of very deep low points that I don't want to gloss over when I talk about my life because it might sound like one big adventure. But it doesn't always feel that way when you're living in it.

But at the same time, making some of these unconventional decisions has allowed me to get closer to what's right for me. And I don't feel like I've taken a lot of wrong turns in terms of not doing something authentic to who I am, and that's a real gift.

So, I'm sure other people are experiencing the same thing, and I just want to say keep going, keep checking in with yourself, and keep reflecting on what's right for you. That's important.

Donna Ferris: That's so helpful. And I look back at things, and they may feel wrong at that [00:24:00] time or even 10 years later, but what you find a little bit longer is that it was probably the right thing. But it's hard because the nearness of it can still feel a little bit too fresh. But it's important to realize that even if it's a deep and difficult thing, it's probably gonna be the right thing for you and turn out okay. But it's a hard one

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah, easier said when you're looking back on it.

Donna Ferris: Distance gives it less of a sting for sure.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah.

Donna Ferris: Well, thank you so much. I've learned so much today And now I want to go to Cambodia. It just got on my bucket list.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: It's an incredible place

Donna Ferris: Well, thank you so much.

I hope you get to go there soon.

Zanny Merullo Steffgen: Yeah. Thank [00:25:00] you. This is great. And I love your podcast. You have great conversations that matter and I really appreciate it.

Donna Ferris: Thank you so much

That's all for today. If you want to learn more about Zanny's writing and her Substack with her father, those links will be in the show notes. Thank you so much for listening. I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family. That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit.

And if my daughters Sienna and Sylvie are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you. And I love you so much. Bye now.