

Transcript for Episode 312: “Gretchen Powers - On Mountains, Mental Health, and Metaphors”
Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.

GRETCHEN POWERS: “Some of them are climbable. Some of them aren't, but at any given time at any given season, they're attainable and require a lot, a lot of work. They require preparation, both physical and mental. They require tools like bear spray, and crampons and trekking poles and lots of extra water. They require you to be really prepared. And I think that that's what living with anxiety and depression requires. It requires you to be prepared, it requires you to pack up your rucksack and head out the door with what you might need to take care of any part of it on any given day. And yeah, I just love this metaphor and if you are listening to this and are looking at your own life and your own struggles. I think figuring out what those mountains are to you, maybe it's a different metaphor for you. And being able to assess like, what do I need to make this mountain climbable? How many tools do I need? Where are we at? How much extra do I need to take care of myself today.”

[music playing]

LINDSAY KOLSCH: You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. Each episode we'll be talking about the things that can often feel hard to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. We'll be sharing stories and exploring big themes like hope, healing, and recovery.

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CHAD MOSES: Hey podcast family, it's Chad Moses, TWLOHA's Director of Outreach. We're back just off the heels of our biggest campaign of the year. While the Worth Living For campaign guided our conversations and actions for the last month or so, we want you to know that our commitment to addressing the hard things that so many of us face is a year-round effort. So today, we're joined by Gretchen Powers to bring you a bit of a nuanced conversation about mental health and the outdoors. Gretchen is a photographer, an outdoor adventure enthusiast, and a self-proclaimed professional mover. At the start of her journey with mental health, Gretchen believed that staying active and spending time outside were the keys to maintaining her well-being. But after years of battling waves of depression and anxiety, she found that her toolkit was missing some important things. Through trial and error, self discovery, and the encouragement of her supportive wife, Gretchen talks with us about the ways in which she has allowed herself to find healing despite the shame that she's felt along the way.

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CHAD: So I am so thrilled to have the time to sit down with our friend Gretchen Powers. She 's been connecting with Becky from our team on the blog space. And several members of our team have just been really excited about this conversation, finally getting on the schedule and

onto the podcast and, and into the ears of you, listeners. So Gretchen, thank you so much for finding the time to connect with us. And I guess just as a brief introduction, tell us who you are. Where you're calling from. What's life look like?

GRETCHEN: Thank you so much for having me. This is really an honor and an exciting thing. And I'm currently calling from Kailua on Oahu in Hawaii. I just moved here a couple of months ago, and things are pretty shut down at the moment. So our Hawaii life doesn't exactly look like the one we imagined when we found out we were moving here back in March, but we are definitely trying to make the best of it with what we have.

CHAD: Yeah, now obviously this year has thrown a ton of curveballs. But let's pretend for a second that it's not the year 2020 and we are not navigating pandemic. What takes up your day to day life? What do you do?

GRETCHEN: I am a photographer/filmmaker. That is my main job, if you will, and I specialize in storytelling, whether in the outdoor space for outdoor brands, or I do a lot with small business. I work with individuals. I do the occasional adventure elopement or small weddings, something that's intimate fun and has like a big outdoor component. And I also have a newer side business called Powers Provisions where I sell both my own handcrafted goods. So I'm a big knitter, beeder, artist, if you will. That's a new title I've been giving myself but I also sell work from a lot of my friends who also make beautiful things and it's just my way of, especially these days, really trying to put more beautiful things into the world. When I'm not wielding a camera or a pair of knitting needles, I love, love, love being outside. You can typically find me hiking, biking, kayaking, rock climbing. I love camping and backpacking. And just generally being in places where the air feels more fresh than it does inside my house.

CHAD: For sure, and I reckon Hawaii is a generally good place to get some of that fresh air.

GRETCHEN: Yeah, definitely.

CHAD: You mentioned that this is a new home for you?

GRETCHEN: Yeah, So, I lived, after college, I went to University of Vermont, and then I lived in Maine in Portland for four years. And then my now wife joined the Coast Guard, and we were stationed in Kodiak, Alaska. So we moved there from Maine. We lived there for two and a half years. And then this past June, we moved to Hawaii.

CHAD: That's absolutely amazing. I was just about to say, from Hawaii, you, I believe are our furthest distance podcaster that we've had. And that would have been the case if you were in Alaska as well. I actually don't know which is further I think. But I bet Hawaii is probably further.

GRETCHEN: My mom did the math for how many miles away we were and we've moved closer back to the mainland from here. Interestingly enough.

CHAD: Thanks for you know, taking one for the team and coming a little bit closer to home.

GRETCHEN: Oh yeah, of course.

CHAD: We know that you're suffering greatly for it in that paradise. You know, one more thing related to that travel. How many states have you been able to call home at this point?

GRETCHEN: 1, 2, 3, 4, I would say five. I grew up between Vermont and Colorado. And then, so both of those are home for me. Maine is definitely home for me. Alaska is home for me and Hawaii is not quite there yet, but in time, I think I will also grow to call it home.

CHAD: In time for sure. Now how did you first get connected with To Write Love On Her Arms?

GRETCHEN: I've been very aware of To Write Love On Her Arms for a while. I love the work that you're doing. I find it really really important and both, like, for me personally, and for a lot of my friends that I know have been struggling over the years. But the reason you guys reached out to me is because you read a piece that I've written for the 'She Explores' book that came out . I'd written about a trip I went on with my mom, a kayak camping trip, about Mental Health and the outdoors and how important the outdoors were for me.

CHAD: So, the book you're referencing is 'She Explores' and the byline or the subtitle is 'Stories of Life-Changing Adventures on the Road and in the Wild' and there one line in your piece there that says, "Even on the worst days, especially on the darkest ones, I know that I have to get out into deep green spaces and find gratitude." Would you mind talking just a little bit about that statement, about that phrase? Kind of where nature and mental health intersect in your life.

GRETCHEN: I think for the longest time and I think it's really interesting because since that book, since I wrote that piece, that would have been three years ago now, so three falls ago, actually like this week, I went on that trip with my mom. And in my own journey I've come really far. I've done so much work in therapy and trying medications. So now reading back almost, it's just impressive to me that I thought that the outdoors was like this, 'as long as I can go outside, it'll be great. Like, I'll be fine, I can keep it together.' And that wasn't the truth at all. For me, it turned out, you know, I needed much more than just the outdoors. But I think that having my roots of like a healthy mind for me was in being able to go outside and experience the outdoors and go to places, for me it's about like, how far away from society and from my cell phone can I get? Like how can I remove myself from everything that keeps my anxious mind so busy. And I love the feeling of like the dimming or the dulling, if you will, of that noise. For me, my anxiety often feels like it builds to a roar. But it's typically like a buzzing, a chattering in the back of my mind. And when I go to like wild spaces in Alaska that were full of scary things like grizzly bears, that didn't even scare me to the same extent, because it was a place that I found so much clarity. And so yeah, there was this real fear of like, You're going on a backpacking trip and you,

you pass a bear and you're like, 'Wow, I'm going to sleep outside tonight.' That's true. That's like real fear. So my fear of myself and my fear of my mind becomes so much dimmer and smaller. And so that's why I think that I really need wild spaces. Because it's where I'm able to more clearly, think more clearly, be more aware of myself and accepting of myself, as well, in all facets of who I am, but particularly my mental illness as well.

CHAD: I feel like that theme of self acceptance, that's something that we definitely hear a lot on this podcast, it's a lot of our conversations, in the times where we can get face to face chats with people at speaking events or festivals, that's something that often is a resting place. That's kind of the wide open space that you're referencing in nature on the inside of your head, this ability to extend a sense of compassion to yourself. Now, I guess kind of walking backwards in your story. You found that nature, that these wild spaces, are therapeutic for you. Would you mind talking about the onset of your bouts with depression and anxiety? When did you first start kind of noticing those becoming recurring characters in your story?

GRETCHEN: It was in college. And I was studying abroad in Nepal. And I was living in this village making a film. And it was one of those moments where you're like, 'Wow, this is what the pit of despair feels like like, like this is what dark, dark, dark, dark, scary places in your mind feel like.' And the irony of I think, too, is that living, spending time there and spending time in Alaska are two of the most remote places I've ever lived, and they are the places I've definitely had the hardest time. They're also the places where I had the most access to the quote unquote, outdoors like to these wild spaces, but it's also where I had such a hard time and I think it's because when you're put in a place where you don't have cell phone reception, like you don't have the constant distractions of a city life, you can't go to a film festival downtown and out to eat at some fun places or get coffee with your friends or go to a brewery or like all these options that anyone who lives in an urban area has, you're faced with yourself. And you are your own company. And especially in this instance, like my Nepali at this point was pretty good, but I didn't speak the local language to an extent beyond, you know, communicating about wants and needs and the food I liked. So I didn't have any way to connect with anybody else. So I was really left with myself and my own thoughts and I think that's when my anxiety/depression really kind of reared its ugly head if you will, and said, 'Hey, I'm here, you've kind of been ignoring me for a while, like, I am a part of you and you need to look at me.' And I got back from that trip. And I definitely spiraled and was really depressed. I was in some like hard situations at school, and with a job I'd gotten and I was really struggling and my family has always been so supportive and encouraging in trying to get me to get help, and I was very resistant because for me as like a strong like athlete at the time, trying to be an independent woman, being told I needed help was not what I needed to hear or wanted to hear, at all. And so, I resisted and, and I resisted for years. And it was something that my wife had given me, like, so much pressure to go do for so long. And it was damaging our relationship. Like I was like, up and down and up and down. And like, she couldn't keep up with like where my head was at. I was honestly like in denial, I think that I even had a mental health problem. And then we moved to Alaska. And that's when things got very real and very scary. It got to a point where I was having panic attacks regularly, anxiety attacks all the time, like I was just, felt so out of control of my own head. And

again, I was in a place where there are no distractions. There's one stoplight on the island I lived at. And while it's the most beautiful place I've ever lived in my life, with these gorgeous mountains to climb and coastlines to walk. It's also incredibly isolating. And while the outside world you know, quieted down, I didn't have as much to distract myself. And so I really needed to come face to face with my demons if you will, or just with these like deep, dark parts of myself that the outside world, to me, found scary. And I think it's so amazing now like that she explores giving that platform to share that story and that you guys want to talk to me and that it's becoming more and more socially accepted to talk about the types of treatment that are available. And, and to that point, I love the word treatment. And I needed to hear that word way sooner. Because the second I had someone say, 'Gretchen, it's not about getting help. It's about getting treatment. You have an illness, just like someone might have a broken leg, like and you need to get the same kind of treatment for that.' That I was able to look at that and say, 'Okay, you're right. You're right. I do and I have a problem. And I need to get better. And I need to take care of this.' And so I put in a ton of work in Alaska. And I think I give it so much credit to the fact that I did that to the fact that I'm now living in Hawaii under like lockdown. And I'm doing great, which is really amazing to say, and I think it's because Alaska taught me how, like, the outdoors is not how to heal myself entirely. That there's a lot of work that has to be done internally as well. And so, while I can't go hiking. You know, there's so much stuff I can't do here right now. I'm okay. And I think that that's really great.

CHAD: No, I love that you mentioned that. That, so often, the language that we return to when we are talking about mental health challenges is finding a treatment plan. It's not a treatment formula, that it's not going to be a one stop shop to fix your brain chemistry or to fix your heart. But it's going to take some trial and error. It's going to take a number of wise voices and a number of experiences to kind of wake up your senses and to find that grounding. As you were discussing the places that you lived and your experience, you kept bringing up the word isolation. You were referring to that kind of with this distance between yourself and other people on a relational level, feeling like you were isolated from caring community, but also physically isolated. You were in Nepal, you were in Alaska, you were in places that were literally far from, from what you identified as home. And yet to begin this conversation, you were talking about the value of getting out in the wild. I really love this play with the word isolation of the times where you feel isolated, and you have the times that you just have to get away in order to find yourself and to find that center. I don't even know if there's a question there. But do you want to spend some time just exploring that nuance between the isolation that you felt in your battles with depression and anxiety and being in a wild space that most people would identify as isolated geographically?

GRETCHEN: Yeah, I think part of what made me take so long to get the help that I needed in Alaska was that I did have such access to what normally is very good for my brain, exercise and time outdoors. And you combine those two things and you're like, giving yourself a multivitamin every day. But at the same time, I didn't have good boundaries in my relationships. I didn't have a good sense of getting enough sleep and eating food at the right times of the day and like doing all these other things, like I had totally, I was running my own business, I didn't have a

schedule, like all this stuff led to a pretty bad mental health space for myself and I think that again being in this remote place and then also having a spouse who leaves a lot. So not only was I in this remote place where I'd moved to be with my partner, I also moved to be in this place and live alone, essentially, especially for like the first year and a half we were there. So my person was gone. And she had also been a huge you know, part of my own keeping my head on straight with regards to my mental health and so with her gone I was like very isolated. And I think all those things led to like, you know, me being in a very bad place for a while but I think it also led to me getting to the point where I knew that I needed more help than just, then exercising outside, you know, and spending time with friends or whatever, you know, my normal kind of quote unquote, like medicinal things would be. And so I've realized there that like, that's not enough. You know, that's great. And I am the hugest endorser of exercise and time outdoors, things that are really, really good for mental health. Because I know, I notice it in myself, like, if I haven't spent time outside, I'm not a good person to be stuck inside. And now I learned how to just find that in much smaller ways and smaller doses. But, it's not the only thing. And that's why when I read that story I wrote for "She Explores" looking back I'm like, 'Wow, that is, Gretchen, you were like, halfway there. You know, good job, but like you needed so much more than you realized. And I'm so glad that you found that now.'" But I was almost making an excuse saying, Oh, I just go exercise outside. I'm good. I don't need to do anything else. But that was so far from the truth and I'm glad for my hardest times because that's what's led me to be doing much better now.

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CHAD: So you mentioned the the exercise piece and you've mentioned what you identified as, you call it your your daily multivitamin you know the the getting out where, you know. I can empathize on some level with you know, being in a committed partner spouse relationship and yet work keeps us physically separated, you know, sometimes for weeks and sometimes months on end. However, you know, for me, I always know like, where my home address is, I've never really had the threat of moving at the drop of a hat hanging over me. With this most recent move, and maybe even with the moves prior to this one to Hawaii, where have you been able to find a sense of support outside of just exercise? Where have you found a sense of community for the times that when your wife is not able to be home for, for extended periods of time?

GRETCHEN: In Alaska, the really cool thing was that there are so many people whose partners are gone, especially in the summer months. So whether it's fishermen or fishing game workers, NOAA Officers, or scientists, and then a ton of coast guards on the island we lived on like there were so many other pairs that have been split up. And so it took me a bit but once I kind of learned and like looked around and realized that that was a thing. Most people became such a great resource because a lot of them, especially the ones, 20 years older than me have been doing this forever. And so when I was able to kind of ask for help in that regard to like, ask for advice, and how do you get through the summer months? Like, how do you pass the time or keep your head up, or that sort of thing. And a big thing is community, you know, kind of diving headfirst into building a community here, and there was huge, and it took me so much longer in

Alaska, because I didn't really have the tools at my fingertips yet. Like that was my first move in years. And so I didn't really know like, how do you go about making friends as an adult? It's so hard. It really is.

CHAD: No one taught me that in college, that it would be hard.

GRETCHEN: No, yeah, like that should be in your graduation handbook when like, 'All right, good job, you graduated college but also just so you know, making friends for the rest of your life is going to be really difficult.' And so that I think is a big thing is finding my crew if you will, finding my local friends has been really really important and also building a routine in my own life and sticking to it, especially when I'm home alone has been huge and finding joy in things I kind of used to hate like cooking for myself, that has been really big and and all those things together if I can like build a day that has the work I have to do in it, but also like the little things that I know bring me joy, then I know that I'll be doing okay, like that I'll be able to maintain like healthy levels in my brain as far as like my mental health goes. But the second I kind of start neglecting aspects of that is where I definitely start to struggle and I'm not here to say I've got it all right and I'm doing it perfectly because I'm so new to this. And I know that it's going to be a lifelong journey, if you will. Two years ago, I didn't know that life could be lived without pain every day. It was between my anxiety and then the resulting depression, I was in a really, really bad spot. And this sucks, every day is so hard. Why is life so hard? And now, I even in the midst of the world that we're living in right now, which is so chaotic and full of pain and frustration and anger and confusion. I wake up every day. And I try to find something I'm excited for before I even get out of bed. So maybe that's like my cup of coffee in the morning or tea. Or it's like the breakfast I'm really excited to eat. Or if I've planned a bike ride or some sort of adventure that I'm allowed, maybe that's what I'm excited about. But those are like the little things, particularly when I'm home alone that I have to do because otherwise it's just really easy to, I mean, I am so isolated. And now we're in a pandemic. And that makes that isolation in this new location even harder. But luckily, I know that I can try to go to local markets, if they're around and talk to vendors and like, meet other artists, or try to connect with other photographers on the internet, and get their tips of places to go and hopefully, someday we can meet up in real life, you know, that sort of thing is so hard because it's like the tips I would give right now are not really doable given the current climate. But I'm hoping at some point, there are a lot of people here that I do get to meet in real life, but they make the world feel smaller. And a smaller world definitely feels more at home, or makes me feel more at home.

CHAD: No, I love that. I mean, that strikes me is that role of an artist, whether that's through photography, or through music, through storytelling, through crafting is, is really to, like you said, shrink the world a bit. I'm sure that takes on an entirely different meaning to you as it would to me as someone that has been literally halfway around the world going all the way to Nepal. What are some tips that you've picked up along the way in maintaining boundaries, maintaining proper mental health, maintaining proper self care from these different communities that you've been able to, to call home for, for bits at a time?

GRETCHEN: That is a really good question that I love a lot. Because I've never been asked that before. And I think that I'm having things in my mind right now that excite me a bit because, yeah, like I said, I've never thought about that in that way. And so I'd start with Nepal, I mean, everyone there. I mean, half of the country's Hindu and the other half is Buddhist and the kind of route of Buddhism has a lot to do with mindfulness and being present. And so that's a big, big, big one for me. And my anxiety is remembering to be present. And my wife will say to me, if I ever start kind of spiraling, and she notices or I'm talking to her about things that I'm worrying about that are like tomorrow, or a month from now, she says, baby where your feet are. And I always kind of roll my eyes a little bit, but I'm like, 'you're right.' Like she's right. You know, you caught me, ready, and it's like, you know, going down and down a road, I don't need to go down right now. Because like it takes you out of the present. And when you're in the present, that's when you're capable of experiencing so much more joy. And when you're experiencing joy, you're less likely to be experiencing anxiety or depression or what have you. And then something I learned most recently in Alaska is just the importance of community and looking out for your neighbors and being able to ask for help. Even if it's something really little, like you never really know, or I never really know what is going to contribute to my anxiety on any given day. But I've learned that there are things that will build up that I feel like I have to do. Like it is a responsibility that I have. And I've noticed that sometimes if I just ask for help, maybe it's like building something in my house or something's broken, or, you know, what have you, something's amiss, and it's causing me anxiety. And so I have two choices, either a, I can keep stressing out about it and not know how to fix it or whatever or I can ask a friend and neighbor, the internet, even how, you know, how do you do X, Y, and Z. And that can just take like such a load off. And being able to do that takes guts and I think it takes a bit of vulnerability too depending on, you know, what it is you're asking for help with regards to, but I think it's super, super important. And then with regards to boundaries, I had never heard the word boundaries with regards to mental health before, like two years ago in Alaska. And I realized that I was so desperate for community and so desperate for friends that I had no boundaries with regards to people. When I would or if I would meet up with them, like what my boundaries were as far as like the information I'm sharing with them about myself and my family, or whether or not I even wanted to see them at all. And I think that people are definitely like a big root of my anxiety and so kind of recognizing that and also big shocker, Gretchen who thought she was an extrovert her entire life turns out to be quite an introverted extrovert or extroverted introvert, I'm like right on the line, but I thought my entire life I was super extroverted. And what I didn't realize is that I actually need a substantial amount of alone time but I never had the boundaries to like recognize that and say no. "No, I don't want to hang out with you this evening like I need. What else? Sorry, are you busy? Yes, I'm busy with myself." Like, I need to recharge, emotionally mentally, like, I want some time just sitting on my couch in my house with my dog. Even when my wife is gone, that's a big thing too. I do not need to fill my time overflowing while she's gone. It's quite alright to schedule evenings where I am by myself. And that's great and really good for me. It used to be a place that was very scary. I used to like have anxiety attacks anytime I was going to be home alone. And now I like look forward to it almost, almost. Or at least have just learned to enjoy it.

CHAD: That's the tweet. You don't have to fill your time. Especially now in this COVID era. Just people feeling that every second needs to be productive. And that utterly discounts the reality that caring for yourself listening to your rhythms, just learning something about yourself and, and maybe a bit of silence a bit of solitude a bit of stillness. Like that's still work just because it doesn't look like work or just because there's not a paycheck associated with it does not negate the importance of, checking in with yourself, being where your feet are. Well, before we go too much further, tell me a bit about the dog. Who's the dog? What's the dog? Do we know a breed?

GRETCHEN: She is a purebred harbor seal. We say. She is named Ella, otherwise known as Dobby or over jeem or bng. Um, she is 11 and a Cattle Dog Healer, Terrier, Beagle something else cute, little house off mix.

CHAD: Bless her heart.

GRETCHEN: And she's the freakin best. I got her from my parents, they were fostering a bunch of dogs and she wasn't really getting along with the other dogs quite as much and they also knew that I was really struggling with regards to my mental health and you know, they were like, 'We can get her certified as an emotional support animal and then you'd be able to travel with her' and I at the time especially was like, 'There's nothing wrong with me. Like, I look healthy like people are going to say the meanest things, like, I would no. I can't do that. I'm so embarrassed XYZ.' And gosh, there were so many things I would say to Gretchen five years ago, six years ago, and one of them is, 'You are not broken, but you need help, and you need these aspects to take care of yourself. And there's no shame in that.' And I thought there was so much shame. And so honestly, I didn't even start telling people that Ella was an ESA until like the last like two years because then they look at you and they say, 'But there's something wrong with you. Oh, you're cheating the system. Oh, I should do that with my dog too.' And then that makes you feel really shitty, like the scum of the earth human and it makes me doubt myself to, like, 'Am I sick enough that I need this?' And it has taken me so long, it gives me, it makes me feel so empowered now that I am able to, but it took me a really really long time to be okay with that. And this is probably the first time I've been like publicly sharing this with people so bravo me. Progress.

CHAD: Totally because I mean, I feel one thing that we discovered through this podcast is truly very little of any of these discussions is novel or is even unique. Now, there's unique names, there's unique places, there's nuance, but the reason this podcast, reason To Write Love as an organization still exists is because people have said, 'Hey, me too.' Or, 'Man, I've just been waiting for someone to say the same thing.' Or, 'I'm already glowing with the idea that someone out there who has just gotten a dog who is questioning whether or not they can get their dog certified as an emotional support or a therapy animal for their own benefit. How many people will now feel power to do that because you can, because your mental health matters. It's funny what you were saying about, you know, 'What will people think of me? How will people judge me as a human?' And, for whatever reason, I've found that people are way more gracious when we think of people as professionals or what they do or what takes up their time, then if we just view

them as a human. Example, when you were first starting your photography passion that has led into a career opportunity, you probably did not have the best equipment on day one of you shooting your very first subject and you didn't have all the tools, you didn't have all the theory, you didn't have access to teachers or to photo labs or to software. And yet, you probably wouldn't go back and shit on your entire first year of photography right now, right? Those are all stepping stones. And I just wish that people would see your human journey as the same thing. When we first learned about our own struggles with depression and anxiety, we didn't know this was going to be something that we would fight daily. And you know, through the rest of our lives, we were not equipped initially. And that's no fault of our own, that there are other people that have walked this road that we can lean on. There are tools, there are dogs, there are therapists, there are medications, there are books, there are things to help us learn. And you're not a bad person for leaning on tools to make you better, whether that's a better photographer, or just a better person on the planet.

GRETCHEN: Yeah, I think that we all deserve to be able to live with the smallest amount of pain possible and with regards to whatever we might be dealing with, and I think that I didn't believe that in the beginning. I believe that I had done something wrong or that I somehow deserved to be experiencing life in this way that just felt more difficult. Because life is difficult. Horrible things happen. There's so much pain in the world, but when it comes to like a day to day going about your day, routine, that's not supposed to be hard. But for me, when I was in the hardest time of this journey so far, it was so hard. The day to day was so difficult. It was like debilitatingly difficult. And it took a toll on so many people in my life. And I think, you know, I'm so glad that they encouraged me in the right direction, but it's hard to know and it's hard to see but you know, like you were talking about acceptance that people are going to accept you. You write yourself off way more than anybody else does. We are all so busy focusing on ourselves that we do not see these things and other people at all. And I have a really hard time asking myself that question, right? So if a friend of mine told me they had an emotional support animal would I have that reaction towards them? Probably not. In fact, I am now the biggest proponent of it. And when I know that people struggle with anxiety and they have animals, or like they're looking at maybe getting one I'm like, 'Yes, go do it. It's a tool in your toolbox.' It is not the only tool just like exercise and time outside is a tool in my toolbox. It is not the only one. I need many more than just that one. And when you build up this toolkit, it can be filled with lots of things and so mine happens to have a dog in it, it happens to have therapy, and happens to have the requisite amounts of time outside and exercise and eating well and getting enough sleep, etc. But yours might have medication. Or it might have time inside, alone, or whatever it might be that helps you be happier, because happiness is not always the goal. Sometimes just peace is the goal. For me anyway, to just feel stillness and feel peace. But I just think it's really neat that you all have this podcast and that you created this space in order to enable people to say, 'Hey, me too,' in a way that also offers resources because I think that's so important to say, 'Hey, I struggle too' that's great that we can find community with other people that have a hard time. But sometimes I find that there ends up being this like pity party situation, that's not beneficial for anyone really, because we all need to be moving forward and moving up and taking care of ourselves. And if we focus too much on what's wrong and not like, how do we take care of this,

how do we get the proper nutrients that we need to live a more fulfilled life, then that's not beneficial. I don't personally think, but those are just my opinions.

CHAD: I want to try to bring in one more question that was not on the primer dock at all. But as you were going through your very brief oral history of the places that you visited, the places that you've called home, I've noticed a theme. So Vermont, the Green Mountains, Colorado, Rocky Mountains, Alaska, Scott Mountains, Nepal, the tallest mountains in all the world. And Hawaii, these brilliant volcanic cliffs. And with so many of these conversations with life journeys, and particularly with mental health, we often refer to them topographically with mountains and valleys and it's occurring to me now, just how even like reductionist that language is. Not every mountain is gonna look the same, right? Like how can you begin to compare Vermont and Hawaii? How can you begin to compare the Rockies and the Himalayas? Like, I think that there's something touch on there that even in the moments that you feel like you can identify patterns in your life, or different valleys in your life, waves of depression and anxiety, that even then you can be surprised, just because you can say, 'Okay, yeah, that's definitely a valley' or 'That's definitely a mountain' doesn't mean that they're always going to look the same. So, I guess the question is, what would you say to someone who sees themselves in a valley or maybe sees a mountain in the distance? And perhaps their mountain looks very different from yours and their valley looks so different from yours. What would you identify as some basic survival tools for anyone that may find themselves in similar topography?

GRETCHEN: I love this metaphor. I love nature metaphors. I love metaphors in general. I really love nature metaphors. I love the idea of looking at these landscapes. And I love that you picked that out from what I shared that, you know, these mountains look so different, obviously, yes, Gretchen loves mountains. That's like how I decided where I wanted to study abroad in college was like, where are there mountains? Where are there big mountains? And I think the biggest in the world. And as far as encouraging, I think that for me, looking at these different types of mountains, so right, there are mountains I'm never going to climb. Like, have no desire to climb the Himalayas. You can, but it takes like a lot of money and resources and training, to climb Mount Everest right? Like it takes a lot to do that. It's doable though. There are mountains on the island I live on now that are not claimable. They are sheer cliffs. That you can't even rock climb up. You know, it's like this jungle. I can't even describe it. I've never seen anything like it. It's truly gorgeous. But there are parts of them that you can't climb. And that is new for me to live in a place where I'm looking at mountains that are just untouchable. And I think it's really important when you're looking at your own struggles. And when I look at the last, say 10 years of my life, and what those have looked like they have all been different types of mountains. And something we haven't really touched on, but my whole coming out experience, which continues to this day, talking to the dentist this morning who asked me, you know what my husband's birthday was? And that is like the kind of mountain that is like the Green Mountains in Vermont, you know? It's like, you could do it every day. It takes some energy, but like not, it's not going to like knock you out for a week but it's a thing you have to kind of do every day. But it's doable. So the fatigue of coming out on a regular basis and being different, being other, versus you know, me having when I'm flying or something and needing to tell someone why my dog is with me

when they ask, 'Oh, what's wrong with you?' That's, for me, more of like a rocky mountain. That's a little higher. That's me, especially when it's a stranger sitting next to me on a plane and going, 'Did you really just ask me that?' Okay, deep breath Gretch, like, what are we going to do about this today? Are we going to answer this question? Are they gonna say I'd rather not talk about it. Like, there's options. But that's a bigger mountain for me. And acknowledging that I think is really important. Acknowledging that it's going to take more energy to talk about things that are harder, more personal, things maybe you haven't talked about before. So when I first started dating my now wife, it was not a Green Mountain, you know, it was like, borderline Himalaya looking like to be like, wow, I have to tell these people something about myself that could change their opinion of me. And did. It changed a lot of people's opinion about me and I've lost a lot of friends. So I think that looking now and saying, 'Okay, I need to give people more of the benefit of the doubt' and hope that, you know, a right wing conservative person I know who I'm telling about my wife is still going to want to have a conversation with me when we're done. That's like trust and that's trying not to have bad stereotypes about other people based on past experiences, which is really hard. For me, my battles with anxiety and depression are definitely more of the mountains in Alaska, really beautiful. Some of them are claimable. Some of them aren't, but at any given time at any given season, they're attainable and require a lot, a lot of work. They require preparation, both physical and mental. They require tools like bear spray, and crampons and trekking poles and lots of extra water. They require you to be really prepared. And I think that that's what living with anxiety and depression requires. It requires you to be prepared, it requires you to pack up your rucksack and head out the door with what you might need to take care of any part of it on any given day. And yeah, I just love this metaphor and I think like so if you are listening to this and are looking at your own life and your own struggles. I think figuring out what those mountains are to you, maybe it's a different metaphor for you. And being able to assess like, 'What do I need to make this mountain claimable? How many tools do I need? Where are we at? How much extra do I need to take care of myself today?' And that, I believe, I will do for the rest of my life. This isn't something that you're cured from, but it does get easier. Just like training for a marathon. Running gets easier. I'll never do it. But that's because I don't like running. But I think if you can find things that you do enjoy and that do help you become stronger, mind and body, that are not as climbable, except these ones are tricky. I don't know what a metaphor is for them yet. But yeah, they're beautiful but like, I'm like, I want to get on top of that. And they're like, 'Yeah, you can't.' Like don't tell me that, like that's not true. I'm here for two years. Give me some time. I'll figure it out.

CHAD: Sure, keep that plotting going. Gretchen, this was great. Thank you so much for the time and thank you for sharing and, where can we find you on the interwebs? How can people keep track of Gretchen if they are not in Hawaii?

GRETCHEN: You can find me on the interwebs on Instagram @gpowersfilm and at Powers Pervisions and then my wife and I are constantly sharing stories and recipes and stuff on gpowersfilm.com.

CHAD: Gretchen, yeah, all of our gratitude to you and to your family for allowing us to take some time out of your afternoon and I guess it's wait is it noon yet? Is it lunchtime?

GRETCHEN: Yeah. It's right about lunchtime. Or so my stomach is telling me.

CHAD: Hey, time is a myth. But send your love to or our love to your family and your dog.

GRETCHEN: Will do.

[music playing]

CHAD: I want to say thank you again to Gretchen for being willing to explore this topic with us today. We are truly grateful for her vulnerability and willingness to be honest even when talking about the hard things she struggles with. We hope that you can relate in seeing your own experiences with mental health as mountains that can differ in size and terrain, and require you to adjust and prepare accordingly. But ultimately knowing, at the end of the day and perhaps with some extra assistance, that they are climbable. And we want to remind you that throughout the ascent, you don't have to reach the peak alone. Even in "wild places" you are still in good company, and we are glad you are here.

[music playing]

LINDSAY: We hope this episode has been a reminder that your story is important, you matter, and you're not alone.

If you're struggling right now, know that it is okay to reach out and that there are people who want to help. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources on our website twloha.com. That's T-W-L-O-H-A.com. And Click FIND HELP at the top of the page.

Or, if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always text our friends at Crisis Text Line. Simply text the word TWLOHA—that's T W L O H A—to 741741. And you'll be connected to a crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The To Write Love on Her Arms podcast is produced by Lindsay Kolsch, with editorial support by Rebecca Ebert. Music assistance was provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor.

I'm Lindsay Kolsch, thank you so much for listening.

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