

Chris Fagan: Dear Keenan, this is the hardest letter that I've ever written, and I'm certain it'll be the hardest letter that you've ever read for if you're reading my words, then I must be gone. Something unpredictable and horribly unimaginable has happened to me in Antarctica. At this moment, I wish my arms could reach out from these pages and wrap around you to comfort you like no other. I would take your hand in mine, whisper in your ear, tell you, "I love you, and everything will be okay." Of all the things that I've ever done in my life, nothing compares to being your mom, nothing. How could I choose Antarctica over spending the rest of my life loving you and watching you grow into a man? I promised to be safe. I promised I would be back. Part of living, really living, is to continuously grow, and learn, and challenge your limits. I believe to my core that the best way to live a good life, a full life, a happy life, is to seek challenge and to take risks, try new things and push into the unknown.

Shelby Stanger: It takes a certain kind of person, a bold one, a strong one, a wild one to pursue an adventure like the one taken on by today's guest. In 2014, Chris Fagan and her husband, Marty, left their 12-year-old son at their home in Washington state, and they flew to Antarctica. There, they spent 48 days skiing to reach the South Pole, setting a world record. I'm Shelby Stanger, and this is Wild Ideas Worth Living. Chris Fagan calls herself ordinary, like anyone else, but she's spent decades pursuing wild ideas. She met her husband while climbing Denali in Alaska unguided. She founded an innovation consulting company. She's run several ultramarathons, but the idea for her wildest adventure, it came with the realization that she and her husband's bodies, they were aging. The planet was warming. Antarctica was changing, and they decided it was time to push themselves to the edge of the world now.

Shelby Stanger: I just want to start with why? Why did you have that wild idea at age ... Can we say your age?

Chris Fagan: Yeah. Well I was 48 when we went, and my husband was 50.

Shelby Stanger: Heck yeah.

Chris Fagan: Mm-hmm (affirmative). "Why?" is the biggest questions that you could imagine of this expedition, and I think the biggest reason why is the core of our relationship and our family is adventure and living it adventurously. My husband and I had met adventuring; and at that point, we'd been married for about 15, 20 years, and we wanted to take it to the next level. We had done all kinds of ultrarunning and mountaineering, and this was really the pinnacle. We were in the prime shape of our lives, and we thought ... We were starting to feel creaks and cracks in our body as we were getting older, and my husband's knee was acting up, and we thought, "If there's any time that we can do this, it's probably now," and we really struggled with when we should go. "Should we wait until our son's in college?" Which at that time, my son was 12; and so we just thought, "I don't think our bodies are going to be able ... May not be able to do it at that timeframe," so, yeah, and we wanted to see the most wild, pristine,

other-worldly place we could imagine on earth and experience it first-hand where few people had ever gone and do it on our own and not have any guides and really see, "What are we really made of? Are we up to this challenge? Are we able to do this? Can we prepare ourselves to be safe?" And it was just the most wild imaginable thing we could do, and so we just wanted to challenge ourselves before it was too late.

Shelby Stanger: How do you find yourself staring down 570 miles of skiing and trekking over a landscape of barren snow in 20 below temperatures? Well it started with Chris' love for the outdoors which blossomed as a child growing up in Illinois. Tell us a little bit about what you were like as a kid and how you became an endurance athlete.

Chris Fagan: I grew up in Champaign, Illinois and Des Moines, Iowa; so I was a Midwestern flat-lander, and you really had to just invent your own excitement. Yeah, there was no mountains. There weren't lakes nearby, but I was an outdoor girl. I just found that I fit outside, and I liked just wandering around as a kid, riding my bike. Those were the days when your parents were like, "Go ahead. We'll see you in ... 5pm when it's time for dinner."

Shelby Stanger: Then somehow you moved to Seattle, and is it in Seattle where really this adventurous spirit to go climb Denali in Alaska with some girlfriends was born?

Chris Fagan: I would back up a step and really was born when I had some girlfriends ... After getting a professional job, maybe four or five years after working, they decided to ask for a leave of absence from their job and go travel by themselves; and I thought that was the coolest idea on earth. I just thought, "Oh my gosh. I need to do that," and so I asked for a leave of absence from my advertising job and traveled for four months by myself, and that was really what launched me. I went to the Cook Islands, to New Zealand, to Australia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Japan by myself; and it really gave me the confidence to say, "I can do anything I want." I came back. I was living in Chicago at the time and said, "You know what? I have to live where there's mountains. I have to live where there's ocean. I have to live where I can be outside, where it's accessible out my door," and then I just put it out there, and jobs started coming to me. I had a job offer in Seattle and Denver, and I just didn't know anybody in either place, and I'm like, "I'm going to Seattle." Moved to Seattle, and at the same time, I thought, "I need to build a job where I can be flexible and do what I want to do and not always walk into an office," so about two years into that job I took, I decided I must start my own consulting agency.

Shelby Stanger: After founding her own company, Chris finally had the flexibility to go adventuring. The thing is her adventures weren't just everyday hikes or camping trips. Chris was climbing Denali in Alaska unguided. But she maintains she was just an ordinary person, and ordinary people can do extraordinary things. For those of you listening to this podcast, you can't see Chris, but she looks like just

this cute mom. She's not completely jacked and scary and intimidating. I mean you look like one of my buddies but like any mom at school. It's so cool.

Chris Fagan: That's what's interesting is one of the things my husband and I have found is that we are just ordinary people. We get up in the morning, and we have jobs. I have a consulting company that I have been working at for 25 years. My husband goes to a tech job. We're not professional athletes. A lot of times, you hear these things, and that's their whole life. We live on a regular block with neighbors and friends and kids, and our son has grown up in this environment, so it's just part integrated into who we are as people who want to live an adventurous life but don't have the vision of, "Adventure is our livelihood."

Shelby Stanger: That's important, when it's not your job. It's just part of you. What does adventure do for you that makes you keep coming back to it?

Chris Fagan: Adventure and just literally being outside is where I just feel the most alive and in touch with myself and the world around me. I just find if I'm in my office too long, I just need to get outside and just get a breath of fresh air. Literally wipes my mind clear, become more present, become more in tune with what it is that I want out of life, out of this day, out of this moment and just gets ... Any frustration and stress that I have will leave my body, especially running. I mean I started out as ... My stronghold in the outdoors became decade plus of ultrarunning, and your mind and body can transcend when you're outside running.

Shelby Stanger: So you're speaking my language. For me, the outdoors is where I solve problems. It's where I go for stress relief, for fun, and it's where I met my partner. I met him surfing in Costa Rica, and you met your husband in Denali. That's hot. Can we talk about this?

Chris Fagan: Yeah, same idea. I moved to Seattle and decided I wanted to learn how to mountaineer, and I took these mountaineering classes through The Mountaineers in Seattle for two years, became super proficient, decided me and these other two women were going to climb Denali in Alaska, and what happened was we were on the mountain. The first day we arrived, other teams arrive in a similar timeframe, and other teams arrived; and my husband's team arrived that same day, and his was three men, and we just happened to arrive at the mountain on the same day, and we started moving up the mountain; and so if you know anything about this mountain, there's base camp, and then there's four camps, and so you're kind of moving up when the weather's good. Teams move, and we were just on the same path, so we just started talking to each other through tents. Literally when you're in a storm, you're sitting in your tent for two, three, four days; and you're just talking to anybody around you, and we were talking through tents, and Marty would talk to our tent of, "How are you ladies doing over there?" And pretty soon, it became, "Hey Chris, how are you doing over there?" And so literally that's how it happened, but I was laser-focused on climbing, and so was he.

Shelby Stanger: He was flirting with you between tents.

Chris Fagan: Yeah. At one point, he was baking pancakes because we were all hunkered down in a storm. "Hey, you guys want some pancakes over there?" Throws over some pancakes. That was how, yeah ... I really don't know how it worked other than we both summited the same day. We hugged on the mountain ridge. His team summited. We were coming down. We were 30 minutes apart. Hugged, got down to base camp, and he said, "No matter what, we need to have a beer in Talkeetna together," and then we literally decided to stay an extra day when all of our teammates flew off, and then that was it. He moved to Seattle six weeks later from Hawaii.

Shelby Stanger: I just got goosebumps. I love a good adventure love story.

Chris Fagan: Yeah and we were both in our early 30s, and you just know. You just know.

Shelby Stanger: And you guys have a baby.

Chris Fagan: Yeah.

Shelby Stanger: Keenan.

Chris Fagan: Yes.

Shelby Stanger: Who, at the time when you decided to go to the South Pole, was 12. Right?

Chris Fagan: That is correct, yeah.

Shelby Stanger: That's a pretty young age to leave a kid at home ...

Chris Fagan: Yeah.

Shelby Stanger: ... When you want to go off and do an adventure that has some risks. How did you guys decide to do that?

Chris Fagan: When the idea first emerged, it was three years prior, so Keenan was nine years old; and really, it took us a year to vet the idea. "Can we do this? Can we be safe? Is it too risky?" Because when the idea first came up, it was not a yes. It was a hard stop, "Oh my gosh. What?" Marty brought up the idea. "Hey, what do you think about going to the South Pole?" But he wasn't even convinced. He just sort of had this, "Why not us? We have all this experience now. Why not us?" And so then we explored that questions for a full year, and we vetted our experience and our skills, and we met with polar guides. We actually went on some training with them to say, "Are we crazy to think we can do this? Or do you believe that we have the skillsets?" And they vetted us, and that was a huge hurdle and then they said, "Yes. I actually do think you guys have what it takes."

So, yes, so a year, "Yes okay we can do this." Then two years of really hardcore training and planning and bringing my son along, so at first, he really was reluctant about the idea; but for three years of watching us plan and make sure we're going to be safe and that he's going to be safe at home, and we had this whole planning for him at home, for friends and mostly family to come in and be with him at home, engaging his school to be part of this adventure; and we went in and did this whole assembly with the school prior to leaving, and they had a bulletin board with tracking us every day.

Shelby Stanger: So you guys were the cool parents.

Chris Fagan: We were, hopefully.

Shelby Stanger: To put into perspective, how far is the distance that you're going to trek, and just give me a little bit of background on the South Pole, and why the South Pole?

Chris Fagan: Yeah, so two places that we thought were the most wild on earth to try, and were really good endurance athletes, is the North Pole or the South Pole. We chose the South Pole because it actually is a bit safer, and also as some of your listeners may know, climate change is really affecting both places but particularly the North Pole. There's no land. It's just solid ice, so at the South Pole in Antarctica, it's land covered by a massive ice, so even if it's melting, there's not these massive open leads of water that you can fall into so less dangers. There's not polar bears, which are in the Arctic, so that was a little less risky. Our journey would take us from the edge of Antarctica to the South Pole, 570 miles; so to be official in Antarctic-type adventures that you want to go solo, unsupported, unguided, unaided, you need to start at the edge of the continent and make it to the South Pole with no help to kind of fit into that category.

Shelby Stanger: So that means you had to carry all of your own gear, all of your own food, all of your own ... Well you melted snow, I'm guessing, for water.

Chris Fagan: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Shelby Stanger: How heavy was that?

Chris Fagan: Our sleds ... We each carried a sled that was about seven feet long, three feet wide, and they were 220 pounds, so each of us had 220 pounds.

Shelby Stanger: You're pretty small. You're 5'4" ...

Chris Fagan: That's right.

Shelby Stanger: ... Guessing. 230. That's impressive.

Shelby Stanger: Three years of preparation couldn't completely prepare Chris and her husband for the adventure that lay ahead. Some of their friends and family, they didn't understand why they would choose to put themselves in this position, especially as parents. We've talked to a lot of different adventurers in the past three seasons, and they all deal with preparation and goal setting differently. Chris explained her approach in a way that really resonated with me.

Shelby Stanger: So eventually your kid's on board. You get other people on board. Was there anybody, maybe even your parents, who said, "You're crazy for going to the South Pole."

Chris Fagan: So when we decided to announce that we're going, there was clear camps of, "This is awesome. We totally get what you're doing," and then there was clear apprehension from another group and rightfully so. Until you really understand the painstaking ways in which we were making sure that we were going to be safe, when you just hear it, you think, "That's irresponsible. I don't think you should do that. That's scary," so that camp, until they sort of allowed us to explain where we're coming from, then a lot of people came around. My brother was one of them. He lives up in northern Alaska, and he knows cold intimately, and he's just like, "I don't get it. It's just going to be cold, a big struggle. Why would you do this? I don't understand, and who's going to take care of Keenan when you guys die?" And I'm like, "Oh." Some people just don't understand why some athletes want to struggle. Why do we want to struggle, and why do we want to put ourselves in harm's way?

Shelby Stanger: What's that answer?

Chris Fagan: It's a hard answer to explain, and that's one reason I choose the hard road of writing a book because it really took a whole book to explain it, but the short answer is we are on this planet to live, right, fully; and once you figure out what your thing is that makes you feel most alive, I feel like that's what you need to go do. Ultimately, for our son, it was to model for him what it looks like to live a full life that you feel makes you feel most alive, and that's how you're going to contribute the most in the world, I believe; so the judgment that we felt from ... Mostly it was people we didn't know. That was the judgment, but the judgment you felt, it was hard, but then we overcame it because you kind of just go, "Why are we doing this? Why are we doing this?" Literally you're asking yourself for years as you're planning. It wasn't a simple decision.

Chris Fagan: But then watching our son come along on the journey with us and his mindset shift as he was part of it, and he could feel our excitement, and for him to see his parents put in so much effort and hard work towards a goal, you can't explain that to a child. You model it for a child, and in the end, all of our worst fears did not come to fruition. The guilt that you feel as a parent sometimes in doing something for yourself ... And we all deal with this whether you're just ... "Should I go back to work? Should I leave my son for a few days?" All of that guilt, I think sometimes it's society putting that on us, especially as women. It

was much more prevalent for me than my husband even though we were both leaving my son. The judgment was more on me.

Shelby Stanger: At the beginning of the episode, we heard the beginning of a letter you wrote to your son, Keenan, who was 12 at the time when you departed for your grand South Pole quest. We'll hear more of the letter later in the episode, but can you talk to me about writing it? What was that like for you?

Chris Fagan: Prior to departing as a parent, you're getting ready to depart, and you're making sure all of your paperwork and everything is in order in case something should happen which we do for any kind of trip, right; or you're just leaving, making sure that your will and everything is in order, and people know where it is; and so part of that was that we wanted to have some paperwork in there that talks about ... And we did this prior to even dreaming up the South Pole. If our guardians had to care for my son, what kind of things would we want them to do for him to continue to live the values that we have? So we had that in there, and then I just decided I wanted to write a letter to Keenan directly if something happened to us, and one of the reasons I wrote this letter was for myself because it really was ... I was struggling for over a year of this guilt and making sure that, "Why am I doing this? Why am I ..." and even today six years later, it's hard to tell you. "Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this?" So I wrote this letter to really be clear for myself and for my son.

Shelby Stanger: That letter made me cry. My dad died suddenly when I was 11 almost 12, same age as Keenan, of a heart attack; but I took with that, you have to live life to the fullest, but I can't imagine writing a letter to my future child as if I was dead. At the same time, I'm thinking that's a really good exercise for people to do in life. What was that like for you?

Chris Fagan: Writing that letter was really hard. As you can imagine, there's tears all over the actual letter because you're just coming to terms with ... Ultimately you're coming to terms with your morality, and whether you have a child or not, we don't know when our last day is, right? And you're just acknowledging that, and I had lived sort of this life, and I have this blessed life where I haven't had these horrible things happen to me, but you never know when something could happen. It was not an exercise that my husband chose to do. He felt it was too ... He didn't want to have to think that way, and we all have our own way of dealing with these things, right? But for me, I didn't feel complete resolution and put that guilt away until I could do that, until I could resolve feelings that might have gotten in the way of my focus.

Shelby Stanger: When we come back, hear about the hardest day of Chris' expedition plus some unique challenges she faced as a middle-aged woman in the wilderness. Chris also offers great advice for conquering your fears.

Shelby Stanger: REI believes that every action matters, especially in the fight for life outdoors. That's why REI's taking steps every day to reduce waste in the business, and

they want you to join in. Make action a part of your life with the Opt to Act Plan. It's 52 weeks of simple action to reduce your impact, get active, and leave the world better than you found it. Nature doesn't have time to wait. Opt to Act. Find out more about the plan at [rei.com/optoutside](http://rei.com/optoutside). That's [rei.com/optoutside](http://rei.com/optoutside).

Shelby Stanger: With a wild idea like this one, every day had to be a struggle. High gusts, temperatures of 40 degrees below, and heavy sleds weren't the least of the challenges Chris and her husband faced. In her book, *The Expedition*, Chris writes about her whole Antarctica adventure including day 39, the hardest day of their trek. I want to talk about the expedition. I'm really curious about the hardest part, day 39 you write about in your book.

Chris Fagan: A lot of Antarctica and traveling there is like Groundhog Day because people might not realize. It's just white vast open landscape, which makes it really monotonous and also really beautiful at the same time. By day 39, imagine every single day you're getting out of your tent and going for 8 to 10 hours, dragging a 220-pound sled which is getting lighter as you go ...

Shelby Stanger: And you're on skis?

Chris Fagan: We're on skis, and the weather is ... The average is about 20 below, and as you're moving toward the Pole, it's a gradual incline. The Pole sits at 9000 feet which few people know.

Shelby Stanger: I had no idea.

Chris Fagan: But it's super gradual, so it seems flat, but it's hard, and there's all these different conditions of the snow that you're dealing with. It's sometimes super sticky. It feels like you're pulling through sand. It's crazy.

Shelby Stanger: And then there was these weird little hills.

Chris Fagan: Right. There's waves of snow which are called sastrugi which look like frozen waves in an ocean. Imagine it just freezes, and you have to pull over those. There was 150 miles, so by day 39, we had taken one rest day out of 39 days; so imagine that in your daily life, but you're going 10 hours a day of hard work. The reason we only took one day is we had a finite amount of food, and we had predicted our trip would take us 40 to 45 days, so we had 45 days of food, and we could quickly project by day 30 that we aren't going fast enough, so we can't take more rest days.

Chris Fagan: So we were only going about a mile or two slower than projected, but that adds up to about five days of food that we were going to be short, so we had to keep going, and we had to then start rationing food a little bit to make some additional days of food; so we had 5,400 calories a day, which is double what you would eat in normal life; and we started, at about day 37, having to take a little bit away from each day.

Shelby Stanger: And you're burning ...

Chris Fagan: 8,000 a day.

Shelby Stanger: So you're just losing weight.

Chris Fagan: You're losing weight. We actually put on weight before going because you knew it was going to be a losing equation, so I gained about 12 pounds of trying to muscle mass. My husband gained about 15, but I was losing about a third of a pound a day, and he was losing a half a pound a day. And also the stress of being your own guide, I cannot underestimate in telling you how hard it is to be your own guide in a place you've never been, and you've never been able to simulate that exact experience somewhere else. Yes-

Shelby Stanger: The navigation part or ...

Chris Fagan: The stress of every decision is yours to make, and there is no room for error, so your navigating isn't so hard, but it's the conditions that you're under that ... You make one false move. You can lose a piece of gear to the wind, literally, and you can't go get another piece of gear. If you let go of that tent in a 30-mile-per-hour wind, it's gone, so you have all this protocol, and so you're getting more and more tired, and if you don't follow these steps, you could do something wrong and really put your life at risk, so that stress is always weighing on you. At the same time, your body is breaking down, and you have pushed yourself mentally and physically beyond where you've ever been, and we pushed ourselves really hard. As ultrarunners, we have run for 24, 36 hours straight in a race, but you know that it's going to end. You did not know when this was going to end, and so the state of mind was a place where I've never been and my husband at the same time. So we became these two people who were up against our own physical and mental barriers simultaneously where normally we would be able to prop each other up, and throughout the expedition, we would. You'd have a bad day, and I'd kind of help you. He'd help me, but we were both there at the same time, and we were no longer able to be there for each other. I was having some crying breakdowns in the tent because the stress. Usually exercise was my stress reliever, and in this case, it was just causing more stress, and your body's breaking down. It needs a rest day. It needs recovery, but you can't give it the recovery you know it needs, so you're in survival mode; and as much as you want to show your love and support of your spouse, you don't have it to give, and they don't have it to give to you. And so you become ... I'm not angry at my spouse, but it feels tense in your relationship, and what really saved us was having our sat phone. We called in to report where we were every single day. We also had ... I had a really good friend who I called at least once a week as just my touchstone. You're so isolated. The isolation is crazy. It is not like being on Everest where there's lots of other teams, and you can see other people. You see nothing. You are completely isolated, and 10 hours a day, you're in your own head. That's how isolating it is, and now you're budding up against the wall at the same time, and just having that phone was really the life

savior for us. We literally had a day where I said, "Maybe we should take another rest day," and Marty said ... He was literally like, "If we take a rest day, we're never going to make it. If that's what you need to do ..." this kind of thing which was not our normal way of being with each other.

Chris Fagan: And he said, "Well let's call somebody and see what they think outside the tent," so we call my friend. Her name's Lenny, and she's a good running friend of mine, and she sort of just talked us down. "You're at mile 70 of 100 mile race, Chris. This is the low point. This is where you just have to dig deep. You know you can do this. Everything gets better." Those mantras you tell yourself. "Just keep moving forward. Everything will get better in the morning." These kinds of things. "We just have to move through, and don't ..." We never thought we'd stop, but it just was such a otherworldly experience.

Shelby Stanger: Okay so that was one mantra. I mean how did you do it? How did you keep going? What did you say to yourself?

Chris Fagan: I literally would say, "Mind over body. Mind over body. Mind over body," because it was such a mental exercise. There were so many people who have tried this who have probably superhuman physical powers who haven't done it, who haven't been able to complete it, and it becomes a mental battle, and that's really what gets you through; belief in yourself, mind over body.

Shelby Stanger: Did you listen to music? Podcasts?

Chris Fagan: I did. There were certain days where we would listen to podcasts or music and other days when the conditions were so horrendous you just wanted complete focus, yeah.

Shelby Stanger: And on top of that, you're in your 40s, and you're going through hot flashes.

Chris Fagan: Oh my gosh, yes.

Shelby Stanger: I have so much to look forward to. Tell me about it. In the most freezing of cold conditions, that must've been-

Chris Fagan: I'm telling you. Women out there, it's different for everybody, if you haven't gone through menopause; but I was in my late 40s. It was sort of pre-menopause, and everything is kind of wacky, so your body is having these hot flashes; and for me, it starts in your chest and kind of just spreads through your body, and it lasts for a minute or two, but you're just on fire. But in Antarctica, you have to have everything covered at all times because you're worried about getting frostbite, so those were little torture zaps. You're going along, and I would just have this hot flash, and I would literally have to stop. You don't want to stop because you're following your partner, so we would be in a single file, so if he was in front of me, I would just sort of wait and hope that would just wash over me, and then I could kind of catch up.

Chris Fagan: But it was literally ... At night sometimes, it would happen. That's more frequent, and so you're in your sleeping bag, and you're cold, and then you're just like, "I'm dying," and then you're just like, "I'm sweating to death," and so it really disrupted my sleep a lot which ... Then I actually had my period that just went on and on while I was there, and that was a whole episode of learning to deal with that.

Shelby Stanger: What did you do?

Chris Fagan: Well if you would like to know specific details, I'm happy to tell you.

Shelby Stanger: Go for it.

Chris Fagan: So before leaving, I was like, "Do I ..." Because this is something ... I actually wrote about it in my book because people don't talk about it.

Shelby Stanger: Yeah. I think we should talk about it. I have a lot of friends who are adventurers, and that's the biggest question I have is, "What do I do if I'm doing this month-long journey, and I get my period?"

Chris Fagan: Right so you definitely have to prepare by bringing supplies, so you're bringing tampons, but in this case, that was two months and tampons; and so what was happening also for my body, it's common with other women, is that you end up having these really really really really heavy periods that are not normal because your body is trying to figure out how to shut itself down eventually, so that was happening; and I had pre-decided ... I had done all this research, and I didn't want to carry so many tampons because you have to-

Shelby Stanger: Mooncup.

Chris Fagan: Yeah so it was the Diva Cup.

Shelby Stanger: The Diva Cup.

Chris Fagan: The Diva Cup, so I'd read about it, and I was like, "Never tried it," and I was like, "Hey, this is cool. I'm going to try this."

Shelby Stanger: So intimidating, but people swear by them.

Chris Fagan: They're great.

Shelby Stanger: Yeah.

Chris Fagan: So that's what I used, yeah, and I brought two of them because I was worried. "What if something happens to it?" And they're lightweight silicone, and you could wash it with hot water, and that's what I used. I did encounter one really

... Wasn't able to test it exact conditions, so 20 below, and I'm outside trying to pull that thing out, and I couldn't get a hold of it, and it was like, "Three, two, one. My hands are frozen. Oh my God," and then that's when the swearing started because I'm like, "Oh my gosh. I can't get the stupid thing out," and then I dive in the tent, and I'm in the vestibule, and Marty is like, "Oh what is happening?" Because normally our men in our lives don't have to be intimately involved in everything that's happening to us and our bodies, and I'm literally squatting in the vestibule. I'm like, "I have to get this thing out," and I'm ... Because now that my hand's a little warmer, I can sort of get it and-

Shelby Stanger: That is my worst nightmare.

Chris Fagan: It was a nightmare. It was a nightmare, and then I got it out, and it was sort of like-

Shelby Stanger: Crime scene?

Chris Fagan: It was a little ... It was a crime scene. It was a total crime scene, and my husband's like, "Whoa," but we cleaned everything up, and everything was okay, and then I figured out how to get it out. I just had to learn how to get it out of my body, kind of bearing down like having a child or something, kind of push it out, and then everything was good. It was really good.

Shelby Stanger: For you men listening, it's all good. What were the highlights like, especially when you made it?

Chris Fagan: So those are two questions, but the highlights are really those moments that any of us who have been in any kind of activity, whether it's art or where you really get in the flow, and you're in an environment so beautiful, or you're just floating through a magical environment where you are surrounded by nature. You're one with everything. Hours melt. You don't even know that you've been moving. That happened. Or you stand, and you're just turning 360 degrees, and you're looking at this wilderness that is the most profound place you've ever seen, and it's not windy, and it's silent; and my whole relationship with silence changed because I learned that silence isn't to be filled. It's to be felt, and everything that's in the silence was always there, but I didn't know it.

Shelby Stanger: I love what you just said. Silence isn't to be filled. It's to be felt.

Chris Fagan: I came back, and I stopped using my headphones running, kind of not on purpose. It just started happening because sometimes you're filling that, "Oh I'm doing this because I have this on my schedule because I need to go do this race, so I have to put this many miles in," and I sort of let go of a lot of that and just became more one with what was happening in the moment and just more tuned into the moment, to being present and not worrying about what if so much. Your other part of the question was how did it feel when we got there, and when we got there, it was just ... Again, it was so surreal because ...

Listeners may not know that at the South Pole is an actual scientific base, so there's a manmade object, so for 48 days, you've seen nothing but white and a blue sky; and all of a sudden, there's objects on the horizon, and literally I saw a dot the day before we arrived, and I'm like, "That glint looks like something that's not snow," and it was just a little dot, and we pulled out our GPS, and we were 16 miles away from the Pole, and we could see the start of the Pole 16 miles away.

Chris Fagan: And you're on a glacier, so it's undulating so kind of in and out of view, but suddenly you're just beelining with all of your might towards, "I don't have to look at my compass anymore. I can just follow the little dot that's growing over time." It was really interesting. The last day was the hardest. It was like Antarctica just decided, "We're going to test you to the limit, and you're not there. You still have a day," and it was 50 below, and the wind was howling, and if you read any history books, you may have learned that Scott's team who was trying to become the first to the Pole, a British team, they perished 13 miles from their next depot of food. We had 11 miles to get to the Pole our last day, and it's just like coming off a mountain. You're not there until you're there, and we were so cold, and we had some mishaps that day that Marty's hands were super freezing, and we just never took a break.

Chris Fagan: But once we were within a mile, and you know you're going to be there, it was all tears in the goggles, just overwhelming feeling of completion and satisfaction and pride, and what we did was, as we saw the Pole and we were almost there, Marty was like, "Let's call Keenan and have him on the phone as we actually arrive at the Pole," and so that's what we did. Our hands were little clumps, didn't work, and we're trying to call, and my sister was there with him. She answered. It was a Saturday. He was home from school, and we're like, "Keenan, we're at the pole," and we're just screaming into the phone, and he was so excited. We were just bawling, and it was hard to tell what he was doing, but to just have that moment of him being there with us at that moment was spectacular. We didn't think we were going to do that, and it just sort of spontaneously happened, and it was sort of this really awesome reunion even though he wasn't there with us, so that was spectacular.

Shelby Stanger: While Chris and Marty completed their expedition to the South Pole in early 2014, she came out with a book late last year called *The Expedition: Two Parents Risk Life and Family in an Extraordinary Quest to the South Pole*. It's all about the nitty gritty details of the trip, but the book also talks about weighing the responsibility of parenthood against the possibility of one more grand adventure. They also dive into their preparations, the dangers they encountered, and so much more. Chris, why did you decide to write this book of your journey?

Chris Fagan: I really wanted to capture all of what happened, most importantly for my son because he was only 12 at the time, and even though we blogged every single day and people followed us on our journey doing that, we didn't have the whole

story so for him; and ultimately what kept me coming back was - I want inspire others to see what is your South Pole, and how can you get there? Because this book really isn't about trying to inspire you to go to the South Pole because two people want to do that, but there's a lot of people who want to understand my motivations, our motivations and really, I've heard from many readers now, just to connect with the desire to have an adventurous life because you can do it in so many different ways every day.

Shelby Stanger: I love that you just said, "What is your South Pole?" That's such a good question to ask people. Any advice to listeners who want to do something wild, go on an adventure? Maybe it's not to trek across the South Pole. Maybe it's a marathon in their own home town. Any advice on how to just get over that fear and start?

Chris Fagan: I believe that the power that you have to get over fear is accessed by your ability to envision that thing which you really want, so if you can embrace that vision so much and see yourself there so much, and you really have, "What's my motivation? What's my purpose? Why do I really want that so bad?" It powers you through those fears and also identifying what is that underlying fear. Is it fear of failure? Is it fear of judgment? Is it fear of the unknown? I believe so much of it is fear of unknown. Well those three are really big actually, and what happens is, in my experience, is that fear is really a light. It's a tapping of you saying, "Hey, you should do this because it's like a key to open a door to a part of yourself that you want to access, and you don't know how else to access it but to go through this thing that you're attracted to, and you're going to find these parts of yourself that are so amazing, and those things are what the world needs, and that's going to make you feel alive."

Shelby Stanger: You're someone who's not afraid to be vulnerable. How did adventure help you become more vulnerable, or how does being vulnerable help you in adventure?

Chris Fagan: Being vulnerable in adventure is great because adventure pushes you to these limits. They open you up out of your comfort zone and make you go to these new places in yourself, and if you block that vulnerability, then you block that growth I think.

Shelby Stanger: Chris, this has been such a pleasure. We've made it to the Wild Round. This is new this year. We ask you rapid fired questions that are a little wild and all over the place, so I'm especially curious. What sort of dehydrated meals did you eat on the trip?

Chris Fagan: We tested every single possible dehydrated meal out there, and it turns out one of my favorites is the Breakfast Skillet, Mountain House, that we ate for breakfast and dinner.

Shelby Stanger: How did you sleep in broad daylight since it's light 24/7 there?

Chris Fagan: Yeah you slept with a hat pulled over your eyes.

Shelby Stanger: What song played most in your head while you were trekking across the South Pole?

Chris Fagan: Oh my gosh. I don't know, but my husband, I'm sure his song was Back In Black by AC/DC.

Shelby Stanger: Awesome. You can tell what kind of guy your husband is.

Chris Fagan: That's funny.

Shelby Stanger: Gear that when you're hiking today, you never leave home without.

Chris Fagan: Even on short hikes, I'm always wearing a little vest, and I now always carry my phone which I never used to bring my phone because of its ability for GPS and other kinds of-

Shelby Stanger: But everybody says your phone's the best case of gear even though we hate having it in the wild-

Chris Fagan: Yeah I used to not carry it-

Shelby Stanger: ... It's also the best.

Chris Fagan: Yeah.

Shelby Stanger: What was the best thing you had with you in the South Pole?

Chris Fagan: Our satellite phone.

Shelby Stanger: Writing a book is no easy task. Quick tips on what got you through it?

Chris Fagan: They're the exact same as getting through any kind of hard adventure, and it is being consistent every single day, or whatever your plan is for getting that big goal, you have to be consistent. You have to put the hard time in and using that why as your motivation for when you cannot get yourself to go sit down. It's like, "Okay why am I doing this again?" And my why for the book really seriously was, "I want my son to have the Pole story."

Shelby Stanger: Aw. Since you're a writer, you're obviously probably a reader. What's the book that you go to most often?

Chris Fagan: I don't have one that I go to most often, but I really love a lot of what Brené Brown writes about, and when I read Daring Greatly, it just was like, "Oh my gosh. I feel like I could've written this book." It just spoke to every single way that I think.

Shelby Stanger: You are kind of like Brené Brown if Brené Brown trekked across the South Pole with her husband. Brené, I hope you're listening to this one-

Chris Fagan: That's a huge compliment.

Shelby Stanger: Yeah. What's the best advice you've ever received?

Chris Fagan: Okay this just popped into my head. I don't know if it's the best, but people ask, "How do you get through something really hard?" And I say, "It's 90% mental, and the other 10% is mental." The best advice is being in touch with your mindset because that is what's going to empower you.

Shelby Stanger: What's your next adventure? Do you guys have one?

Chris Fagan: Well my son graduates in June from high school, and we asked him, "Do you want to go on a trip? What do you want to do?" And so two weeks after he graduates, we're heading over to Europe, and we're going to do the circumnavigation of Mont Blanc, the Tour du Mont Blanc, so that's actually ... My husband and I had run in that race before, but now we're going to take it hiking, and my son loves great food, so we're like, "We're going to hike all day and then end up in these nice villages and eat awesome food."

Shelby Stanger: And drink yummy beer.

Chris Fagan: Yeah.

Shelby Stanger: He'll be okay to drink in Europe.

Chris Fagan: I know, right?

Shelby Stanger: You guys are the coolest parents ever.

Shelby Stanger: Since their adventure in 2014, there's been some different kind of challenges that Chris' family has encountered. In 2016, just two years after they returned from Antarctica, Chris' husband Marty was diagnosed with carcinoma or skin cancer, but this is not a family that lets anything hold them back. Six months after the diagnosis, the family went trekking in the Himalayas. Chris said the trip centered them. It helped them redefine their family around adventure rather than cancer. In 2019, Chris, Marty, and a friend, Captain Danny, raced from Port Townsend, Washington to Ketchikan, Alaska on a 30-foot Hawaiian outrigger sailing canoe. Their son, Keenan, he's now 17, and he's taken several trips with his family. In watching his parents and joining them on adventures through the Grand Canyon on a raft, hiking in Nepal, and biking through Tanzania, Keenan's learned a lot not only about self-reliance but how far a positive outlook on life can take you. This family lives every day to the fullest. They're always dreaming of their next big adventure. I can learn a lot from them. I think we all can.

Shelby Stanger: Thanks so much to Chris Fagan. Chris, it was such a pleasure to meet with you, talk with you in person in Seattle, and go to places I've never gone before in an interview. You can get Chris' book, *The Expedition: Two Parents Risk Life and Family in an Extraordinary Quest to the South Pole*, on [rei.com](http://rei.com) and in select REI stores. Be sure to check it out. It's an unbelievable story; and of course, she dives a lot deeper than this conversation goes. Tune in week after next for our conversation with pro snowboarder and founder of Protect Our Winters and Jones Snowboards, Jeremy Jones. *Wild Ideas Worth Living* is part of the REI Podcast Network. It's hosted and created by me, Shelby Stanger, with writing and editing by Annie Fassler, and production by Chelsea Davis. As always, we appreciate when you hit subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you listen; and remember, some of the best adventures often happen when you follow your wildest ideas.

Chris Fagan: If I hadn't chosen Antarctica, then I might have been trail running on a mountain in Patagonia or climbing an unnamed mountain in Nepal or sailing on the Pacific with friends. You may have been there too. You see, don't be afraid of what will happen if you challenge yourself. You must do the things you think you cannot do. You must live and use your gifts to the fullest, to share your light with the world. You never know what day will be your last, so don't wait for the perfect moment to step out and into your full self. My wish for you in life is that you find your own path to being fully alive. Please promise me to live every day. Keenan, I spent 12 glorious years with you, my best years. I know your character. I see your heart. You are destined to do great things in this world. I know you'll be true to yourself. I will be watching you and with you every step of the way. All my love, Mom.