

Documenting a Full-Circle Moment feat. Christine Fitzpatrick, AMD'10

**Music:** Enter

**Tommy:** Welcome back to another episode of “Northeastern Next.” On today’s episode, we have Christine Fitzpatrick, a documentary filmmaker. We will discuss getting started in the entertainment industry, going from doing a co-op at National Geographic to working with them, and her latest project. Let’s get into it.

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**Tommy:** All right, hello, Christine! Thanks so much for joining the “Northeastern Next Podcast” today. How are you?

**Christine:** Hey, Tommy. I’m good, happy to be here. How are you?

**Tommy:** Good, I’m really excited to talk to you today. This is a really exciting interview for me, particularly, and, you know, I want to give a quick shout-out to Brianna, our new co-op who started this week, who has been very, very helpful in just getting everything kind of ready for this interview. So, thank you, Brianna.

**Christine:** Yes, thanks Brianna!

**Tommy:** Yeah, Christine, you know, I know that obviously you are a documentary filmmaker. So, where in the world are you now? And where would you say home base is?

**Christine:** Well, what’s funny about all this is I am back where it all started in my hometown of Haverhill, Massachusetts. I live in the D.C. area, just outside of Washington, D.C., that is my home base but, you know, had to get that New England summer vacation in. So, my family and I made the ten-hour drive the other day and, yeah, back in Haverhill. So...

**Tommy:** Oh, well that’s awesome! So, clearly, you know, Northeastern is local to you. And kind of just to pivot into the Northeastern aspect of this, what about Northeastern made you want to be a documentary filmmaker? You know, to just dive right into it. Was there something specific that happened there? Was there a catalyst?

**Christine:** Yeah, sure! So, when I went to Northeastern I—to be honest with you, the co-op program wasn’t a particular selling point for me for Northeastern. I never wanted to go to school in the Northeast, I wanted to get out of New England, I wanted to go to school down South, warmer weather, and, you know, Northeastern was one of those places where I said, “Ok, I will apply to a few local schools to have in my back pocket.” Thankfully, I was offered a pretty generous scholarship, along with some federal grants that allowed me to really consider it as an actual contender for a school.

And, so, when I went to visit the campus, I was like, “Wait a second, this is actually pretty cool.” You know, not what I expected. This is an oasis in the middle of the city, this is pretty nice. And what about this co-op program? So, I started thinking about it and my family was really pushing it, “You can graduate with a resume, this is actually a great feature, there is only a couple schools in the nation that do this.” And so, I thought, “Ok, I’ll give it a shot.” And, when I was coming to Northeastern, I kind of had this vision of working in either in fast-paced Ad world in New York, power-suits, nice heels, you know, “13 going on 30” style, you know, if I can age myself there. And the other option was well you know I always been into National Geographic as a kid—the magazines, the VHS tapes—and so I thought, “Man, travelling the world and telling stories could be a really cool thing too.”

Well, you can try all those out when you’re at Northeastern. So, I knew I always wanted to do the most number of co-ops I could. So, my first co-op was in the production world with the world’s largest student film festival, it’s called Campus Movie Fest. I’m sure people may recognize that name, but I did that internship and got to travel all over the eastern seaboard. I was based in Atlanta for it, we were travelling for these festivals, setting up these live events, making movies with students. It was really incredible. So, I thought, “Ok, production is nice, I could kind of get into this.” But I still have to give advertising and marketing a shot because that was also on my list.

So, I went to a boutique advertising firm for my second co-op in the Boston area. I realized I hated wearing heels and hated wearing power suits and wasn’t really into that corporate lifestyle and vibe. But I got paid! And I felt rich. So, you know, with my \$12 an hour and I had a 401K matching—didn't know that existed...

**Tommy:** There you go!

**Christine:** With my \$12 an hour, my friends and I would go to Legal Sea Food for happy hour, and I would just make it rain, you know, with my tiny paycheck. But, finally, for my final co-op—you know, I’m sure we can cut this up and get into the other details—but just for the overview, Northeastern didn’t have a relationship with National Geographic so my incredible co-op advisor at the time, Pam Goodale, she was saying, “Well, you really can do whatever you want. I’ll help you make some introductions, we can reach out to them, and you just stay on them.”

So, I said, “Well, National Geographic Television has an internship available. I can see it on their website.” I applied. Crickets. Then, I just kept staying on, staying on and after a few months, I finally got a call, it was Fourth of July, and they said, “Can you be here in three weeks?” So...

**Tommy:** Wow!

**Christine:** That's kind of, yeah, that's what kind of brought me to National Geographic and I did have one, you know, a friend of the family—a friend of my brother's—who had [done] an internship there. So, he made kind of an introduction to someone, and I just stayed on top of it, and it worked out.

**Tommy:** That's awesome! Yeah, that really just goes to show the power of persistence and networking. When it's together, it's the perfect storm for opportunity.

**Christine:** Yeah.

**Tommy:** I do want to make one note of something you said which I thought that was the coolest description of Northeastern ever was calling it an “oasis in the middle of Boston” because, now that I think about it, it really is for, you know, not to use the word “compare” but if you are comparing it to other campuses in the city, it totally has a different feeling to it than say...

**Christine:** Let's call it out, Tommy, I know what you are going for. Call it out! BU is...

**Tommy:** I was going to say our friends over on Commonwealth Ave.

**Christine:** I mean, I looked at both and I saw BU and I was like, “Ugh!” You know? No offense, BU, I've got some good friends who are alumni but, yes, exactly.

**Tommy:** Now being interested in documentary filmmaking obviously I feel in that field, and you can totally correct me if I am wrong, there needs to be a judgment and balance between creativity and being analytical. So, if that is the case, were there any programs or classes or professors at Northeastern that helped keep both of them even keeled.

**Christine:** Oh my god, absolutely! I mean, like, honestly, you're going to have to edit this a lot because I have a laundry list. I mean...

**Tommy:** Go for it!

**Christine:** I just had such an incredible experience at Northeastern with my professors. And I should say to whoever is listening, I'm not being paid by Northeastern, so this is all free advertising because of how much I loved my experience there. I can rattle off a few names, but I was in communications, so I was a communications studies major with a focus in public communications, and I also minored in spanish and international affairs. But I had designed my classes so that my spanish and international affairs were more geared towards cultural anthropology. So, I took all the credits I needed for those particular minors, but I took all the courses I could in anthropology.

So, on the communications side, I like how you said analytical skills with creativity because I had that in spades. So, Professor Richard Katula, he is a big name, and I think he is retired now. Susan Piccillo, who I am sure she is gotta be still on campus...

**Tommy:** I have heard that name, yeah.

**Christine:** Yeah, Alan Zaremba. He is an organizational communications professor, and his classes were very formative for me. A professor named Marcus Breen, who is no longer at Northeastern, I think he is actually over at Boston College. That was a loss because Marcus Breen was really, really influential.

And then on the cultural anthropology side, which, again, analytical creative, you get a lot of that. I had Susan Setta and Carie Hersh were two of my professors who were just, you know, they opened my eyes to how to deal with people and cultures and enter a world that you're not particularly used to as a participant observer without disrupting what is laid out in front of you too much. So, that was really key for my career now. And one last name I have to mention is Michael Hoppmann, he was really incredible as a professor. One, because he came from a different culture himself, he was from Germany, and so he brought this new flavor to mostly American kids in Boston in his communications classes. So, I really enjoyed him.

**Tommy:** That's awesome! And I think that's a cool thing too because what you just expressed really goes beyond filmmaking, documentary filmmaking too where it's just... what was the phrase you used, again? A participant observer? Or an observer participant?

**Christine:** Yeah, yeah.

**Tommy:** I think that's really cool, and I think that is something like you can take that away in just everyday life beyond a career. That's really important just for the, not to get all weird about it, but the human condition, you know?

**Christine:** Yeah, no absolutely! In the interdisciplinary nature of Northeastern's education, again, when you are looking for a field in communications or storytelling, documentary filmmaking, cultural anthropology, that is invaluable. Having that experiential interdisciplinary education sets you up for success for sure.

**Tommy:** Yeah, truly is a foundational piece of Northeastern to the point where I have yet to come across any alumni who have something negative to say about the experiential education and it's not really something that you can find anywhere else either which is really cool and so unique to Northeastern. So, kind of to pivot towards your National Geographic co-op, I think that is the coolest thing in the world, I would love to dissect it for a second. So, when during your Northeastern experience did you participate in that co-op?

**Christine:** Sure, so I was a co-op for National Geographic Television in 2009. So, I was a Middler I guess you can say. I was in my fourth year at Northeastern.

**Tommy:** Ok.

**Christine:** It was my third and final co-op. I really just wanted to throw all of my chips and see what I could get in terms of, you know, the end all be all of what I envisioned for myself. And I was lucky, while Northeastern didn't have a connection to National Geographic Society at the time, I was lucky to have a slight in which was my brother had a friend who had done a co-op for National Geographic a few years prior to me applying. So, he was, you know, I am very grateful to him he was able to give me a contact there and, when I didn't hear anything after I submitted my resume, I just emailed that contact over and over and over again. Called them, you know, I would not let up. And I didn't hear back for a good three, four months. And I am going to share this podcast with that person who is a very dear friend of mine now and we have worked together throughout my career.

**Tommy:** That's awesome!

**Christine:** Just to call them out there a little bit. But it all worked out in the end. He called me up and said, "Ok, you are qualified, we loved to have you down. When can you be in D.C.?" As a scholarship kid, I was like, "Oh, man! How am I going to afford living in D.C. during an unpaid co-op?" It was a six-month unpaid co-op, and I think at the time the co-op department was considering should we allow unpaid co-ops for our students? Well, we can get into that later if we have time but, I was like, "Well, yeah, it's the entertainment industry." So many production companies and music companies and all these places, they don't pay their interns and if I don't do this then people like me, people from my socio-economic background, are never going to be able to get a foot in the door. So, I figured it out. Worked a summer job, scraped together some pennies, borrowed some money from my parents, and got a sublet down in D.C. and moved down in like three weeks.

**Tommy:** Wow! Good for you, that is an incredible story! That's really cool that everything was able to come together at once and I'm sure it was an unbelievable experience.

**Christine:** Yeah.

**Tommy:** Now, this question is a little bit two-pronged. You referred to yourself as a Middler when you were doing this co-op...

**Christine:** Is that right? Did I remember that right?

**Tommy:** I actually don't know. I hadn't heard the term, but I really like it because...

**Christine:** Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's right.

**Tommy:** Yeah, that's right, I'm going to start using that. I have always been looking for a phrase for students in that situation. But was there anything at Northeastern that you learned that you were able to apply to the co-op. And then, conversely, was there anything you learned at the co-op that you were able to take back with you for your final year at Northeastern?

**Christine:** Yes. Great question! And I will answer it by saying this: Northeastern is for hustlers. Right? So, I mean, all of my close friends at Northeastern and I would love to do a whole other podcast episode talking about them and their successes because...wow! The people I went to school with and graduated with, just incredibly successful in their chosen careers now.

But, yeah, what I learned at Northeastern was stay on the follow up. You constantly have to solicit feedback from peers, from professors, really anyone surrounding you, supporting you, wanting to see you succeed because those are the people who are going to be your champions and give you that confidence to take to your professional experience in a co-op, in a job, in an internship. And so, aside from the academic foundation I had at Northeastern, I had these professors who worked in their industries. They had entire careers in their industries before they came to Northeastern. All of them were like, "You just gotta stay on it. You gotta follow up. You gotta network." So, when I started at National Geographic, I did that. I went around, I introduced myself to executive producers, I introduced myself to staff producers who maybe hadn't been assigned an associate producer and maybe could use a lowly intern to help them out. And so, I did that and walked into the right office one day when I knocked on the door and I said to the producer, who was a war correspondent and journalist, very successful woman—I don't know if I should name-drop...

**Tommy:** Go for it.

**Christine:** Tresha Mabile. She is a really cool person and incredibly successful War Correspondent and Journalist. And so, I knocked on her door and I said, "Hey, I heard you are working on a documentary and that you might need some help. Can I help you?" And we talked for a little bit, and she was like, "Yes, come on in." And so, from that point on, I was working as her right-hand person on her documentary which was on the troop surge in Afghanistan. So, it was 2009, we were doing a troop surge, and she was investigating for National Geographic Explorer, investigating the northwest frontier province of Pakistan, so in between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and how the Taliban was using that area to move through and counter this ISAF troop surge. So, she took me under her wing, it was really amazing and literally baptism by fire as an intern. So, I was conducting all of her research for her under her guidance and when she went to Pakistan and Afghanistan to film, you

know, I was also with the team at National Geographic Television [which was] one of her main contact back in the States. So, there are stories upon stories with that experience but that was all because I knocked on the right door at the right time.

**Tommy:** Wow. That's incredible. What an amazing experience that must have been, especially an experience at that point in your life. You know, talking to... I don't think everyone is going to have an internship or a co-op that is even remotely like that. So, what an amazing and incredible experience. It sounds like it kind of laid the framework for your future too so, that being said, after graduating from Northeastern and quote unquote entering the industry, what was it like coming back to National Geographic after having a co-op there.

**Christine:** Yeah, so, that was really interesting because I finished my co-op with National Geographic, and I was offered a job by the executive producers at National Geographic Television before I left.

**Tommy:** Wow!

**Christine:** They said, you know, I don't want National Geographic to sound like they're not for academic advancement, they obviously are, but the executive producers at the time were like, "You really don't need a degree to do this job, right? We've got an opening right now, an entry-level opening as a production coordinator, we want you to stay on." And I was like, "Guys, come on. I've got one semester left, I've got to graduate like so much time and effort and money and I've done four and a half years. I'm going back to graduate. I'm going to get this degree." And I think it was a tough choice for me because the documentary I worked on, which was wrapping up, was a challenging experience but it ended up being a very solid documentary and contender for awards. In the end, it was nominated for some Emmys and a large part I felt like I contributed to that. We were nominated for a Research Emmy Award and having conducted most of that research with the producer, it was enticing. It was this "What if I do just stay here and I keep on this track?" That would be really cool.

But no. I went back to graduate and when I left, they said, "Well, Christine. You did a great job, we've had a really amazing time having you here, but we can't guarantee you that there will be an opportunity once you graduate and that is just the way it goes." And I was like willing to take that chance, that's fine. I go back to Northeastern, had a lovely final semester, did all the things I wanted to do, like going to the Red Sox game, doing the boat cruise, like all the senior events. So, zero regrets there. And then, I graduated, and I said, "Well, I'm going back to D.C." Well, I didn't have a job! So, packed up my suitcases, literally had \$22 in my bank account, and I had a friend of a friend who said, "Come sleep

on my couch.” And so that’s what I did. I went down there, slept on her couch, immediately got a waitressing job—two blocks from National Geographic Headquarters—and so I waitressed there and I kept sending my resume in.

**Tommy:** Yeah.

**Christine:** So, I was finally able to slide in probably after a year and a half of doing that.

**Tommy:** That’s incredible!

**Christine:** Yeah, I went back and, again, back to that hustler mindset. I just thought to myself, “Well, I’m here now. I’ve got to keep working to stay relevant and find these opportunities.”

**Tommy:** Yeah, that’s really cool and I, honestly, thank you for giving me a title for the podcast, you know? I love the idea that Northeastern is hustlers. I like that. But that is really cool. It just goes to show that again, clearly it was intrinsic to you in being persistent but Northeastern really just reinforces that. It seems like it worked out. That’s awesome.

Just as a documentary filmmaker too, you have worked with a couple of other behemoths it seems. Like the NFL or Bloomberg, giants of media. So, I guess on the artistic side, do you have a different approach for a different audience?

**Christine:** Yeah! Yeah, for sure. I mean, anytime in media, you got to tailor your product to your target audience, right? Well, in documentaries, you want your target audience to be massive. So, depending on your client, depending on the network, they have done enough research on their end and analytics to know, ok, who is really watching our content, right? So, that’s how greenlights work. Networks will look at their statistics, who is watching their content, and that is how they greenlight shows for the future. Well, we’ve got a hold on the male, 18-65 [year-old] set there, so let’s keep making documentaries for them. And, I think, what’s really challenging sometimes is extracting yourself as a documentarian from just sticking with the same network, the same client, you know, the same kind of pigeonhole, if you will.

**Tommy:** Sure.

**Christine:** So that you can kind of expand your creative toolbox and learn how to tell stories for everyone not just who is bringing the views. So, yeah, I mean, like I mentioned this first documentary I worked on was under the Explorer umbrella of National Geographic, which was their flagship programming, but because it was military related, I kind of got pigeonholed into military content early on.



So, I have to mention the Smithsonian Channel because I did a long-running series for them called “Air Warriors” and it was all about military aviation—notable battles, wars, notable stories from combat, things like that. And so, I was stuck in the military world for a long time, and I was like, “Wait a second! I don’t want to be pigeonholed like this” and it just so happened that who is watching military programming mostly, right? I’m sure everyone could guess. I want to do animals. I want to make stories about the environment, and I want to tell stories about a culture across the world. Like, how do I get into that? And so, it was hard extracting myself from that for a little while. Thankfully, I had enough people within my network who were willing to give me a shot [at] the marine's story—not military marine but ocean—...

**Tommy:** Yeah.

**Christine:** So, on the ocean documentary, that was a really cool thing because it took a long time, it was really hard, and it was a huge hurdle in my career. But, once I was able to make that jump, a whole new world of opportunities kind of opened up for me.

**Tommy:** That’s awesome, yeah! It seems like you were really able to make the most of that transition because, that being said, I would love for you to tell me about “Protecting Paradise.” I would love to hear all about that, that seems really cool and it’s on Disney+ now, right?

**Christine:** Yup! It’s currently streaming on Disney+ and Hulu and you might also be able to catch it on National Geographic Channel if you have a traditional cable provider. So “Protecting Paradise: The Story of Niue” is, you know I’m obviously biased, a beautiful documentary about the tiny island-nation of Niue, which is a little rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean flanked by American Samoa, Tonga, and now I’m forgetting the third one and I’ll embarrass myself in the world of geography. But anyway, Niue is a tiny island-nation in the south Pacific and they have a very innovative plan to save their waters. They’ve approached National Geographic Pristine Seas.

So, Pristine Seas is a non-profit under the umbrella of the National Geographic Society, it was started by Dr. Enric Sala. If you don’t know anything about him, look him up, read his books, an incredible person, really nice guy. So, Dr. Sala started Pristine Seas with the goal of creating as many marine protected areas, or MPAs, around the world. So, let’s find the pristine ocean environments left in the world and make sure they do not degrade to the extent that we have sadly seen in a lot of other ocean and marine environments degrading to.

So, they got on a boat, starting sailing across the world, saying to countries, “Hey, you got something really special here. How can we help you with our science and media and

research?” Well, Niue had heard about Pristine Seas, and they approached [Pristine Seas] and said, “We’ve got something really special here, we need help. We are this island-nation of 1700 people, we depend on the ocean for our physical, cultural survival so we are seeing a lot of changes and not in the right direction.”

So, National Geographic went out there in 2015-2016 timeframe and did a full scientific survey of Niue’s territorial waters. With the results of the scientific survey, they presented it to Niue along with a beautiful film—because that is what they do, they film everything they do to show everybody who can’t get down to those depths, who can’t put on a mask and get out to the ocean. “Here’s what you have, what do you think? Do you want to protect this? We will help you.”

Niue saw those treasures that they had and basically was like, “Yes, let’s do this.” They set aside 40% of their EEZ, which is an exclusive economic zone...

**Tommy:** Ok.

**Christine:** So, all of these economic waters that they could have been using for fishing...they could have been exploiting for economic benefit and they said, “Let’s protect it.” No take, no human exploitation, we are just going to leave it alone. Let nature be and see what happens.

**Tommy:** Yeah.

**Christine:** So, after seven years, they invited Pristine Seas back and that’s where I come in to make a documentary to do another full scientific survey and document what they had to see whether their protections were working. So, we all went out to Niue, spent a month there, we had a production team on the research vessel, we had a production team on land—which I was a part of—and we worked with the people of Niue to get their story out there.

The cool thing is—another Northeastern tie—I was lucky enough to work with a very close friend from Northeastern who was on the expedition side of things. So, Mike Barnaby works for Pristine Seas, he is an expedition specialist, incredible person and oh my god talk about a great Northeastern experience. He is also a great friend. He was at my wedding, very close with both my husband and I, and we got to be in Niue together and make this documentary.

**Tommy:** That is so cool! So, a question about the production side of everything, when it comes to a project like this—you said, “This is where I come in.”—how does that work? Does National Geographic tap you on the shoulder knowing what your background is and all the work you have done or do you have a little more autonomy where National

Geographic is like, “This is what we are doing” and you say, “Hey, I want to be a part of that.”

**Christine:** It can be both!

**Tommy:** Oh, ok!

**Christine:** In this particular case...and, I should say, for everyone listening, I do not work for National Geographic, I do not work for Pristine Seas, I am a freelancer, I have always been a freelancer. So, in this case, it was the ladder, Tommy, that you mentioned. I had worked with someone who was at Pristine Seas so he was at Pristine Seas, he was familiar with my body of work, and knew they had this project coming up and said, “You might be a great fit for this.” So, he introduced me to the leadership at Pristine Seas Media and after several rounds of interviews and things like that, they brought me on board to produce the project.

So, it can also happen where maybe you hear about a project coming up and you find out who’s the executive producer is assigned to it and say, “Hey, I really want to work on this, can you give me a shot?” Thankfully, at this point in my career, I am very lucky that I get a lot of calls, and I don’t have to pursue work in the other way which is...when I got started that was all that I was doing. “Hey, I am available, what do you got?” I still do that from time to time, especially in this changing atmosphere of television and film, it’s tough out there. A lot of people are struggling. A lot of really talented producers are struggling to get their next project whether it be because of strikes, changing network landscapes, the environment of streaming, etcetera. But, in this case, I was extremely lucky to have my phone ring, get an email saying “Hey, I want to introduce you to someone.” So, that’s how I joined the team.

**Tommy:** That’s awesome! And, again, that seems to be a little bit of a motif in this interview...just goes to show the power of networking and persistence. That’s really cool. Well, Christine, I am very appreciative of you being on the pod today and I always end the podcast asking this question: since this is Northeastern Next, what is next for you?

**Christine:** What’s next for me? Well, we were talking about the military. Funny enough, I am now on another big series for someone who I can’t mention right now but it’s a fully funded multi-part series that focuses on the nuclear deterrence strategy of the United States. So, again, one of the coolest things I found out through my career was that I did not want to be pigeonholed but then, I thought, “Wait a second, I actually really like this.” I love balancing military and politics with the environment and natural history. So, I have been so fortunate to be able to flip-flip between projects and so now I am working with the United States Air Force, the U.S. Navy, and so that is what is next for me. Maybe keep your ear to

the ground in 2025, we are about to start post-production on the series and yeah. It's an incredible team, an incredible topic, and very timely...

**Tommy:** That's amazing.

**Christine:** ...with everything going on in the world.

**Tommy:** Wow! Alright, well, that's super exciting. Everybody, keep your ear to the ground and make sure you stream Christine's latest project on Hulu, Disney+, and just good-old fashioned cable.

**Christine:** Yup! Protecting Paradise: The Story of Niue. The Niuean people deserve their story to be heard so please, please, please—you know not for me, for them—learn about the beautiful island of Niue. Give it a watch.

**Tommy:** Absolutely. Well, thanks again, Christine, this was awesome. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today.

**Christine:** Yeah of course, Tommy! Thanks, Tommy. Thanks, Brianna. Go Huskies!

**Tommy:** Yeah, go Huskies!

**Music:** Enters

**Tommy:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of "Northeastern Next." Are you or do you know a Northeastern alum with a great story to tell? If so, email us at [alumni@northeastern.edu](mailto:alumni@northeastern.edu) to be featured on a future episode of the pod. I hope you enjoyed the episode, and I will see you the week after next.

**Music:** Fades