



# The *Real* Jane of the Jungle

An intimate portrait by a young writer who has known Jane Goodall since first working with her at age seventeen. | Pippa Biddle

IT'S FALL IN NEW YORK City and world-renowned activist and primatologist Dr. Jane Goodall is seated in an off-white armchair in the penthouse sitting room of the Roger Smith Hotel. Members of the Jane Goodall Institute team have set up shop in the dining alcove three yards away. It's only the beginning of her fall tour of the US, but there is already a sense of fatigue hanging over the dining table, which

is cluttered with an array of computers and phones, soon joined by a virtual reality headset purchased that morning to demonstrate a new program they've been developing.

The work they are doing is tiring. Not because Jane is difficult, but because the world that has grown up around Jane can be unwieldy. She is on the road for more than 300 days each year, and every day is scheduled down to the minute.

Reporters have been cycling in and out of the room all afternoon. They perch on the couch across from her, wielding recorders and notepads, and ask her about her life. Sometimes in person, sometimes by phone, the questions nearly always are the same. What made you want to be a scientist? An activist? What drives you to continue to advocate for people? For animals? For the environment? Which was your favorite chimpanzee? The past few

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Left: Dr. Jane Goodall beside a waterfall in Gombe National Park, Tanzania.  
Above: Gaia and her son Google in Gombe National Park, Tanzania.

years have shown only slight variation to the questions Jane gets asked.

As one may expect, Jane's responses to the repetitive questions are similarly repetitious and it's come to feel like a call-and-response. She was curious; loved animals; wanted to go to Africa. She never planned on becoming a scientist. She saw the impact humans were having on the places she loved and she had to do something to protect them. She's been driven by a desire to improve the lives of people and animals, and to protect the environment. She's inspired by youth. Her favorite chimpanzee is David Greybeard.

The same questions are being asked, save a few tagged to recent releases or

current events, largely because the world thinks Jane's story hasn't changed. Her path, which took at times unlikely and winding turns, has become, for most, a well-marked trail:

Dr. Jane Goodall was born Valerie Jane Morris-Goodall on April 3, 1934, in London, England. Her father was a businessman, her mother a novelist. She grew up fascinated with animals—from dogs and chickens, to the worms she tucked into bed with her until her mother patiently explained how sheets were not an ideal habitat for a colony of dirt-dwelling animals. This young Jane was drawn to adventure and to the wild. She devoured books like *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) and *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* (1920), and developed a crush on Tarzan, declaring, "Silly man. He married the wrong Jane." And she dreamt about seeing Africa for herself. But her family wasn't wealthy. An African holiday wasn't an option. Neither was university—she went

to secretarial school instead.

In 1957, then-23-year-old Jane Goodall received an invitation to visit an old classmate at their family's farm in Kenya. The country was still under British control and wouldn't gain independence until 1963. It was an opportunity she seized with all her characteristic determination and vigor, and she worked as a waitress to earn the money for the trip.

A few months into the adventure she'd always dreamt of, she met Dr. Louis Leakey, who was studying fossils in the Olduvai Gorge in an effort to map human evolution. The famed anthropologist and paleontologist was in need of a secretary, but he was also on the lookout for a young woman who was curious, resilient, and thoughtful, and who was unburdened by the biases of the scientific establishment, for a very different type of work. He wanted this person to brave the perils of the forests to conduct a study of chimpanzees, which, he believed, could



Above: Infant in Gombe National Park, Tanzania.

Right: Baby Jane Goodall with her toy chimpanzee Jubilee.

Opposite: Dr. Jane Goodall, DBE, U.N. Messenger of Peace.



provide valuable insight into the behaviors of early humans. It wasn't long before he realized that his new secretary was a perfect fit for the monumental task.

However, this was the late 1950s and the British government was dealing with unrest in their African colonies. The Mau Mau rebellion to the north had put the region on watch, and pressure was on to transition Tanganyika towards independence. In addition to this, there were the ever-present dangers of the natural world, including baboons, snakes, leopards, disease, and, of course, the chimpanzees. Even without the political tensions and the environmental dangers, it was considered improper for a young unmarried woman to travel alone, so British colonial

authorities required that she bring along a companion. Jane returned to England while funds for the research were raised and recruited her mother for the expedition. Jane, her mother, and an African cook named Dominic arrived in the summer of 1960 and built a camp along the shore of Lake Tanganyika in what is now Tanzania's Gombe Stream National Park.

It took months to build trust with the Gombe chimpanzees, but once developed, the unique bond between the hairy creatures and the strange hairless ape would lead to discoveries that resounded throughout the scientific community. When Jane witnessed David Greybeard take a twig, strip its leaves, and, by nimbly dipping it into a termite nest to fish out a snack, transform it into a tool, she knew that what she had seen would alter our perception of humans' place in the universe.

Until Jane's remarkable discovery, humans were believed to be

fundamentally different from other animals because of our ability to innovate, bringing ideas into the world not just with our hands, but with what tools our hands can build. Adam was given the tasks of naming all things and tending the Garden; man built a tower at Babel to rival the heights of Heaven; every society has a tale of some primordial disaster, which was survived only because someone built some means of weathering the storm. From the earliest flint-knapped arrowhead to the greatest behemoth ocean-liner, time and time again, humans have defined themselves as uniquely great because we, and we alone, took up twigs and turned them into termite kebabs. Man was the Toolmaker. But with the simple act of purposefully stripping leaves, David Greybeard had upended the scientific argument for humankind's innate superiority.

The next two decades were filled with further discoveries, which led to a *National Geographic* cover story in 1963.

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Overnight, the quiet young woman was eclipsed by the image of the leggy blonde beauty who was eschewing scientific protocol by gallivanting around the jungle with a group of apes that she insisted on naming. An article in the Feb. 28, 1964, issue of *The New York Times* described her as "Fragile and blonde, and with huge green eyes...she looks as if she should be pouring tea or watering the roses instead of prowling the bush."

But in 1966, Jane earned her PhD in ethology from the University of Cambridge without ever having received a bachelor's degree and, with that, she had received her bona fides as an orthodox-approved scientist. Her work in Gombe is still recognized as one of the most impactful field studies on any single species in scientific history and it remains one of the longest-running field studies worldwide.

The Jane Goodall Institute—created with a decentralized, locality-driven confederation structure, which now includes 33 different national institutions—was founded in 1977 with a mission to protect chimpanzees through holistic conservation methods that also serve to benefit the environments they rely on and the communities that surround them. Nearly 10 years later, after seeing alarming evidence of ecological devastation that was threatening the places she loved, she formally stepped out of the forests and onto the world stage. Jane the secretary-turned-scientist had a new role to play: global activist.

In the more than three decades since, Dr. Goodall has cultivated a devoted following that puts her alongside the Dalai Lama, the Pope and Mother Teresa on the (albeit theoretical) list of "world's most-beloved icons."

Now, everywhere Jane goes, people flock to her. They ask for photos. They ask for autographs. They plan parties and celebrations in her honor. They roll out the flash and the fireworks. Not only have numerous films been made about

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her—those bio-pics and documentaries have been shown in settings as elaborate as the Hollywood Bowl, accompanied by a live orchestral performance of the score.

An intimate 2014 celebration of Jane's 80th birthday included an acoustic set by Grammy Award winner Dave Matthews, who identifies himself as a "Jane fan," and others have shelled out thousands of dollars to join her in watching the annual spring migration of the sandhill cranes. For decades, Jane has lived her life in the midst of this parade. Yet while everything whirs around her, Jane, at its center, remains disconcertingly serene.

Perhaps this shouldn't surprise anyone—after all, Jane has never been the parade type. She was a girl who loved to explore the depths of a nature-unknown; never one to bask in the limelight. The world found a quiet young woman who was busy with observing the way it worked and turned her into a megastar. It'd be enough to make almost anyone's

head spin, but she doesn't see what the fuss is all about.

I'm only the most recent writer to take the still-warm seat facing the world's foremost observer. We've been talking for nearly half an hour when she breaks her life into two distinct halves.

There are, she clarifies, two Janes. In her words, there is "the ordinary one," the normal Jane, and then "the one that's been built up into an icon by *National Geographic* and *Discovery*." She has tried to "make use of" the icon, she says, "to do what this one," pointing towards her heart, "needs to do."

Jane, a soft-spoken woman with a wicked sense of humor and a soft gentle laugh, lives to be outside in nature and yearns to be back in the forest she left to save. Dr. Goodall is a world-renowned scientist and activist who packs stadiums, raises millions of dollars, and has spent three decades on a nearly continuous world tour. The latter was fashioned to defend what the former has spent her



**Above:** Orphan chimps at the JGI Tchimpounga Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Center in the Republic of the Congo.

**Opposite:** Jane Goodall and Rebeca Atencia release orphan chimpanzee Wounda on Tchindzoulou Island—part of the JGI Tchimpounga Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Center.

life loving. And it can be easy, from the outside, to overlook where one ends and the other begins.

But beneath the commotion of celebrity, there is that same Jane—the first Jane, the *real* Jane: curious, resilient, and thoughtful. The young woman who worked waiting tables to buy her fare to Africa, the brave woman who plunged into Gombe, the witness, unburdened by doctrine or dogma, who was ready to see our primate cousins as names, and not

numbers; the girl who took the words she read and dreams she dreamt and turned them into realities. This is the Jane who even now, at the age of 83, travels 300 days a year advocating for the earth. That is the woman I’m interested in knowing.

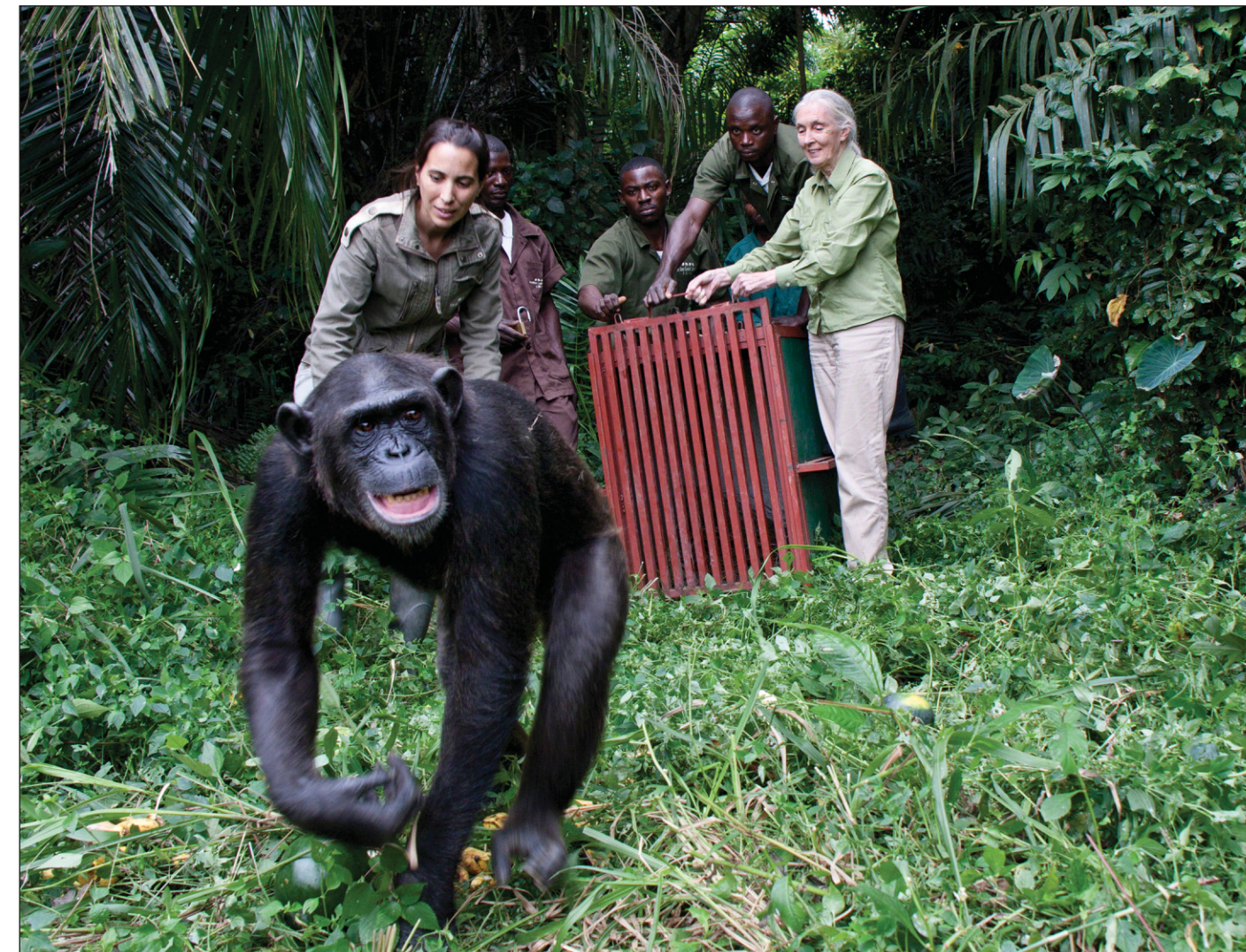
Though, to be honest, I came into the room with a bit of a head start over other writers. Or, if not head start, at least a different context for our conversation to exist within.

In 2010, I was preparing to graduate from high school. I decided early on that I wanted to take a year away from academia before starting college, but my enthusiasm for the concept hadn’t translated into much action when it came to actually doing any planning. By the time spring rolled around, I still had no idea

what I would be doing. It was then that my mom, a consummate conversationalist, met a woman in the checkout line at the grocery store who told her about a program called “Roots & Shoots,” and that there was a position they were currently hiring for that might be a good fit for a high-spirited young woman—the Youth Leadership Fellowship.

The position would involve mentoring younger students, which interested me, but it would also be a full-time job and would mostly be done out of an office only 20 minutes from my parents’ house—not much of an adventure. There was the chance of travel, but the scope of the job would depend on the skillset of the Fellow, leaving the daily realities of the position semi-opaque. I certainly

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wouldn’t be galivanting around Europe. Which, while this was never an option, was what I had been daydreaming about through every math class since submitting my last college application. Still, the more I looked into the Fellowship, the more intriguingly unique the opportunity appeared.

But I had never heard of Roots & Shoots before, and I was also fairly certain that I hadn’t heard of the “Dr. Jane” they kept mentioning during the interview process either. Being selected as the Fellow seemed like such an absurd long shot, as they were accepting applications from both recent high school and recent college graduates, that I didn’t even Google her until after I got the job.

Roots & Shoots was founded by Jane

and a group of Tanzanian students in 1991 with the purpose of engaging young people in local activism and action on issues impacting people, animals, and the environment. However, whereas other youth action organizations direct kids to look out into the overwhelming expanse of the world to find things in other communities to fix, Roots & Shoots asks students to learn about global issues by addressing problems closer to home.

At the core of Roots & Shoots is the idea that anyone can create positive change, regardless of age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic footing. They encourage this by mobilizing young people to address issues in their own communities. Compared to expensive “pay-to-play” service models, prospective members

aren’t excluded simply because they can’t afford to fly half-way around the world to attempt to “solve” someone else’s struggles. In the 26 years since its founding, Roots & Shoots has grown into a powerful organization with thousands of groups and hundreds of thousands of members around the world.

I spent the Fellowship advocating for the Roots & Shoots model, and a fair bit of the job did end up being on the road (certainly not the European adventure I had fantasized about, but a conference in Abu Dhabi did much to make up for that). Because of this, I got to know the two Janes simultaneously. There was the Jane that sat in a green room before a speech, savoring a small square of dark chocolate, and then there was the Jane

that was greeted outside of that green room by tightly packed crowds of eager fans. There was the Jane who spent hours shaking hands and signing books at conferences where the line wrapped around the room and down two flights of stairs, and the Jane who needed help pulling her hair up into her trademark ponytail. There was the Jane that seemed like she could live forever, and the Jane (and people around Jane) who maintained that aura of indomitability.

For nine months, I existed within the world of Jane. Whether I was speaking to elementary school students in Arizona or to environmental activists at a conference in Northern California, I was tasked with conveying Jane’s message and mission in a way that would inspire others to follow in her footsteps. Advocating for Roots & Shoots meant living and breathing Dr. Jane Goodall, but while we were occasionally in the same place at the same time, I never had the chance to sit across from her one-on-one.

Now, six years later, our knees are less than two feet apart, the table full of staffers is just outside of my visual range, and the ever-present white noise of New York City has been turned down as if with a dial.

I’ve just asked her what excites her right now and she seems to be struggling to find an answer. “Well,” I follow up, trying to save us from an uncomfortably long pause, “we can talk about what concerns you.”

“Almost everything concerns me right now. Everywhere you look, in almost every country, there are major problems. Sometimes there’s conflict, like in Syria, [there are] refugee problems in Myanmar, immigration problems all over Europe. There’s the political attitude towards racism—and it’s not just in the US—it’s in Canada too, and it’s in the UK, it’s in Europe.” Her global perspective is a reminder that she is more than just “The Chimp Lady.” The scope of her interests, and her concerns, are

both broad and deep. But it is when she speaks about climate change that her voice sounds the most pained.

“When you think about how we’re harming the environment,” she says softly, looking past me as if footage of environmental devastation is being projected onto the wall behind me, “climate has changed all around the world, all over the world all the time and *everywhere* people are saying ‘the weather wasn’t like this when I was growing up.’”

Her framing of climate change as something experienced both emotionally and multi-generationally is representative of the approach she has taken throughout work as a scientist and as an activist.

Jane has dedicated her life to the practice of emphatic empathy. Whether in her work with the chimpanzees in Gombe, when strategizing with rural community leaders about how to preserve the vulnerable habitats around them while improving their quality of life, while presenting to children in a classroom, or when lecturing to thousands, Jane is an evangelist of empathy. And yet, empathy is a word that can feel nebulous and loose, lacking a satisfyingly concrete definition. Empathy is personal, so understandings of what empathy means, and how it looks, are deeply subjective.

When asked how she describes empathy, Jane starts with a rare “Um.” After a few beats, she defines empathy as “feeling involved with the emotions of another human or animal,” and, after another shorter pause, “and feeling concerned about it.”

“We’ve got this window of time,” she says, “to create a new mindset and to try and find a different way of living than this constant exploitation of the natural world.” Empathy is the wedge she uses

Right: Jane writing up her field notes in her tent at Gombe.

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Above: Dr. Jane Goodall with a group of Roots & Shoots members in Salzburg, Austria.  
Opposite: Gremlin carries her son Grendel in Gombe National Park, Tanzania.

to shift people towards this new mindset and away from “business as usual.”

“That’s what led to climate change—business as usual.”

Society can’t continue with business as usual, but her business as usual, a grueling schedule crisscrossing the globe, doesn’t seem to be changing in the least. If anything, she seems to be speeding up. The enthusiasm for her work, and her story, hasn’t dampened either. *National Geographic* recently released “Jane,” a biopic focused on her early work. It is, she says, the most accurate and resonant telling of her story so far, an impressive feat given the countless films, tv specials, profiles, and books that have tried to capture her life. Between this, *National Geographic’s* accompanying retrospective issue, and her new six-hour MasterClass lecture series, released this

fall, Dr. Goodall is more present than ever.

“Jane” is an impressive execution of a well-worn format, but the Master-Class series puts Jane the Teacher into the homes and classrooms of her fans in a way that is more intimate than has previously been accomplished, while simultaneously cementing her legacy as a global educator. She hasn’t gotten around to watching the whole thing (which is understandable given that watching six hours of oneself talk sounds unbelievably tedious), but she’s excited that she had “the chance to talk about things I normally haven’t talked about,” like how to deliver an evocative lecture. In the videos, Jane is energetic and playful, and she maintains her characteristic earnestness. She is truly having fun, despite the process including a full day and a half of sitting in a chair on a set and answering questions into a camera. She is powerful, but she is not infallible. She teaches; she doesn’t preach.

Jane might have struggled to find

something to be excited about, but even when it seems like things are headed in a bad direction, there are, she says, reasons to be hopeful. 2017 marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Jane Goodall Institute, and Roots & Shoots recently welcomed Malawi, its 100th country, into its ranks. Young people are mobilizing around the world, policymakers seem to be catching up with scientists when it comes to the action needed to address climate change, and she finds fortitude in her faith:

“Maybe the secret is believing that there’s this great spiritual power and somehow we get strength from that?” “Even,” she adds, “not knowing what it really is.... Certainly [there is] an intellect behind the creation of the universe.”

My old boss comes to check on us right as I’ve turned off my recorder, not wanting to go beyond the 30 minutes that had been carved out for me fairly last-minute. There are a few hours before Jane’s next commitment and it’s been gently suggested that she try to take a nap, but

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the MacBook Air in her arms suggests that she has other plans. As I head home to transcribe our conversation, she’ll be working on a talk she’s scheduled to give at an upcoming scientific conference. We happen to navigate towards the elevator at the same time and as we walk past the penthouse’s staffed private kitchen, a hotel employee asks her if she needs anything. “I’m ok,” she says, even after he insists that he can bring anything she’d like.

He’s being helpful and polite, but the reverence in his voice reminds me of the expectations so many people have of her.

Some people have a way of forgetting that Jane doesn’t exist to meet their needs. They get frustrated when they can’t skip the line at an event because they met her once five years ago and donated \$50. They get ticked off when they’re told that she won’t write a personalized note in their book, that there are too many people waiting and that there just isn’t time to do that if she’s going to get to everyone. They are confused when she won’t fly to a kid’s private birthday party just to “pant-hoot.”

Jane is kind and accommodating, and the vast majority of her fans are respectful and understanding, but she still remembers the first time someone recognized her in the street. “I’ll never forget,” she says, her whole body cringing, “it was so horrible and shocking. Somebody came up to me, I was in Arizona walking in the street, and somebody came up and said, ‘Are you Jane Goodall?’ I said ‘Yes.’ And she said, ‘can I touch you?’”

Jane got her to settle for a signature instead.

Today, she can’t walk through an airport without being whispered about, followed, photographed, and asked to take selfies and sign scraps of paper. But now, she says, “I use it.” Every photograph and signature is a chance to recruit another Roots & Shoots member. “You can follow [the growth of] Roots & Shoots as I travel through the airport,”

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she exclaims, no longer cringing.

“That’s part of what drives me to keep on going, because it’s actually bearing fruit. The roots and shoots are bearing fruit,” her voice is lilting and she laughs along with herself.

“I never thought of that before,” she says, earnestly, “but, yeah, they’re bearing fruit. These little roots and shoots.”

She’s using the icon to do what the real Jane needs to get done, and it’s working.

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### About the Author

Pippa Biddle is a New York-based writer. Her work has been published by *Guernica*, *The Atlantic*, *Wired*, *BBC Travel*, *The New York Times* online, *GirlBoss*, and more. She has been featured in numerous online and print media outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Independent*, *Al Jazeera*, and *Forbes*. Pippa has also written content for television in partnership

with *Bridge the Gap TV*. Shows she has worked on have aired on major networks including PBS and *National Geographic*. From 2010 to 2011, she served as the Roots & Shoots Youth Leadership Fellow at the Jane Goodall Institute. Pippa is on the board of *Onwards*, and is a graduate of Columbia University with a degree in creative writing.