Living with Coyotes

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Documentary Treatment

**Synopsis**

Coyotes have been slowly moving into New York State from Canada since the 1930s. They reached Westchester County and the Bronx decades ago, and their numbers have been slowly rising. Sighting in Manhattan reached an all-time high last spring, and pet attacks in Westchester County have increased slightly in the last several years. But the slight increase in sightings and pet attacks in recent years has been amplified on social media in towns like Chappaqua, New York, where anxiety and fear about coyotes has pitted neighbors against neighbors.

Main character Frank Vincenti is a Long Island barber and a self-proclaimed wildlife educator. He’s always wanted to be a scientist, but he wasn’t able to go to school for it—instead he runs his family’s 4th generation barbershop business. Frank gives talks in communities in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, trying to teach people how to live with coyotes. He may not have the academic qualifications of some educators, but he makes up for it with passion and humor. He believes that coyotes are here to stay, and he does his best to educate people on how to protect their pets and train coyotes to avoid humans. He’s charismatic, funny, and enthusiastic, but there is also some pathos to his unsuccessful efforts to help others.

In recent years, Frank has been trying to give talks in towns around Westchester about how to deal with coyotes, but the towns don’t always want his help. In the hamlet of Chappaqua, coyote attacks came to a head in 2013, and Frank was finally invited to speak (along with a state expert) after several dogs were killed. Frank’s talk didn’t go well—residents were angry and upset, and his speaking style (he makes a lot of bad jokes) wasn’t appreciated by some of the people who had just lost their pets. Since then, the town has tried to develop a plan for how to deal with coyotes, but there have been strongly opposing viewpoints. Some people feel coyotes should be left alone, while others feel they should be trapped and eliminated, leading to some heated exchanges on social media and at public meetings.

The film looks at the coyote conflict in Westchester and the frustrated efforts of one outsider—Frank Vincenti—to improve human-coyote interactions. It’s a portrait of small-town politics and an example of how human ambitions and emotions can be projected onto the natural world.

**Treatment**
The film opens with menacing music and shots of Chappaqua as we hear voices of describing the fear and division coyotes have caused. Then we meet Ann Styles Brochstein, a resident of Chappaqua and former co-chair of the Coyote Management Taskforce, one of two committees charged with coming up with a plan for how to deal with coyotes. Ann explains a little of the context of coyotes, including when they first arrived in Westchester and their genetic connection to wolves.

After meeting Ann, we go to Mineola, Long Island, and meet Frank Vincenti at his barbershop, which is full of images of coyotes and other wildlife.

Frank explains how he’s always wanted to be a scientist, and how he started his organization, the Wild Dog Foundation, to educate people about coyotes. We see him cutting hair, chatting with customers, and he shows us his collection of hand-written poster boards that he uses in his talks.

Then we go back to 2013 and see the talk he gave in Chappaqua. It didn’t go well—several audience members had lost pets to coyotes, and Frank’s sense of humor offended them.

We hear Ann Styles Brochstein and Eileen Gallagher respond to Frank’s talk with disapproval, saying it wasn’t what the town needed. Frank also gives his perspective on what went wrong and how he has tried to make up for that failure by giving talks in other towns.

At this point, we hear from Ann Styles Brochstein about how her own dog was attacked by coyotes and barely survived, giving us a sense of the stakes.

Then we get a brief summary of the two committees that were formed to come up with a plan for dealing with coyotes, and we meet Victoria Alzapiedi, who chaired the second committee. Victoria’s committee brought in an animal rights group, which made strong claims online about Ann and Eileen’s group, accusing them of creating a “kill plan” and of pursuing “coyote jihad.” We hear about this from Ann and Eileen, and then we see footage of the town meeting where they were supposed to present. They didn’t show up in person, claiming they were afraid for their safety.

Then we get Frank’s perspective on the whole drama. He’s frustrated he wasn’t able to help, and says it didn’t need to get so divisive. We hear his hopes for the future—he’s unsure about the long-term prospects of his education group, but still wants to keep helping.

**Structure and Style**

The film will be a mix of archival footage, sit-down interviews, and verité footage, some indoors, some outside. There will be several walking interviews, one with Frank and one with Ann. There will also be a few moments where we see photos and
footage of coyotes. Stylistically, the film aims to move between serious moments and more humorous ones. Coyotes are a very serious issue to everyone involved, and the goal is show how serious it is to each person and what the stakes are (the life of pets, the cohesiveness of a community in Chappaqua, and Frank’s success as an educator) while at the same time letting humorous moments move the story along.