

KICKSTARTER CREATOR Q&A: AMY FINKEL FROM FUREVER

Posted by Meaghan O'Connell

The morning it launched on Kickstarter, Furever caused quite a stir in the interoffice email chain (where all good stirs are born). A documentary about freeze-drying your pets? A guff guy in overalls, preserving pomeranians so that weeping ladies can keep them on a pillow for always, for furever? ALL CAPS ENSUED. I watched the project video with my left eyebrow preemptively raised. And then I was gripped. First, I want all of you to watch this video (<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1121014244/furever-a-documentary-film>). I'm serious. Now.

It is incredible — Mac, the freeze-drying guy, is insightful, the people who request his services fascinating, and Amy, as I think you'll see in the Q&A that I couldn't wait to send her, is navigating this world deftly and with grace:

First off, I have to ask: is Mac single?

Sorry ladies, he's not. But I can't tell you how often I get that question, along with a number of comments about how handsome and dazzling he is. We've become close friends and I couldn't agree more; definitely a total catch! Should his status change, I'll let you know.

Perhaps we should schedule a follow-up interview with Mac now. Ha! Okay! So. Onto the hard stuff — Did you get to touch any of them? Are they heavy? Hollow? Do you think they float?

I have touched them, and I did my best on two occasions to help Mac with the preparation of both a cat and a dog, in the name of research. I'm (perhaps ironically) quite squeamish so I didn't help much, but I was able to assist by washing both animals, then carrying them from sink to tumbler, and tumbler to table. They're limp and heavy at that point, and it was uncomfortable to imagine my own pets in such lifeless detached condition, but it's the same impression I have about the preparation of human bodies after death. And Mac treats the pets with dignity and care, as members of someone's family, rather than as "specimens." Before the freeze-drying they feel like a floppy version of a live pet, as rigor mortis retreats after the pet has been frozen then thawed. In arranging the dog's tongue I noticed that it felt like a motionless version of any dog's tongue; slightly coarse but still with some moisture and elasticity. After the freeze-drying, they're rock-solid, completely hardened and much lighter. There's no potential for movement whatsoever, nor any potential for decomposition, and it feels less delicate than one might expect. The fur, however, is soft; how it was when the pet was alive. I can imagine how it might offer comfort to a pet owner to feel that. They also look like they may have in life, but with a perfectly horizontal, flattened lower body, much like SpongeBob SquarePants™, having molded flawlessly to the wooden board on which they were preserved. Also, no, they do not float. Have you ever eaten Cup 'O Noodles™? It's the same technology. The noodles are freeze-dried, and only become pliable once you've added water. You can imagine what might happen to a freeze-dried pet if it comes in contact with liquid.



Yikes. So, this one's personal. If you could freeze dry any animal to hang out on your coffee table, what would it be and why?

Well I should start by mentioning that I would never choose to freeze dry a pet. For me it would offer no comfort, simply a reminder that my pet is gone. I do, however, understand the motivation to choose that option; I can identify with that level of attachment and one's desire not to let go. With that said, I do, actually, have two freeze-dried animals that do not hang out on my coffee table: Chompers, my groundhog, and Fleischesser, my armadillo. Mac gave them to me, along with a taxidermied wild boar's head (Angel), as thank you gifts for making his website. I feel a bit uneasy knowing that they, likely, did not die of natural causes, nor, unlike the boar, did anyone eat their meat, so it makes me feel better to treat them in death with the dignity and respect that they never received in life. They both get frequent positive affirmations, simulated food offerings, and a pat on the head (before I wash my hands). You know, for that extra dose of anthropomorphic affection (with a chaser of projection). Chompers and Angel spend time with me in my living room, and Fleischesser lives in my office, positioned so that he may stare in perpetuity at a gorgeous mannequin whose arms frequently fall off, as an homage to his species' leprotic leanings.

That is good to hear. And what about the people you worked with — they are such characters. How did your impressions change over the course of spending time with them?

I try not to go into any interview with preconceived notions, and with the first segment of *Furever* (that you can see on Kickstarter), I had absolutely no idea what I would encounter or what my subjects would be like. Though I'd watched some footage of Mac from a couple of news programs shot long ago, and I had a feeling that neither his story, nor the stories of his pet owner clients, were told with truth or accuracy. There was always an attempt at sensationalizing the subject matter (which, to be fair, is certainly stirring). Mac was often

turned into a character that the audience was supposed to gawk at: an uneducated, unintelligent, gun-wielding, motorcycle-riding headbanger with monster testosterone and an addiction to shooting and mutilating animals (then putting them back together). I didn't find that to be the case at all. Sure Mac rides a Harley and likes to go hunting, but he's also fiercely intelligent, interesting, cultured, incredibly generous, and kind to both humans and animals. And I never expected the pet owners to be out-of-touch with reality necessarily, but I assumed they'd be at least peculiar. Mostly, however, that peculiarity was limited to this one unconventional choice (to preserve their pet after death), and as far as I could tell, they were otherwise pretty ordinary. I got the impression that most were quite smart and led fairly normal lives. At times they wrestled with the religious repercussions of preserving a dead body in a way that I wouldn't have expected, but there was nothing particularly strange about them. They simply had an immense capacity to love their pets and an unusual way of dealing with both their grief and loss. I'm not sure if it was comforting or alarming that they were otherwise so conventional.



I love that. Okay, before I leave you, we need to talk about something serious. I saw in the comments section of your project that there was an amazing conversation happening around the potential freeze-drying human beings. Um, WHAT?

It's true! Mac gets numerous requests every year from people hoping to have their human loved ones freeze-dried! Actually, people have been preserving bodies for many years, most famously ancient Egyptian mummies, but there are various religious relics across the world, and ongoing methods of ancestor worship in many cultures. There's also Jeremy Bentham at University College London, the poster boy for taxidermied philosophers, and Ted Williams here in the U.S., the poster boy for the cryonic preservation of sports professionals. Or currently one can go to the South Street Seaport in NY any day of the week to see "Bodies: The Exhibition," in which real human bodies are on display, having been maintained by polymer preservation techniques. The exhibit, along with an earlier plastination exhibit developed by German anatomist Gunther Von Hagens ("Körperwelten"), has toured globally for many millions of spectators. While exhibits such as these produce controversy

surrounding the origin of the bodies on display, among many other ethical concerns, the general consensus seems to be that preserving bodies for medical or educational purposes is reasonable. What seems to be less tolerable is the idea that someone may want to hold onto the body of a loved one because they can't seem to let go, or can't grasp the concept of the finality of death. Mac's human requests, however, usually consist of someone wanting to freeze-dry their loved one in a resting state before burial, so that he or she may never decompose or be eaten by maggots. Rarely does someone request that Mac position 'Uncle Burt' so that he's eternally laid to rest in his favorite Barcalounger, smoking a pipe, eyes open and enjoying the television lineup with his still-living family (though there are occasional unexpected requests). Mac is open to the idea of human freeze-drying and he'd be able to do so in compliance with post-death body preparation laws, as he lives next door to a funeral director who would like to assist, but few opportunities arise, as the \$150,000 price tag is a little too expensive for most. Plus not all bodies would even fit in his freeze-dryer.

“Plus not all bodies would even fit in his freeze-dryer.” I think that's as good an end note as any, folks. Check out the project if you haven't yet (why haven't you?) and spread the word in the name of humanity's ongoing struggle with mortality and all the bizarre ways it rears its terrifying, metaphorically freeze-dried head!