If you have ever been to Southern Indiana, you probably would not be surprised to find corn there. But what you may be shocked to discover are two full grown grizzly bears living simple domestic lives in the charming little town of French Lick, Indiana. These grizzly bears are not free-range grizzly bears mind you, they share a home with a widowed man named Jeff Watson, who, over the course of the past 20 years, has parlayed their ability to intermingle with human society into acting careers most theater majors would do unspeakable things to acquire. They have starred in commercials for everything from Rice Krispy Treats to the Energizer Bunny. Watson himself, is a fascinating character, taking in his first bear while dealing with a neurological disease that left him incapable of walking soon after the death of his wife. Now he posts Tiktok videos chronicling his life with the bears, and his never ending journey to prove to people that living with them is safe. That is how I discovered Jeff.

It would be fascinating to investigate, first, what the relationship between Watson and the bears is like. Is it an exploitive relationship, is it nurturing, is it respectful? How does he feed them? Does he have a job outside of raising bears? Do they explore in the wild? How in the world do they manage to live in a house in the middle of Indiana? Is this even legal? (I may need to speak with the local police department about that). Second, how have the events of Watson’s past influenced his decision to raise live bears in his house, which most people would assume is a threat to one’s life. What pushed a man, in the middle of his life, after the death of his wife, to become a bear raiser (I don’t know the official term for man who keeps bears in his house)? I’m especially curious about his upbringing and what impact it had on the man he is today. There are numerous documentaries I’ve seen where a subject who lives a crazy, outlandish life does so after being neglected in their childhoods, and that neglect fuels them to live insane lives as adults. Or who knows, maybe he’s just crazy and loves bears. I don’t know, but I really want to find out.

In terms of the process of making the documentary, I want to go down to Jeff’s house to follow him around, and see the life he and the bears live, but I also want to interview those associated with him. His neighbors, his family, his co-workers- what do they think about one of their friends or family members raising bears in his house? Have they encountered the bears before? Do they even know he has bears? I also think another cool area to go would be to interview the people associated with the commercials the bears have worked on and how they remember Jeff and the bears.

The project covers a number of topics including animal rights, and the impact of loss on people’s lives, but I have always just been fascinated by people who live crazy lives in the middle of the ordinary. It’s one thing to find interesting people in New York City or Los Angeles, but to find people living extraordinary lives in the middle of Indiana or Montana takes a special kind of crazy because they are surrounded by so much ordinary. You have to really be committed to your lifestyle, which I think makes these people more authentic.

A similar documentary that came to mind when I first envisioned this project is the cult classic *Tiger King.* You may have heard about it. It’s an inevitable comparison because of how similar the subject matters are, however, I envision this project being different first in that it would focus a lot more on the animals. One of the areas I believe *Tiger King* fell short is that despite *Tiger King* being called “Tiger King”, it wasn’t about the tigers, it was about Joe Exotic, and the tigers themselves took a back seat. The filmmakers seemed so seduced by Exotic’s crazy antics and his entertainer persona that they overlooked the lives of the animals that he was “raising.” While I anticipate Watson being quite the character, I think it will be far easier to focus on the relationship between Watson and the bears because of how intimate the setting is. Instead of a giant zoo with hundreds of animals and a whole crew of workers, Watson lives with the bears, so the bears themselves will become their own characters, even though they can’t talk… at least I assume so. I also imagine this project taking a more comparative view of the life Watson lives to the midwestern life around him. As someone who has lived in Indiana for over 20 years, the contrast between looking at Watson’s life compared to those around him would add an aspect of relativity that *Tiger King* lacked at times.

Stylistically, I envision my own style and this project being similar to the show *Atlanta*. One of the aspects I love most about *Atlanta* is the way it views extraordinary events as ordinary. Its deadpan style gives the impression that these insane events are just everyday life for its characters, and that is a style I think would work well with this piece. I almost want to shoot it like the bears are just two 40 year old, midwestern dads going about their everyday lives and the only thing crazy is how people react to them. Filming them waking up, getting breakfast, sitting on the couch, watching tv. I think it would be a funny way to go about demonstrating how this type of life is ordinary for Jeff. One challenge that could come with this is that at times *Atlanta* loses its focus a bit and what story it’s trying to tell, so I would need to be cognizant of that, however it is a style I could see having great benefits.