

BY VICKI GLEBOCKI '93, '02 MFA LIB

WELCOME TO THE
ALEXANDRIA
SAFE ZONE
MERCY FOR THE LOST
VENGEANCE FOR THE PLUNDERERS



THE END OF THE WORLD as she knows it

When it comes to surviving a zombie apocalypse, **GILLIAN ALBINSKI** knows firsthand what to eat, how to make weapons, what to do with undead blood, and how to make anything out of tinfoil. They're useful skills—both for staying alive at the end of days, and for being the prop master on one of the most-watched shows on TV, *The Walking Dead*.

IT WAS CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT

when Gillian Albinski pulled down the deserted, tree-lined road that led to Senoia, a small town just south of Atlanta. In the back of her minivan, she had several two-by-fours, a butane lighter, a bucket,

and a sealed Rubbermaid pitcher filled with deer blood. She thought what she always thinks at times like this: *How will I explain this to a cop if I get pulled over?*

Albinski '93 A&A, as usual, had a plan—keep both hands on the wheel and tell the officer to go to her website. That would explain everything: that she makes her living as a prop master for movies and TV and that, last fall, she landed a dream gig as prop master for *The Walking Dead*, AMC's post-apocalyptic thriller in which a virus suddenly turned just about everyone into zombies and survivors are fighting to stay alive. Filmed near Atlanta, *TWD* is not just the top-rated series in the coveted U.S. demographic of 18- to 49-year-olds, but it's the second most popular TV show in the world (second only to HBO's *Game of Thrones*). And when the script calls for burnt blood on a baseball bat—and not just any baseball bat, but the one

wrapped in barbed wire that's the weapon of choice of the show's sadistic villain, Negan—the prop master needs to first answer one very important question: What does burnt blood on wood actually look like?

Albinski began by doing what any self-respecting prop master would do. She Googled it. She didn't find a single image of burnt blood on wood. Plan B? Find blood, put blood on wood, burn blood. But where does one get real blood? She tried blood banks, vet hospitals, and taxidermists—all with no luck. Then, early one evening, one of the taxidermists texted her. It was a video of the taxider-

ALWAYS IMPROVISING

Albinski tried everything from Rustoleum to deer blood acquired from a taxidermist to help create a realistic look for "Lucille," the famed baseball bat used by the show's villain Negan.



PREVIOUS SPREAD: LUNA HAZON; THIS PAGE: COURTESY GILLIAN ALBINSKI (2)

GENE PAGE/AMC

STARSTRUCK

A fan of *TWD* since it debuted in 2010, Albinski says she arrived on set last August and "I suddenly got all giggly fan-girl."

mist, in real time, dressing a deer that a client had brought in. And there was lots of blood.

Albinski, 48, jumped up, tossed her supplies in her van, and headed to the shop, an hour-and-a-half drive from Senoia where *TWD* is filmed, praying she'd get there before the blood coagulated. She figured she'd set up her experiment in the parking lot: pour the blood in the bucket, dip in the wood, light it on fire, repeat and repeat and repeat, and take tons of photos. She arrived at almost 9 p.m. The bad news? The taxidermist was located on a busy street with open businesses all around, so parking-lot pyromania wasn't exactly an option. The good news? The woman had kindly put an anticoagulant in the blood and poured it into a convenient and portable Rubbermaid container. Albinski would just move "burning blood on wood" to the top of her to-do list at work the next day.

She gingerly placed her blood in the minivan and drove back to the site of the apocalypse.

WHEN ALBINSKI SAW THE EMAIL IN HER

inbox in July 2017, she knew instantly that it was the opportunity of a lifetime. The subject line read "Walking Dead Prop Master." The message was from Tom Luse, one of the show's executive producers, who's the main boss on set in Georgia. The position was opening up for the second half of the show's eighth season and she was on the short list. Still, Albinski's reaction was immediate: "I can't do it."

She was working in Pittsburgh at the time, in the thick of prop mastering for a new crime series called *Gone* starring Chris Noth (and with production design by fellow Penn Stater Charlie Lagola '82 A&A). The end of that shoot overlapped with the start date for *TWD*. And she's not the type who leaves anything unfinished.

Fortunately, her husband, Douglas Young, was working on *Gone* as well, as assistant prop master and, even more fortunately, Albinski showed him the email before she hit any send buttons.

"Just write back, 'I'd love to talk to you about it, but I'm on another show,'" Young said. "What's the worst that could happen? You get the job?"

The job wasn't an easy one. The prop master for *TWD* oversees an eight-person team and is responsible for, basically, everything in a scene that a character interacts with, whether it's live worms they're eating, a photo album they're flipping through, an oven door they're using as a shield. Since the apocalypse happened years ago in *TWD* world, every single prop has to be aged and distressed so it doesn't look like it was just picked up at Best Buy (even if the prop master just picked it up at Best Buy).

And, since there *isn't* a staffed and stocked Best Buy in the end of the world, lots of props need to be Macgyver-ed





SHE'S THE BOMB

When Showtime's series *Homeland* started shooting in Charlotte, N.C., in 2011, there was only one local prop master with the right TV experience: Gillian Albinski. Landing that gig was "a turning point in my life," she says. The show's first three seasons revolve around a bipolar CIA officer, Carrie Mathison (played by Claire Danes) and her love interest, a Marine sniper named Nicholas Brody (played by Damian Lewis, above). Mathison suspects that Brody was turned by Al Qaeda while they held him as a POW. The truth was, well, complicated.

Probably the most iconic prop Albinski has ever designed was the suicide vest worn by Brody on the first season's finale. Here, she describes how it all came together. —VG

IT WAS A BIG DEAL.

Everyone wanted to be the one who created the suicide vest. The costume designer was doing sketches. The production designer was doing sketches. I was doing sketches. I came across a BBC video on YouTube showing a suicide vest being built for real. I thought, *This is it*. I did all the research—how the explosives go against the body and the shrapnel is on the outside. Where the detonators need to be placed. How the switch worked. How to run the wire.

My design won.

The costume department sewed the fabric part, making the panels. I glued BBs on panels, put fake C-4 down the panels, ran detonation cord through the C-4, inserted dummy detonators, and attached a long wire with a toggle switch. I figured, *If I'm doing this, I'd better do it right*. I called the head of the Charlotte bomb squad and asked, "Can you help me with this?" I laid all my stuff on a table. He walked in and said, "If I didn't know this was a prop, I'd be walking out and calling the bomb squad."

Then he proceeded to tell me everything I did wrong. I fixed it. We made three vests.

In the scene, and we must have done five takes, Brody walks into a bunker with the vest on, intending to kill the vice president, but the vest malfunctions. He tries to fix it, rips the vest open, and reconnects one of the wires. A seamstress and I were waiting backstage with thread and a glue gun. He'd do the scene, then come backstage and take off the vest. I had one we'd already repaired ready and would put it on him so he could do another take. I'd then go back to the seamstress, who would stitch up the one he just took off, and I'd hot-glue the wires back together. We did it over and over, take after take."



from random items, like fashioning a solar oven out of aluminum foil and an umbrella. Labels on anything—bottles, seed packets, the brand name on a pen—have to be replaced with a fake ones created by the prop department, then approved by the show's legal department and then aged. Plus, every character has a weapon (or six) and every weapon is a prop—scabbards, knives, guns, brass knuckles, hammers, swords, fight sticks, axes, bats wrapped in barbed wire. It takes a trailer and a semi to transport TWD props to and from set. (Two especially famous props—the crossbow used by the character Daryl Dixon and the Japanese sword, or katana, used by the character Michonne—are now in the Smithsonian.)

And as if the prop demands weren't daunting enough, the shooting schedule for an episodic TV show is downright brutal. Each episode takes eight days to film. With so much zombie killing, the show is gruelingly physical, and shoots often take place in the middle of the night. Or in water. Or in flaming buildings. On any given week, the prop department is photographing, returning, archiving, and warehousing props from the previous episode, and at the same time making, buying, organizing, packing up, and transporting props for the episode that's shooting, and at the same time reading the next episode, building a gigantic potential prop list, hunting down the ones the director wants, and then meeting for show-and-

tell. And it all happens in Georgia. Georgia is the No. 1 film-producing state now, ahead of even California—and it's also where the temperature is varying degrees of "hot and humid" during the entire schedule and where, thanks to the preponderance of certain local fauna, there needs to be a snake wrangler on set at all times.

"If you can do props on *The Walking Dead*, you can do props anywhere," says executive producer Luse. As he was looking for candidates for the job, Albinski's name kept popping up on crew lists from other shows and movies that shot in the Southeast, like Showtime's Emmy-award-winning series *Homeland*, Lifetime's *Army Wives*, and the films *Magic Mike XXL*, *Gifted*, and *The Strangers*. After a series of phone interviews and glowing reviews from former employers, Luse offered Albinski the job.

With the blessing of *Gone*'s producer, Young took care of wrapping up the show in Pittsburgh so Albinski could fly south. She arrived in Senoia on Aug. 15, just days before shooting started. A prominent part of the set is right at the end of the town's main drag, and when she saw it—the TWD city called Alexandria surrounded by its ubiquitous

16-foot-tall corrugated metal wall that keeps (or—SPOILER ALERT—kept) the undead out—she stopped in her tracks. She and her husband, who live in Charlotte, N.C., with their cats Spectre, Gizmo, and Pyewacket, had been obsessively watching the series since it debuted in October 2010.

"I suddenly got all giggly fan-girl," she says.

There was no time for giggling when she arrived on Day 1. The fire extinguishers that had been ordered for the shooting for that episode hadn't shown up. She had to locate eight identical, 15-pound, CO2 extinguishers that looked like the one the director had already approved, then make new labels, get approval for those, and age them, ASAP. Next, she noticed in the episode's script that a character gets captured and is tied up, so she needed the director to clarify "with what?" Chain? Rope? Cot-



COOL COWORKERS
Albinski has designed props for dozens of actors on productions like *Homeland*, *Shallow Hal*, *Gifted*, *Eddie*, and *Magic Mike XXL*.

ALL PHOTOS THIS SPREAD: COURTESY GILLIAN ALBINSKI

She auditioned and got a small part, but found her groove—and some solace—working on props and sets. From then on, she worked backstage on every show she could—at State High, with the Penn State Thespians, at the Boal Barn, and in the Penn State theatre department, where she earned a theatre arts degree in 1993.

“It’s not common for a student at such an early age to be so set in what she wanted to do and where she wanted to go,” says Doug Maddox, who taught scenic design at Penn State and is now an architect in Illinois. “If there’s something Gillian wants, she gets it.” In large part, Albinski was being practical. Most theatre majors dream about being on stage. Not too many want to do props. “When I tell people I’m in theatre, they always ask if I’m an actress. I say, ‘No. I *have* a job,’” Albinski jokes. It’s

GILLIAN HAS APPROACHED HER JOB WITH THE IDEA THAT SHE WILL GET IT DONE NO MATTER WHAT. AND SHE HAS DONE IT.

October, and she and her husband sit in a booth at Nic and Norman’s, the burger joint on Senoia’s quaint Main Street that’s owned by *TWD* executive producer Greg Nicotero and actor Norman Reedus.

When *TWD* came to town eight years ago, it transformed Senoia. *TWD* fans are legion. They travel to Comic-Con and Walker Stalker conventions (and cruises!). And they also come to Senoia. As Albinski and Young eat lunch, tour guides dressed as show characters (and who have all worked as zombies on set) pass by the front window as they lead fans through a two-hour tour of show sites: “And this is where Carl sat on the roof and ate the tub of pudding.” The seven-pound can of pudding? Prop. Spoon? Prop. Thigh holster and pistol? Prop.

Albinski is something rather rare in the TV and film industry—a *female* prop master. And, on a show that’s as action-oriented and male-dominated as *TWD*, it’s even rarer. In theatre, there are lots of women working on the technical side, as Albinski did for years at, among other sites, the Actors Theatre of Louisville, La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, and the North Carolina Shakespeare Festival—where, the year after she graduated from Penn State, she met her husband, who was working at the time on the administrative side of theatre. For 15 years, they paid much of their mortgage in Charlotte working on commer-

cial for big names like NASCAR, Goodyear, and Subway.

But in just about every job she’s ever had in TV or film, she’s been referred to in meetings as “darling,” “sweetheart,” “honey,” and “gal.”

“I’ve been told more than once, to my face, that I didn’t get a job because I’m a woman,” she says quietly. Just two weeks before, the Harvey Weinstein scandal had broken in *The New York Times*, and it was heavy on Albinski’s mind. “How do you fight that when you still want the next job? How do you do it when your whole career is based on reputation?”

Once, when Young and Albinski were working together on a production, the director remarked, “Gillian is great, but she asks too many questions.” Without missing a beat, Young replied, “If she were a guy, you would give her a raise.”

Her career requires her to be assertive—or pushy, depending what lens someone’s looking through. Her husband calls her “The What-if Girl” because she constantly has to ask, “What if *this* happens?” It’s why now-retired Penn State theatre professor Bob Leonard lauded her “attention to detail,” and why another

retired prof, Richard Nichols, remembers her as a “self-motivated problem-solver who didn’t waste time and energy whining about rough patches.” In her position, there’s no time for that. She’s always anticipating, trying to read people’s minds by first imagining what the scene needs, and then trying to figure out what the director is going to *want*. And she does that by asking questions. What color do you want the laundry basket to be? Do you want wicker, rattan, or plastic? Lid or no lid? Big or small? Tall or squat? Old or new?

Luckily, at *TWD*, “pushy” has paid off.

“Gillian has approached her job with the idea that she will get it done no matter what. And she has done it,” says Luse. “She has done it through intelligence, she’s done it through willpower, she’s done it through attitude, she’s done it through dogged determination. She is remarkable.”

ALBINSKI HAD LESS THAN A WEEK to figure out how to turn a car door into a weapon. Luse later told her that when he read the script for that episode and saw the car door, he thought, *That’s not going to happen. We’re going to have to rewrite the scene.* But in Albinski’s mind, there was no way, on her first week on the job, she was going to say,



PROP PROCESSING

Since the outbreak in the *The Walking Dead* began in 2010, all of the props—including old doors found in a junkyard—have to be “aged” to look realistic.

“I can’t do this.”

She brainstormed with the crew, whom she’d just met days before. Could they get a real door and take all the heavy parts out? No, without the guts, the metal would bend. Could they build one out of fiberglass? No, there wasn’t enough time. Since race cars use fiberglass doors, could they find a place that keeps them in stock? Yes.

She picked three different fiberglass door shells that looked like they could have been from a car made in the 1970s or ‘80s, since that’s what would likely be in a junkyard. She made sure there were two of each in stock, because she and her team would need to make a second just in case. She sent photos to the director. He picked one. Then, she tracked down two matching sets of everything else for that 40-year-old door—windows, trim, handles, latches, locks, vinyl. The process took days.

Once the door was assembled, she lifted it and realized something immediately: There was no way the actor would be able to hold the thing up all day, take after take after take. They needed to build a harness for it. And they needed to do it fast—the scene would shoot first thing the next morning. She didn’t go home and let the guys in the shop build it on their own. She stayed, late into the night. She cut the fiberglass. She etched the window. She hot-glued until her fingers cramped. She proved to her crew

that, while she might be a woman, and she might seem a little pushy, she knows how to use a drill press.

The next morning, she was so exhausted she felt like *she’d* been bashed by that door. Though Albinski isn’t typically on set during *TWD* shooting, on this day, she was; she carried the door onto set herself, thinking, *I’m either going to get fired or they’re going to love this.*

“Is that for me?” asked actor Andrew Lincoln, who plays the show’s hero, Rick Grimes.

“Yep,” she replied. “This is your car door.” She explained the basics to him: Here’s the person who will help with the harness; don’t hold the door in this spot. It looked so authentic, Lincoln actually thought it was a real car door.

Then, she left. She walked back to her office, where she’d read the script for the following episode and discover the next impossible thing she’d need to figure out a way to do. And she thought, with a chuckle, what any self-respecting prop master would at a time like that: *If every episode is like that one, I’m going to die.* ♥

Vicki Glebocki, formerly a senior editor at the Penn Stater, is a contributing editor at Readers Digest and a magazine writer and consultant. She and Gillian Albinski worked together on the Penn State Thespian production of *Sweet Charity* in 1990—Gillian as scenic designer and Vicki as a dance-hall girl named Frenchie.

GENE PAGE/AMC