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When the Mountain Calls

Film director shares his story about happiness, faith—and showing up.

November 3, 2011
Blaise J. Noto, The Maui Weekly

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Each one of us has a special place we go to find a sense of inner serenity and clarity of mind. We can retreat there when the world around us doesn't make sense and feel embraced, comforted and ready to meet challenges refreshed with a renewed sense of purpose.

For Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Dr. Tom Vendetti (Bhutan: Taking the Middle Path to Happiness), the Himalayas have always been his place of inspiration and refuge. Traveling and trekking there for over 30 years, he marveled at the grandeur and majesty of the mountains. He delighted in people-one with their culture and land-who have a different understanding of what happiness is. And he was in awe of the mysteries that the mountains held for him.

But this last trip of some 7,000 miles from Maui to Nepal had a different purpose-a deeper significance. Tom had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, and the therapy was weakening his body, and as much as he fought it, his spirit and soul. He needed to recharge and revitalize his "Self" in a place that would give him hope and bring him magic. For as Tom learned over the years, "When the mountain calls... show up!"

Such is the inspiration and basis for his new documentary film When the Mountain Calls: Nepal-Tibet-Bhutan which will hold its world premiere screening on Saturday, Nov. 5, at 7 p.m. at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center's (MACC) Castle Theatre. Tom directed and co-produced with Robert C. Stone (Taylor Camp).

The Maui News' Rick Chatenever wrote the film's script, and the soundtrack is by Grammy winner Paul Horn and Emmy winner Christopher Hedge. Ann Mortifee narrates and Kris Kristofferson delivers the on-camera prologue and epilogue.

"Initially, I wanted to do a film about climate change and melting of the Himalaya glaciers that provide most of China's fresh water supply," Tom recalled. "I went to Beijing in 2008 to interview Greenpeace China and film pollution there, and I returned home more enlightened and with terrific footage."

But then came the news about his health-and his focus shifted dramatically.

"After being diagnosed and undergoing intensive medical treatment, I felt not only physically weak but emotionally drained," he said. "But something inside of me drove me to take the arduous journey back to the Himalayas. It was like the mountains were calling me and I wasn't sure if I physically could answer that call. But I felt my life depended on it. And what I needed now more than anything was to have faith and show up."

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So off he went to Nepal, camera in hand, through the rugged terrain from Lukla to Namche Bazaar on his way to Mt. Everest Base Camp.

"The more I trekked, the more I began to feel revived-not only by the mountains all around me, but by the Nepalese and Sherpa people I met. They exuded an innate joy that was so infectious, so healing-as if they were transmitting pure energy in their heartfelt smiles and through their eyes," he said.

When the Mountain Calls: Nepal-Tibet-Bhutan is not only about Tom's recent life-affirming trip-it is a film tapestry of his 30 years of travel adventures and documentaries about cultures and people simple in their needs yet more advanced in many ways than our own. Tom takes the audience on an eye-opening journey that includes an interview with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharmasala, India. Footage also includes the legendary musician Horn-"The Father of New Age Music"-playing his mesmerizing flute music inside Tibet's sacred Potala Palace, where he and Tom narrowly escaped arrest by Chinese guards.

The film shares the story of Lama Tenzin of the Maui Dharma Center, who returned home to Tibet under the close scrutiny of the Chinese military after decades in exile.

The documentary explores Tom's serendipitous meeting with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary, the world's most famous mountain climbers and the first people known to have reached the summit of Mt. Everest.

The film also includes scenes from inside the once-closed Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan to document their humanistic policy of "Gross National Happiness."

"The truth is, I haven't found all the answers I had been seeking, but I am content with not knowing where the path is taking me," Tom said. "As my dear friend Ann Mortifee wrote in her book, I learned to be In Love With The Mystery."

Tickets for When the Mountain Calls: Nepal-Tibet-Bhutan and In Love With The Mystery, a live narrative-musical performance with Horn and Mortifee preceding the movie premiere, may be purchased for \$25 per person at the MACC Box Office or online at www.mauiararts.org.

Check out the film's Website at www.WhenTheMountainCalls.com.

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