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ARTS AND LETTERS

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The High Life

Film fest feature goes inside director Curt Dowdy's Himalayan adventure

by **Hunter Holcombe**

If there is a theme to Curt Dowdy's mountaineering documentary, *High Ambitions in the Himalayas*, it is that of realizing dreams, set to the backdrop of gutsy mountaineering.

The film follows half a dozen middle-aged men bound together as they struggle up the Himalayan peak Cho Oyu, the sixth highest mountain in the world. Risking their lives and their relationships and discovering their personal limits on the mountain, each climber is exactly where he wants to be. And so is Dowdy, who dropped a well-paying corporate job in Silicon Valley to follow his lifelong dream to become a filmmaker.

High Ambitions is an accurate look at what it means to climb the world's highest mountains—the doubt, the danger, the struggle, the inspiration and the reason. It will play during the Santa Cruz Film Festival at 7 p.m. Friday, May 6, at the Del Mar.

"So many climbing films are testosterone driven," Dowdy says. "I wanted mine to be more introspective, to answer the question everyone asks about people who climb mountains—'why do you do this?'"

Throughout the film, viewers will undoubtedly ask this question themselves. Similar to "Into Thin Air," Jon Krakauer's best-selling book about the 1996 Mount Everest disaster, where nine climbers died, Dowdy's film is able to capture the incredible and exasperating burden that is placed on climbers at high altitudes. Each of the five climbers featured in the film, including Dowdy, experience the combination of harsh mountain conditions at a fraction of normal oxygen levels. The climbers are unable to eat, sleep and even think clearly much of the time as they struggle, both mentally and physically, up and down the mountain during

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the month it takes to acclimatize before making an attempt on the summit.

The struggle of the climbers is much more than physical, however. Climbing a major summit in the Himalayas requires major commitments, like leaving your family behind for long periods of time while you go off and risk your life, spending tens of thousands of dollars in travel expenses, dealing with physical deterioration and then, at the end of it, perhaps not even being able to summit at all, just because of possible bad weather conditions.

"Each climber in this film has his own reasons for going, and each goes through a different transformation on the mountain," Dowdy says.

Despite the realities that saturate the film, it is not without inspiration. As viewers begin to learn the motivations of the individual climbers, they are drawn closer to the desire to climb, to be on the mountain. Between intimate and personal interviews with the climbers, Dowdy sets up gorgeous and expansive footage of the mountain landscape and narrates the acclimatization plan and obstacles the climbers must overcome, all set to a powerful soundtrack featuring the world fusion beats of San Francisco-based Lumin, a band that will play at 9:30 p.m. at the Vets Hall, following the screening of *High Ambitions*.

The story of how this techie turned filmmaker got to the SCFF is as riveting as the movie itself. Though introduced both to climbing and filmmaking several decades ago, Dowdy was working in a highly demanding, but well-paying job as a senior manager at Hewlett-Packard in San Jose.

"After the dot-com bubble burst in 2001, it became very clear that things weren't going to be much fun," he says. Dowdy was put in charge of deciding the fate of several hundred workers, and it didn't feel right to him. "I knew this was an experience that would drain my soul. If there was ever a time I was going to make a leap, it was now."

The idea for this leap was given a major boost when Dowdy took a leave of absence in early 2001 to climb a smaller peak in the Himalayas. This experience had him hooked. "When I came back, I said, 'Sorry, I'm not returning from my leave of absence,'" he says.

After quitting, Dowdy knew there were two things he wanted to do—climb in the Himalayas and make films. "What better way than to combine the two of them," he says.

Dowdy had been taking an assortment of film classes over the years at various colleges and institutions in the Bay Area, and felt ready to make a film. He collected some lightweight digital film equipment, signed up with a guide to climb Cho Oyu, and headed out to the Himalayas. It wasn't until he was in Kathmandu, Nepal, that he found his film crew—the other climbers on the trip, including 61-year-old John Taske, who had narrowly survived the '96 Everest disaster and was back to face the mountains once again. Fortunately for Dowdy, the four other climbers all had interesting and diverse backgrounds, and all were at a decisive point in their climbing careers. Each one undergoes a major transformation in their life by what happens on Cho Oyu.

Dowdy's documentary is already generating buzz as one of the festival favorites, and for good reason. For anyone who has ever dreamed of climbing one of the world's highest mountains, or even wondered about making a life change, this film is honest and inspiring.

"It is OK to follow your dreams," Dowdy says. "As crazy as they may seem."

High Ambitions in the Himalayas will play at 7 p.m., Friday, May 6, at the Del Mar Theater, 1124 Pacific Ave. Lumin, featured on the

*film's soundtrack, will perform the same night at 9:30 p.m. at the
Vets Hall, 846 Front St.*

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