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News

'High Ambitions' filmmaker trained on Mt. Shasta

By Steve Gerace

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Mountain becomes metaphor in the documentary "High Ambitions in the Himalaya," one of 32 films showing at this weekend's Mount Shasta International Film Festival.



Publicity photo for the movie High Ambitions in the Himalaya, which is showing this weekend during the Mount Shasta International Film Festival.

In the film, adventure filmmaker Curt Dowdy of San Francisco joins a team of mountaineers attempting to climb Cho Oyu on the Nepal/Tibet border which, at 27,000 feet, is the sixth highest mountain in the world.

Dowdy is scheduled to be one of several filmmakers at this Sunday's Filmmakers Symposium at College of the Siskiyous in Weed, and he's also scheduled to hold a 30 minute Q&A session following the 6:30 p.m. showing of his film Saturday at COS.

"High Ambitions" details both the extensive efforts involved in the climb as well as the aspirations of each climber and the lessons they learn.

Dowdy, who climbed Mt. Shasta from the Hotlum-Bolam glacier route as part of his training regimen for making the film, says he was transformed by his experience on Cho Oyu.

"I used to be a senior-level manager in the Silicon Valley corporate world," Dowdy said. "Attempting to climb this mountain and making a film about it represented a heartfelt dream that my corporate colleagues thought was pretty irrational, especially when taking that much time off would jeopardize my position during a declining economy. I went through it anyway and proved to myself that I was much happier following the direction of my heart rather than my rational mind. I quit my corporate job, and now I'm living out a life-long dream to make inspirational films."

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"High Ambitions in the Himalaya" won the Santa Cruz International Film Festival's audience award earlier this year and is going to be shown at a festival in Sedona, AZ.

"I think the film resonates with the introspective spirit of people in places like Shasta, Santa Cruz and Sedona," Dowdy said. "I gave up a lot of security to live a more heartfelt life, and it's been hard to make ends meet. Going to the mountain helped reinforce the rewards that come from that, which are more important than financial rewards."

One of the "High Ambitions" climbers is John Taske, who survived the fatal 1996 Mount Everest climbing tragedy depicted in the best selling book "Into Thin Air" by Jon Krakauer. The "High Ambitions" climbers are assisted by two sherpas who also were part of that Mount Everest attempt.

Dowdy said the filmmaking challenges were considerable as he carried a six pound camera that "felt like a ton of bricks at 25,000 feet." He also carried a special battery pack in his down coat because normal batteries don't function at 40 degrees below zero, and he had to make special arrangements to keep his equipment from getting wet in his tent at night.

Dowdy said he had "to win agreement" from the other climbers to allow him to film the climb, and they were skeptical at first. They eventually agreed to a goals priority list that included a clause that it was OK to make a film as long as it didn't get in the way of the top two priorities: reaching the top and staying safe.

Though it is not discussed in the film, the climb was in progress at the time of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and Dowdy said in some ways the climbers' ultimate disappointment was "a reflection of that time."

Just under one hour long, "High Ambitions" is filled with spectacular scenery, mountain climbing details, personal insights and specially composed music by San Francisco composer Jeff Stott, who will provide world fusion dance music on the COS stage from 9:30 to 10:30 p.m. Saturday.

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