

The Pulse of the People

The Activist Heart at the Heart of Mountainfilm



Alizé Carrère in Bangladesh
Photo by Katia Nicolova

STORY BY TODD HARTLEY, TIME OUT WRITER

Mountainfilm, the traveling documentary film festival birthed in Telluride in 1979, rolls into the Wheeler Opera House and the Cooking School of Aspen Aug. 23-27 for this year's Aspen iteration bearing the moniker "Find Your Pulse." It's a nod, according to the Wheeler's executive director, Gena Buhler, to the festival's underlying spirit.

"It kind of ties into a lot of different parts of the festival," said Buhler, "from the adventure to the drive that we find in a lot of stories like in 'Charged' and 'Blood Road.'"

"Charged: The Eduardo Garcia Story," a feature about a Montana chef and outdoorsman who overcomes life-threatening injuries after accidentally electrocuting himself, is tailor-made for Mountainfilm's bent toward bold individualism.

"Blood Road" chronicles ultra-endurance mountain biker Rebecca Rusch and her 1,200-mile ride along Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh Trail to the place where her father disappeared in a 1972 plane crash. It's a natural for Mountainfilm's extreme-sports roots and peace-seeking vibe.

A less obvious tie between the festival and finding a pulse is the idea of using film as a way to tug at heartstrings and stir souls to action. It's a notion that Buhler and the Mountainfilm producers consider a central tenet to the festival's mission.

"It really ties into activism," said Buhler. "You're seeing these amazing stories, and it's meant to

do more than just entertain you. It's meant to engage you and make you react and want to act different ways."

One of the more relatable tales for Aspenites is the story of Tyler Dunning, told in the short film "A Field Guide to Losing Your Friends." When his best friend was killed in a terror attack in Uganda in 2010, Dunning fell into despair and self-medication and could only find solace exploring Rocky Mountain National Park.

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After a failed attempt to climb Longs Peak, Dunning was spurred to go on a quest to visit all 59 of America's national parks and try to make sense of a world that showed him a lot of grief in a short period of time.

"I visited almost all the U.S. national parks," said Dunning. "But along the way, more friends kept dying, either to suicide or a rare disease or accidents."

Despite the psychological setbacks and the diffi-

culties involved in traveling from the Everglades to Maine to Hawaii to the wilds of Alaska, Dunning, a former professional wrestler, soldiered on and was able to reorient his life through his own form of outdoor therapy.

"It was kind of that trope-like story of using nature to heal your wounds and to alleviate your mental stress and find a place of reconciliation and restoration," said Dunning.

The result was the book "A Field Guide to Losing Your Friends," on which the film is based. Dunning will be doing a reading and book signing at Explore Booksellers on Tuesday at 5:30 p.m. in advance of a 7 p.m. Wednesday night showing at the Wheeler as part of a program of nine films.

More directly tied to the notion of environmental activism will be a three-film program at 12:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Cooking School of Aspen. The names of the films easily give away their themes: "The End of Snow," "The Seed Vault: Preserving Crop Diversity" and "Adaptation Bangladesh: Sea Level Rise."

Unsurprisingly, all three films tackle climate change, viewing it from a perspective of the new normal, but what may be surprising is that while the first two films look at catastrophic scenarios, "Adaptation Bangladesh" takes a less pessimistic approach.

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Tyler Dunning at Black Canyon of the Gunnison
Courtesy Photo

that's not working," said Alizé Carrère, the National Geographic explorer at the heart of the film. "People are desensitized or they can't handle it, and they turn their eyes away from it. We take an inspiring narrative and look at how we, as a species, are really adaptable and creative."

"Adaptation Bangladesh," which is slated to be the first of an "Adaptation" series shot around the globe, looks at how people in Bangladesh, faced with rising sea levels, have adapted their communities to include floating gardens and other floating

infrastructure.

The hope, for Carrère and Dunning both, is to get people, turned off by the constant drone of negativity that life throws at us, to look beyond our own despair, realize that all is not lost and get involved.

"Is that type of storytelling going to be more effective?" asked Carrère. "To me, that felt like a better approach to getting people engaged in the conversation and, ultimately, in the solution."

You could call it Carrère's own way of finding the pulse of people who might think we're goners already.

Mountainfilm in Aspen

Wednesday, Aug. 23-Sunday, Aug. 27

Wheeler Opera House and Cooking School of Aspen

Tickets \$60-\$140, on sale at wheeleroperahouse.com

Information at mountainfilm.org



The Last Honey Hunter
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