

West Harrison cinematographer reaches new heights



Written by Charlie Johnson

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Mt. Kilimanjaro climb advocates clean drinking water

Bill Winters, a seven-year resident of West Harrison, has an impressive resume of films, television programs and commercials amassed during his career as a cinematographer.

However, an adventure he took part in at the beginning of the year may have dwarfed the rest of his accomplishments, in more ways than one.

In the first two weeks of January, Winters climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, the tallest peak on the African continent situated in the northeastern part of Tanzania, as one of three cinematographers accompanying a group of celebrities seeking to raise awareness for the need for clean drinking water in Africa and around the world.

The documentary of the climb and associated African travels that Winters helped to film is scheduled to be shown on MTV on Sunday, March 14 at 9 p.m.

Accompanying the likes of Jessica Biel, actor Emile Hirsch, Kick Kennedy (daughter of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.) and rapper Kenna, who organized the project, Winters set out to chronicle the entire trip Jan. 2, beginning the weeklong climb on Jan. 7.

After the group completed its descent on Jan. 13, the participants visited Somali refugee camps in Ethiopia where a lack of potable water was an enormous problem.

The group also visited a village in Ethiopia where Kenna's father, who now lives in Virginia, grew up. According to Winters, Kenna's familiarity with his father's experience growing up struggling to find clean water was the spark for the climb and the organization behind it, called Summit on the Summit.

Winters said that the connection between the climb and the cause to which the group hoped to draw attention was not arbitrary, but rather a vivid way to understand how the natural resources of Africa often fail to translate into a livelihood for its people.

“By climbing the highest peak in Africa, we were able to directly see the need for clean water,” said Winters, who recalled being pelted by rain and snow during the hike, but looking down at the villages that were unequipped to receive and purify the water for their people.

Winters was also struck by the incongruity of the experience of a typical American with that of people in that part of the world.

“We take clean water for granted here,” said Winters. “No one thinks twice about going to the faucet and having water come out. We don't realize that's a luxury.”

Although Winters, 34, is an avid cyclist and a lover of the outdoors, he admits that the Kilimanjaro climb was an incredibly difficult journey and says that the fact that the entire group of 50 climbers was able to reach the top was little short of miraculous.

Winters also noted that, despite being among a group of celebrities, the climb was the opposite of the stereotypical whine-



fest that might make good reality television.

“What was really interesting was the celebrities,” he said. “They were great climbers. They were out there roughing it with the rest of us...there were no prima donnas.”

Winters said that a culture of encouragement pervaded the group that helped it to defy the odds. Typically, he said, a group the size of the one he was a part of would expect to have around 60 percent of climbers reach the Kilimanjaro summit.

“You can be a physically fit marathon runner, and when you get the altitude sickness, there’s nothing you can do; you have to come down,” he said, noting that the success of the entire climbing group was even more unlikely given that most of the participants, himself included, had never undertaken a serious mountain climb.

Winters has spanned a number of formats and genres with his work as a cinematographer, including taking on some unusual terrain. He recently filmed promotional spots for Jerry Seinfeld’s new series “The Marriage Ref” on a frozen lake in Minnesota and once had to crawl through small pipes behind actors in a simulation for a documentary on crossings at the U.S.-Mexican border.

The difference between an “extreme” day of filming and the climb, Winters said, was the fact that on the mountain, the elements continued to plague the group long after the work day ended.

According to Winters, the best way for Harrison residents to get involved in the project is through monetary donations to Summit on the Summit, through its website at www.summitonthesummit.com.

Summit on the Summit uses donated funds to send water purification systems to places in need of clean water. The website estimates that every donated cent provides someone with a liter of drinking water. According to a recent tally on the site, over 6.1 million liters have already been donated since the site went live prior to the climb.



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