

Passion and adventure: Convocation Day features Dr. Geoff Tabin

April 15, 2015

In Nepal, a blind person is considered “a mouth with no hands” – a burden with no means of working in the fields or supporting himself. Blind children rarely survive to adulthood, and blind adults often dwindle and curl upon themselves, their life spans cut short by a third. And, tradition says, such a dire fate is inevitable: when you get old, your hair turns white, your eyes turn white and then you die.

Ninety percent of the world’s blindness occurs in the developing world, noted Dr. Geoff Tabin, an eye surgeon and director of the Division of International Ophthalmology at the University of Utah’s John A. Moran Eye Center. Perhaps most tragic: 85 percent of those cases could be prevented or cured.

Co-founder of the [Himalayan Cataract Project](#) with Dr. Sanduk Ruit, Tabin was this year’s Convocation Day keynote speaker – as well as one of the subjects of David Oliver Relin’s book *Second Suns: Two Doctors and their Amazing Quest to Restore Sight and Save Lives*. On April 14, he spoke to a full house in SUNY Broome’s Baldwin Gym about how his love of mountain-climbing led him to his life’s work.

“Seize your opportunities because they’re everywhere,” he told students. “To me, adventure is when you don’t know the outcome. So many of us have this safe world where you do what you are supposed to do.”



In the Mountains

Tabin discovered his passion for rock-climbing in high school at Devil’s Lake, Wisconsin. He continued climbing during his college years, following guidebooks that led him to the best sites and approaches. But his dreams took him further than the cliff face; he wanted to go into medicine, a desire fed by the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*,

sometimes translated as “repairing the world.”

He received a two-year scholarship to the prestigious Oxford University in Great Britain, where he earned a master’s degree in philosophy and began looking at the moral imperatives of healthcare. His time at Oxford sparked his interest in global medicine – as well as gave him the opportunity for some amazing climbing adventures, thanks to a grant that allowed Oxford students to enjoy climbing adventures abroad.

His adventures included climbs on Mount Kenya, the second highest mountain in Africa, where he and his partner made the first climb on the Diamond Buttress. They also headed to remote northeastern New Guinea to climb a rock wall no one had ever climbed before – with the help of the Dani, a Stone Age tribe who transported their gear and helped them on the 10-day hike to the mountain despite the complete lack of a common language.

In 1981, as a student at Harvard Medical School, he was invited on the first American expedition to climb Mount Everest from Tibet. Forgetting to tell his dean beforehand, he sent him a postcard from the San Francisco Airport, explaining where he was – and ended up fighting for his readmission to medical school after his return. His next trip to Everest – funded by National Geographic – went more smoothly in its execution, at least from the medical school’s perspective; a professor suggested he use the trip as an opportunity to research the impact of altitude on the human retina. He compiled his research data while climbing the east face of Mount Everest.

“In 31 years, the route has never been repeated,” Tabin said.

The doctor has summited the tallest peak on each of the seven continents and was the token male accompanying the first American women to summit Everest, where also worked as team doctor. In the Himalayas, he became frustrated with the limited scope of an individual physician in a remote setting; clean water was the greatest health problem for many of the people there, he said.

Curing the blind

He found his life's work when he witnessed a Dutch team perform cataract surgery on a rural Nepalese woman who had been blind for three years. While cataract surgery is the most common major operation in the United States, the procedure is cost-prohibitive in the developing world, which often lacks the medical staff and facilities to perform it.

"I came back with this incredible excitement and passion and the idea I could do something," Tabin said of his trip.

He and Dr. Ruit started the Himalayan Cataract Project to bring eye care to those who need it most. Ruit – a native of rural Nepal himself – developed a sutureless form of cataract surgery, allowing for safe, high-volume, low-budget operations such as those needed in remote parts of the world. Tabin worked side-by-side with Ruit for three days in a crude schoolroom turned surgery center in Nepal, where they performed 224 cataract surgeries; Ruit performed the bulk of them while Tabin learned at his side.

The project began courses to train ophthalmic assistants, nurses and other providers in Nepal, an approach the program hopes to establish in Ghana; the blindness rate is highest in Africa, Tabin said.

After they undergo the surgery, patients frequently exclaim with unbridled joy. After the bandages come off, 80 percent of them would be able to pass the eye test given to American drivers.

"These global systems have helped over 2 million people around the world regain their sight," said Professor Gian Roma. "You are a true humanitarian, inspiration and a hero."

SUNY Broome students, faculty and staff gave Tabin a standing ovation.

"It was very inspirational," said first-year Liberal Arts major Kyra Lowie.

So, do Tabin's exploits inspire SUNY Broome students to tackle mountains?

"Maybe, but probably never that high!" first-year Communications major Violet Learn said with a smile.

Other events

Convocation Day featured a wide range of morning sessions, covering such topics as the psychology of thrill-seeking, climbing the Adirondacks and the college's Health for Haiti program. Students also showcased their work in Public Achievement initiatives, presented research in the Natural Science Center and more.

Hospitality program students held a lunchtime cookout, while the Student Assembly held a bake sale. An afternoon film screening of "Out of the Darkness" also highlighted Dr. Tabin and Dr. Ruit's work.

The West Gym featured a massive inflatable obstacle course, which also raised funds for the Himalayan Cataract Project. Each four participants raised funds for one person to receive cataract surgery in the developing world, according to Professor Roma.

Perhaps most fittingly, Dr. Tabin made one of the first runs through, competing in a close race against second-year student Andrew Nelson.

**Dr. Tabin competes against Andrew Nelson in
the inflatable obstacle course.**

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