

THE MAUI NEWS

Philanthropist seeks out achievers to film, fund

By LEHIA APANA, Staff Writer

POSTED: June 19, 2009

[Save](#) | [Print](#) | [Email](#)

Charles Annenberg Weingarten is in the business of making reality television. But instead of focusing on superstar hopefuls or singles searching for love, he's turning the camera on dynamic leaders who are spreading good around the world.

As a trustee of the Annenberg Foundation, he started Explore as a way to identify selfless individuals who are making a positive social impact through nonprofit organizations and initiatives - and then share their stories through short documentary films and photography. With video cameras in hand, the Explore crew crisscrosses the globe to learn about nonprofit organizations, record their work and tell their stories to the masses.

"We try to keep it as real as possible," said Annenberg Weingarten, who is on Maui to present several of his short films at this year's Maui Film Festival. "There are no second takes and no scripts with what we do."

Topics range from animal rights, health and human services, and poverty to the environment, education and spirituality. The six films in this year's festival include the debut of three new documentaries, including "Wild Dolphin Project" that will take viewers on a trip to the Bahamas for a firsthand look into the underwater world of these highly social and intelligent creatures.

Another world premiere, "Gorillas . . . 98.6% Human," follows crews to Rwanda to visit four families of wild mountain gorillas, a species with only 720 remaining members. Their guide is Craig Sholley, who has been intimately involved in the preservation of African wildlife for more than 30 years. The team's interaction with these peaceful animals - who share 98.6 percent of their genetic makeup with humans - is a startling reminder of their own humanity.

Article Photos



The Maui News / MATTHEW THAYER photo

Filmmaker and philanthropist Charlie Annenberg Weingarten introduces his dog, Lucky, to YMCA summer campers Thursday afternoon at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center after screening three of his short films for the youngsters at the McCoy Theater. He also is to present several of his films beginning at 8 tonight at the free SandDance Theater on the Four Seasons Resort end of Wailea Beach.

THE MAUI NEWS

From animal issues to human conflict, "No Child is Born a Terrorist" enters deep into one of the most radicalized refugee camps in the Palestinian occupied territories and discovers that the greatest tool of freedom is not the gun but the stage.

There will also be an encore showing of "Guardians of the Sea," which won the audience award for Best Documentary at last year's Maui Film Festival. The film dives into Hawaii's rich history of lifeguards, from the early days with legendary watermen Duke Kahanamoku and Eddie Aikau to the modern-day heroes patrolling the beaches of Oahu's North Shore.

These are just a few of the films being presented at a free screening beginning at 8 tonight at SandDance Theater at Wailea Beach.

"Really the only way to understand Explore and the world we live in is to show a diverse platter of work so you see how the world is connected," said Annenberg Weingarten of the film selections. "When you see one, it's just a film, but when you actually see three or four or five you start to see threads."

He will also participate in the Film Maker Panel Program at 11:30 a.m. Saturday at the Wailea Beach Marriott Resort and Spa's Mei Court. Despite all the work he's produced, Annenberg Weingarten is hesitant to label himself as a filmmaker.

"When I go to places, I'm just going to learn and feel people's energy," he said. "I'm really going to discover people's needs and to see if there's a way to help."

In fact, he admits the extra attention cameras bring is oftentimes more of a challenge than a helpful tool.

"When you go into some of these places, it's all about creating that trust, so you have to be really delicate with the camera," he explained.

Annenberg Weingarten hosted a free screening of his films for the children of Camp Nalu on Thursday at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center, followed by a question-and-answer session with the filmmaker.

"The films are a gateway," he said. "Hopefully after seeing them they will want to go deeper and find out more about these issues."

Before arriving on Maui, Annenberg Weingarten spent two nights at Molokai's remote Kalaupapa peninsula, home to the island's remaining Hansen's disease patients. Admittedly enlightened and inspired, Annenberg Weingarten hopes to produce a short film about his visit.

"I've been to a lot of places, and my experience at Kalaupapa was as high as me going to Mecca, Tibet, the Vatican," he said. "It's absolutely one of the most powerful places in the world."

Annenberg Weingarten is the grandson of the late Walter Annenberg, the creator of TV Guide and the philanthropic family foundation that bears his name. With the support of the Annenberg Foundation, the Explore team is constantly on the go, always discovering, always giving back.

These trips are what Annenberg Weingarten calls "fact-finding missions" to identify potential grant recipients. To date, Explore has awarded more than \$15 million to more than 100 nonprofit organizations worldwide.

Hawaii grants have included \$50,000 to Kumu Kahua Theatre to preserve Hawaiian culture through theater; \$100,000 to the Kokua Hawaii Foundation to support environmental education in schools; and \$100,000 to the North Shore Lifeguard Association to promote lifesaving education.

"Philanthropy is really at the cornerstone of these projects," explained Annenberg Weingarten. "I've learned about a lot of nonprofits, and some we fund and some we don't so I'm really looking for leaders that I think are doing good work."