

Photographer Spanned Globe In Long Career

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TEMPLE TERRACE - Photojournalist Val Mazzenga has stood atop mountains, capturing some of the world's most beautiful vistas on film. He has trekked through primitive hamlets, a witness to some of humanity's most terrifying moments.

The award-winning "shooter" will talk about his 30-year career as a Chicago Tribune photographer at 8 p.m. Tuesday with a multimedia presentation at Florida College in Temple Terrace.

Mazzenga has published prize-winning photo essays on the late Mother Teresa, President Nixon and basketball star Michael Jordan.

During his career, he also photographed the harrowing aftermath of the mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana. He witnessed the bloody combat of Afghan resistance fighters. And he has shot such wonders of the world as the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall of China.

"It's been a fascinating 30 years," Mazzenga said from his home in Chicago.

Mazzenga grew up on the west side of Chicago, the son of Italian immigrants who spoke little English. At 15, he got an after-school job as a copy boy at the Chicago Tribune.

It was in the darkroom, however, where his career began to develop.

"One day I walked into the photo department," he said. "I walked into a darkroom, and I saw a piece of paper going through a developer tray, and a picture came out. It was real magic to me. Before you know it, I was spending my days off hanging around the darkroom learning about photography."

Two weeks before graduation, he said, he was offered a photography job - and took it. In the next three decades, he covered news, sports and features, often traveling around the world.

He was nominated six times for the Pulitzer Prize.

Some of his biggest assignments, he said, involved Mother Teresa's work in Calcutta, India, the suicides at Jonestown and widespread starvation in Africa.

It was a compelling, often perilous, adventure.

"I've been in many, many refugee camps: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Vietnam," he said. "I traveled around the world on news stories. Was my life in danger? Yes, I've had guns put to my head. I've gotten beaten up."

Four years ago, Mazzenga was asked to speak to students at the University of Illinois about photojournalism.

He enjoyed it so much, he said, that he began expanding his lectures to include a behind-the-scenes look at his work - and his philosophy. He calls it "The Untold Story."

"The untold story is my determination and attitude," he said. "People think you just go out and, 'Ahhh, there's a picture.' But there's anticipation and preparation in that. I talk about determination and attitude and how I adapt."

Three years ago, Mazzenga left the Chicago Tribune to concentrate on his speaking engagements and freelance photography, he said. Today, he lectures at colleges throughout the country.

His presentation includes music, movie clips and a slide show, followed by a question- and-answer period. "Never in my life did I ever think I'd be a speaker," he said. "But talking to students about photography and photojournalism and the interests they have, the students really get into it. And I really enjoy this."

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