

Contra Costa Times

Louie Zamperini to share stories of a life redeemed

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At the age of 94, Louie Zamperini is not only alive, he's kicking.

Listing his accomplishments in one breath is nearly impossible -- Olympic runner, WW II bombardier, survivor of 47 days adrift in a raft in the South Pacific and two years in Japanese POW camps, recovering alcoholic, Christian, founder of Youth Center Victory Camp for Boys, father, author "... gasp!

It's little wonder that his life, captured with best-selling flair by Laura Hillenbrand, the author of "Seabiscuit" and Louie's story, "Unbroken," has spent 18 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list.

"I have about two interviews a day," he said, during a phone interview from his home in the Hollywood Hills. "You could say I've never worked harder in my life."

Zamperini also speaks to youth groups, schools and veterans organizations. And on April 17, he will tell his stories to 400 lucky ticket holders at Acalanes Performing Arts Center in Lafayette.

The event is a benefit for the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation and a personal affair for Karen Mulvaney, Lafayette's 2011 Citizen of the Year.

"We're dedicating the event to the memory of my parents and Tom's father, who all served in the armed forces," Mulvaney said, explaining why she and her husband Tom are hosting Zamperini's visit.

Like Zamperini's journey from juvenile delinquent to a life devoted to giving, the genesis of Karen Mulvaney's connection to his story is twisted, even tortured.

"My dad was shot down during the war, like Louie. My dad struggled with alcohol and anger. My dad always tried to put deals together, but they never really happened. That's why Louie's story so resonated with me. It's the parallels that opened wide my eyes and my heart about my dad," she said.

Describing her relationship with her father, who died in July, and her two brothers, both recovering alcoholics, Mulvaney did not sugarcoat the pain.

"My struggle was trying to find a place of safety. When my father would drink, it was the sound of his voice that would make my heart race. Even as an adult, when he was in Connecticut, 3,000 miles apart, it would do the same thing."

Despite the turbulent family relationships, when Mulvaney's parents were simultaneously diagnosed with cancer, she traveled east every month for two years to care for them. Her sense of community blossomed because of her neighbors on Tilden Lane in Lafayette, who cared for her two young children during her absences.

"I cleaved to them because they loved the kids. Today, the connectedness I feel for others comes through the lens of that and how my parents were -- they valued every person equally."

Zamperini's biography, full of vibrancy and his uncanny ability to beat the odds, stirred a sleeping bear in Mulvaney -- her father's past and the stories left untold.

" 'Unbroken' compelled me to want other people to hear about why people struggle," she began, pausing to search for the right words. "People fall out of their own sky, and land in a raft. They feel so alone. For some people, that's the end. For others, they survive. What helps bridge those two extremes is the telling of the story."

Zamperini has more than one knock 'em-out-of-the-seats story, but most people want to know the secret to his longevity more than anything else.

"I do upper body exercises -- stuff with stretching bands -- and six to eight flights of stairs every day, because old people don't pick their feet up high and they stumble," he began. "I accept all things that happen to me and have a cheerful attitude. It's kind of hard, but that's the idea.

"Doing good is the other secret. Whenever you save a kid's life, your immune system is flooded with good chemicals," he reflected, thinking of his work with troubled youths at the outdoor camps he founded and ran until a few years ago.

"Instead of being in the High Sierras, at 94, my work is speaking to young people at schools and youth groups."

Zamperini recommends keeping one's cool in traffic, especially on the "battlefield of L.A. freeways." He says, leave early, put on beautiful music and lose the stress.

"My anger? It's all behind me. That was my youth. I don't have to let out anxiety, because I don't open the door and let it in."

Dignity, he insisted, is loving everybody, letting no one get you down and never retaliating by returning an insult.

A devout Christian, he described Heaven as the greatest thing.

"When my wife died, people tried to console me and I said, 'Why, she's better off than I am!' When you escape this world, with war and crime and torture "... why, being with God is a step upward."

Until he takes that step himself, he's wasting no time representing what he likes to call "The Hardy Generation."

"I'd been the worst kind of a juvenile delinquent and I knew my worse problem was recognition. When I ran the camps, I looked for gangs; for kids that will commit a crime to get in the paper. That's recognition. I taught them, when there's a problem, don't turn your back on it."

Today, he gets letters from all over the world -- from high-powered outdoor programs modeled on his Victory Boys Camp, sports enthusiasts and military families.

"I've even had a couple of women who want to marry me and a girl from Texas who bought a plane ticket and said she just wants to come out here and hug me and then go back home," he boasted.

Universal Studios, planning to make a movie based on Hillenbrand's book, recently asked him to be a consultant.

"I said, 'Sure, but I'm 94 -- let's hurry this thing up!' he laughed.

Zamperini figured his purpose over the last 40 years was set by God: to accomplish things. But his favorite occupation will always be a simple, iconic American character: cowboy.

"Robert Duvall came over the other day. We sat around like old cowboys, talking about mending the fence and looking for strays," he remembered.

It's a perfect metaphor for an independent, even rebellious man who forgave his captors and devoted the remainder of his amazing life to saving souls.