



THE BANFF CENTRE

MEDIA RELEASE

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Jim Whittaker — A Life on the Edge

Wednesday, April 3, 7:30 p.m.
Max Bell Auditorium, The Banff Centre

There have been many ‘firsts’ in Jim Whittaker’s life. He was the first North American to summit Mount Everest (1963). As the first manager and employee, and ultimately the CEO, of Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI), he led the company through years of record-setting growth. In 1965 he guided Bobby Kennedy up the newly-named Mount Kennedy, helping him to become the first person to summit the peak. In 1990, he led the historic International Peace Climb, which put climbers from the U.S., Russia, and China on the summit of Everest in the name of world peace.

Jim Whittaker’s success on Everest and his many achievements before and after are the natural outcome of a life driven by a passion for outdoor adventure. On Wednesday, April 3 he will recount some of his life stories when Mountain Culture at The Banff Centre presents Jim Whittaker—*A Life on the Edge* at 7:30 p.m. in the Max Bell Auditorium.

Whittaker will also be speaking in Calgary on Friday, April 5 at 7:30 p.m. at Murray Fraser Hall, University of Calgary. Whittaker’s Calgary presentation is sponsored by The Hostel Shop.

Jim Whittaker was born in Seattle in February 1929. He credits his mother with imbuing him with a love of nature at an early age. Along with his twin brother Lou, he learned to climb and camp with the Mountaineers Club. By age 21, the Whittaker brothers were guiding on Mount Rainier and Lou later founded Rainer Mountaineering Inc., a professional guide service.

In 1963, Swiss mountaineer Norman Dyhrenfurth invited the Whittaker brothers to join him on an Everest expedition. Lou was unable to make the trip, but Jim leapt at the chance. In his 1999 autobiography *A Life on the Edge* he describes how it felt to stand atop Everest:

“I did not feel expansive or sublime. I felt only, as I said later, ‘like a frail human being’. People—mostly non-climbers—talk about conquering mountains. In my mind, nothing could be farther from the truth. The mountain is so huge and powerful, and the climber so puny, exhausted, and powerless. The mountain is forever. Gombu and I, meanwhile, were dying every second we lingered.”

Summitting Everest changed Jim Whittaker’s life. An invitation to the White House led to a friendship with the Kennedy family and in particular with Bobby Kennedy, President Kennedy’s younger brother and Attorney-General. Following the president’s assassination, Whittaker guided Bobby Kennedy to the top of the Yukon mountain named in the president’s memory.

Whittaker was at the Kennedy home in 1968 when Bobby decided to run for the presidency. He describes that evening in *A Life on the Edge*: “Although everyone knew it would be an uphill battle,

there was a heady euphoria, a rising sense of hope. There was also some anxiety. At one point I took him aside. ‘Do you understand,’ I said, “that what you are doing is a lot more dangerous than climbing mountains?”” ‘Yes’, he said quietly, ‘ I know.’” Just four months later, Whittaker was a pallbearer at Bobby Kennedy’s funeral.

Whittaker went on to lead expeditions to K2, organizing the first American team to summit the mountain in 1978. In 1990 he surmounted physical and bureaucratic hurdles to place a combined U.S.-Chinese-Russian team at the summit of Everest as part of the 1990 Mount Everest Earth Day International Peace Climb.

Today, at age 73, Jim Whittaker spends his time lecturing, writing and, when time allows, sailing with his wife, former Calgarian Dianne Roberts, and their two teenage sons. Life, Whittaker says, is still full of adventure: “I think a life well lived is also inseparable from being able and willing to learn continuously. A climber who doesn’t learn, almost with every foothold and handhold, is unlikely to be around long enough to have a life well lived. Learning is what happens when you risk a journey beyond what you know and are comfortable with, to something you don’t know and aren’t comfortable with. A lot of people my age act like they’ve seen it all and have nothing much else to learn. But I’m still a learner.”

Tickets for Whittaker’s presentation on April 3 in Banff are \$5.00 at the door, free to Mountain Culture members.

Tickets for the April 5 Calgary presentation are \$8.00 in advance from The Hostel Shop, \$10.00 at the door, call 403-283-8311 for more information.

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Media Contacts:

Jim Whittaker and Dianne Roberts: (360) 385-4691 through March 26th. From March 27th through April 6th, Jim and Dianne will be in Calgary/Banff: Cell (360) 531-4691.

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Mountain Culture at The Banff Centre promotes understanding and appreciation of the world’s mountain places by creating opportunities for people to share – and find inspiration in – mountain experiences, ideas and visions.