

BAY AREA NEWS

Sachi Cunningham and her film 'Chasing the Swell' at 5th Annual Surf Movie Benefit

By Jean Bartlett | Correspondent

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Friday night, Feb. 24, at 6 p.m. and again at 8:30 p.m., Pacifica Beach Coalition and premier sponsor Recology of the Coast, along with additional sponsors — the City of Pacifica, Pedro Point Surf Club, Sonlight Surfshop, Norcal Surfshop, The Logshop, Wise Surfshop, Mavsurfer, Volcom, Quicksilver and Legal Point Corp. — present "Chasing the Swell: Big Wave Surfing Through the Pacific" by Sachi Cunningham. The film screening event, which is in support of Earth Day Pacifica (April 21, 2012), also includes a special viewing of the award-winning "Mavericks: Everest of the Sea" photo exhibition. Filmmaker Cunningham will be at both screenings to talk about her film and answer questions.

"Chasing the Swell," a surf video in three chapters, follows the great avalanche rides of the world's top big wave chargers as they chase the 2010 winter swells from Hawaii (Waimea Bay, north shore, Oahu), to California (Mavericks, off Pillar Point, Half Moon Bay) and Mexico, (Isla Todos Santos, a small island off Baja.) Cunningham, a multimedia journalist and filmmaker, is the film's producer, photographer, video shooter, editor, writer and multimedia producer. At the time the film was made, Cunningham worked as a multimedia journalist for the Los Angeles Times. The Los Angeles Times produced "Chasing the Swell."

The Pittsburgh, PA-raised Cunningham fell for the water when she was a little girl.

"My grandparents rented a beach house on Capistrano Beach, every summer," the filmmaker said. "And so from the time I was born until college, I would spend two weeks at the beach. I used to ask for an ocean in my backyard every Christmas." Cunningham began swimming when she was four, and competitively swimming from age seven until college. At Brown University she played water polo for four years. A bodysurfer from the moment she knew she could, Cunningham said she was

too shy when she was a kid to ask anyone to teach her how to board surf. Her first board surfing happened when she was 25, living in Japan, and teaching English and doing marketing for a movie theater in Tokyo.

"I apprenticed with a few Japanese professional surf photographers," Cunningham said. "Then I bought my first camera — film, not digital!" Knowledge in hand, Cunningham took off on a year long trip, alone, through East and Southeast Asia (1997/98), hitting up surf wherever possible. Her trip ended in Indonesia where she got hooked on water surf photography and bodysurfing big barrels.

"I didn't really get into board surfing until I got back to California and eventually moved to Ocean Beach, San Francisco in 2001. However after board surfing for almost 15 years, I can positively say that I still suck!" Currently Cunningham, and her husband Zachary Slobig, also a journalist, are in Northern Peru on a road trip. (They quit their respective jobs last spring, sold their cars, sublet their apartment, bought a truck and headed off to be "itinerant surf bums" by way of California, through Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador and now Peru, to where Cunningham will return after her Pacifica event.) The couple is blogging their journey, www.marshmallowchronicles.tumblr.com (<http://www.marshmallowchronicles.tumblr.com>). Slobig is also writing a magazine article for "Outside" and Cunningham is editing two documentaries, one on "Elwha Unplugged" — a profile of an 80-year-old fisherman who is largely responsible for the Elwha River restoration project in Washington State.

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"It began this fall and it's the largest dam removal in U.S. history" (visit www.reelblu.net (<http://www.reelblu.net>)). Cunningham is also working on "CRUTCH," a story about an artist with a hip disability who performs a hybrid of break-dancing, skateboarding and performance art. In March, she'll meet up with Save the Waves Coalition to document a series of beach cleanups which will screen at the Patagonia Adventure Film Festival in Chile at the end of March.

Cunningham said her journey to becoming a multimedia journalist and filmmaker has been a long and winding road. It began in the Hollywood film industry, where she worked for ten years. On her last Hollywood film, "Bandits," the film's star Bruce Willis gave Cunningham a digital camera as a production gift.

"At that time, it was the start of the digital camera revolution." Cunningham was also given a video camera and her footage was featured on a DVD. She was hooked. To hone her skills she applied to the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley to study documentary film with Jon Else. Following graduation she worked for the PBS international news documentary program FRONTLINE/World. From there she headed off to Tahiti and Chile to produce, direct, shoot and edit two environmental documentary projects. Next, her three year stint as a multimedia journalist at the LA Times would send her all over the map, including to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and to the select spots where extreme surfers go.

"Chasing the Swell" was the result of a lot of things," Cunningham said. "Some failed efforts at previous stories, a good dose of luck, favors from special people and a very supportive newspaper (the LA Times)." Cunningham had originally intended on doing a simple "daily" on big-wave surfer Greg Long before the 2009 contest. She did the interview, which is in her film, but the contest didn't happen.

"And I had a great unused interview," the filmmaker said. "On the first swell in the winter of 2009, I planned on doing a profile of (Pacifica, surf photographer) Frank Quirarte — a sort-of 'day at the office' short video daily. But a few things didn't go as planned and I wasn't able to shoot the peak of the swell. At the end of the session, though, I shot South African surfer Jeremy Johnson falling on a wave at 'Mavs' with a pretty bad wipe out. He got in touch with me later to see if he could see the footage." Cunningham got to know Johnson and was going to do a daily on him, but then Johnson was injured at Todos Santos, and out for the rest of the season. By then, through Johnson, Cunningham had met two more big wave surfers from South Africa — Mike Schleich and James Taylor. With El Nino coinciding with the next big wave season, and with a number of encouraging editors at the LA Times, Cunningham was given the green light to make her film.

Cunningham said that shooting the eye of a wave is, "an absolute awe inspiring vision." And to make the shot is an art and sport in and of itself. However, there are certain memories from making the film that still make her catch her breath.

"Shane Dorian's wipeout (at Mavericks), still makes me sweat," Cunningham said. "I think about it every time I'm held under for any length of time." For people who don't surf, why will "Chasing the Swell" draw them in?

"Because watching big waves being surfed rivals anything you can see anywhere in the world," the filmmaker and itinerant surfer said. "No matter who you are, mother nature will keep you at the edge of your seat."

Event: Pacifica Beach Coalition hosts 5th annual surf movie benefit for Earth Day, includes raffle

Where: Pacifica Performances Mildred Owen Concert Hall, 1220 Linda Mar Blvd.

When: Friday, Feb. 24. Two showings — 6 and 8:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$15 in advance (recommended, prior years were sell outs). \$20 at door, \$10 for 16 and under and seniors (65+). Available at Sonlight Surf Shop, 575 Crespi Drive, Pacifica Parks Beaches and Recreation, 1810 Francisco Blvd., Café Pacifica, 1821 Palmetto Ave.

Additional info: www.pacificabeachcoalition.org (<http://www.pacificabeachcoalition.org>) Visit the filmmaker: <http://www.sachicunningham.com> (<http://www.sachicunningham.com>)

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