

Tamdin Wangdu's photos bring his native Tibet to Denver

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Tamdin Wangdu was a student at CU in 2000, finishing work on a degree in business administration, when he heard the news that his father had died. But unlike most people caught in such a tragic circumstance, Wangdu couldn't rush home to comfort his family. Ten years earlier, at the age of nineteen, he'd spent two months hiking through the treacherous Himalayas and dodging border patrols to escape Tibet, where he'd grown up under the heel of the Chinese occupation.

After reaching Nepal and eventually India, he became one of 1,000 Tibetan refugees granted visas by the United States in 1992. Twenty-one of them, including Wangdu, were sent to Colorado to live. Although he knew little English when he arrived -- his village had only the most rudimentary school -- and despite the painful separation from his culture and loved ones, he quickly adapted to life in Denver. But his inability to return to Tibet after his father's death ignited in him an urgent need to reconnect with his roots.

"My father got sick, and my brother tried to take him to a hospital, which was five hours away by horse," Wangdu relates. "Halfway there, he could not deal with the pain; he just died. When I heard this, I cried and cried and cried. I don't know why or how my father died. No one does. There were no doctors to figure that out. That experience reaffirmed my commitment to help Tibetans. My goal was really simple: to save at least one person's life."

Wangdu began raising funds, and in 2001 founded the Tibetan Village Project. A non-profit organization devoted to preserving the culture of Tibet as well as the lives of its people, the project began as a single medical clinic near his boyhood home.

"Now we have three clinics," Wangdu notes. "They see at least 3,000 patients a year and provide health education. There are several schools that we help with supplies and scholarships. We build bridges in villages and teach people skills that help them become self-sufficient."

To help raise awareness of TVP's efforts -- not to mention the rich culture and breathtaking beauty of Tibet -- Wangdu is hosting Tibet in Pictures at the Tea Box tearoom in Cherry Creek on Saturday, November 26. The slide-show presentation narrated by Wangdu holds a particular poignancy; last summer, he was allowed back in Tibet for the first time since leaving fifteen years ago. Accompanied by eight of his

volunteers, he was finally able to see firsthand his clinics and programs in action -- and to reunite with a family torn apart by tragedy long ago.

"That was the highlight of my trip," he says. "It was really, really emotional. During my slide show, I'll be talking about how things were before I left Tibet and how much they've changed. It will be very educational and informative and fun. And hopefully we'll be able to get some more support for the project."

In addition to the visuals, Wangdu will sell craft items made by Tibetan villagers he met on his trip. The proceeds will help fund TVP's ongoing work, as well as helping the artisans' local economies. But while the Chinese government welcomes a certain amount of charity programs in Tibet, Wangdu has to be very careful about how he words his objectives.

"We cannot get involved in political activities -- it's very difficult," he explains. "But if I became a political spokesperson, I'd always have to worry about the Chinese government shutting down our projects, so I try not to say too much. To me, the most important thing is helping people in the villages. The majority of Tibet still needs running water and education and medical care. It's important that these people have their basic needs met, to get the resources they need to help themselves.

"I just want to do something to help Tibetans," he sums up simply. "This is where my heart is."