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World explorer journeys to UMD

FEBRUARY 25, 2016 BY HANNAH BROADBENT

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BY EMILY NESS | the Statesman

Accompanied by a team of dogs, Will Steger raced through the sparkling snow before him. The light of the moon illuminated the course from above, guiding him onwards. He glanced over his shoulder to check on his team of five different men from five different countries. Snowflakes fell in harmony with each dog's stride and Steger smiled as he realized that the beauty of the Earth brought humanity together—and he wanted to preserve it.



This was not the first time Steger felt such passion, nor was it his first expedition. In fact, he had been on many.

Born into a family of nine children in Richfield, Minnesota, Steger was seldom interested in ordinary life. Rather, he craved life's highest moments.

"As a kid, most of my peers and I were interested in adventure. I grew up in an age without the internet. The only access that I had to any type of adventure was The National Geographic. I'd have to say that the National Geographic magazine was what inspired me to broaden my horizons," Steger said.

Traveling tens of thousands of miles by kayak and dogsled, Steger has spent the last 50 years leading teams on some of the most prominent polar expeditions in history.

"My life consists of two areas of adventure. I have done a lot of personal expeditions, simply to explore the world around me, as well as a lot of public expeditions, in order to bring about environmental education and awareness. As technology advanced, I realized that I could bring an audience where an audience had never been brought before," Steger said.

One of these adventurous expeditions included the first confirmed dogsled journey to the North Pole (without re-supply) in 1986, in which six men from six different countries came together to journey across the harshest continent on the planet. The team's goal was to protect beautiful things—specifically, Antarctica from the petroleum industry and other forms of development.

The team did just that.

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Their Expedition to the North Pole captured the world's attention as Steger advocated for a stand against Global Warming. The men received support from start to finish of their 222 day journey.

After the expedition, the team traveled the globe to meet with world leaders, urging them to ratify the 1961 Antarctic Treaty in order to protect Antarctica from oil and mineral exploration. Steger was even called to testify before congress on the matter.

"I think that my testimony was well received, but what truly moved congress was all of the letters that children had written to our team throughout our Antarctic Mission. Believe it or not, we had tens or thousands of letters. We brought mail bags filled with letters to court and dumped them onto the table. It was an incredibly powerful moment. The children are what saved Antarctica," Steger said.

In 1991 the group's wish came true. The treaty was ratified, protecting Antarctica from scientific research.

"In order to clean up the atmosphere, we have to innovate into a whole new economy, which we are now beginning. As we do this, we are creating an enormous number of well paying jobs for today's youth," Steger said.

In 1995 National Geographic awarded Steger the John Oliver La Gorce medal for "accomplishments in geographic exploration, in the sciences and for public service to advance international understanding."

"Growing up, those featured in National Geographic were role models for me. All of a sudden I was a role model for a new generation of kids. It was quite an honor," Steger said.

This award has only been given 19 times since National Geographic was founded in 1888. As a result of this, Steger joined individuals like Amelia Earhart in being honored with the award.

"There are some major challenges. However, there are incredible opportunities coming... Especially for youth," Steger said.

Recently Steger became the co-founder for the Center of Global Environmental Education as well as the founder of the Steger Wilderness Center. Both are designated to bring about environmental education and awareness.

"The legacy that I hope to leave behind is a world where no more coal is burned. If we stop burning coal, we have the opportunity to save the planet. The human race cannot carry on if we continue living the way that we are. In fact, there are some abrupt changes coming. In order to stop burning coal, we need to change the economy and create these jobs," Steger said.

In addition to these accomplishments, Steger has written four books: "Over the Top of the World", "Crossing Antarctica", "North to the Pole" and "Saving the Earth." All of Steger's books elaborate on his ongoing desire to reduce Global Warming.

"When the last coal plant is being shut down in Minnesota, I will feel good about my life," Steger said.

Through the steps that Steger has taken and continues to take to reduce his carbon footprint, this might one day come true for planet Earth.

Years from now, Steger hopes that children will be able to see the stars and the illuminating light of the moon, just as he has. In addition to this, he hopes that children will be as compelled as he has been to preserve such sparkling beauty.

To hear more about Will Steger's riveting adventures, go to the Marshall Performing Arts on February 25th from 7:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., where National Geographic Award Winner Steger will be on campus to further inspire us all.

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