

100% Adventure

'60s Alumnus Peter Pilafian
Mixes a Passion for Filmmaking
With His Passion for Life.

There are some people out there that life seems to grant special wishes. At first I thought that must be Goddard alumnus Peter Pilafian (RUP '63). As an adventure filmmaker, photographer, musician, recording engineer, mountaineer and climber for almost 40 years, Peter travels all over the world.

"A little danger makes life interesting," he says. There are no special wishes granted for this adventurer, though; his great joy of life comes from working hard and loving it.

His official biographical information records the multitude of productions he has worked on and awards he has won—including two Emmys and two Cine Golden Eagles — as a cinematographer, director of photography, producer, director and sound engineer. He has been especially lauded for his spectacular cinematography, and his bio includes a long list of his films, with highlights such as Stacy Peralta's *Riding Giants* and *Dogtown and Z-Boys*. Most notably, perhaps, Peter was part of the Oscar-winning cinematography team for *A River Runs Through It*, worked for six seasons on *The Larry Sanders Show* and four seasons on *Survivor*, and he was a cameraman for the official films of the 2002 and 2004 Olympics.

He also worked on the extreme skiing documentary *Steep*, which opened in theaters in December, and he has climbed most of Mt. Everest for the adventure documentaries *To the Top of the World*, *Triumph on Mt. Everest* and *Everest: Mountain at the Millennium*.

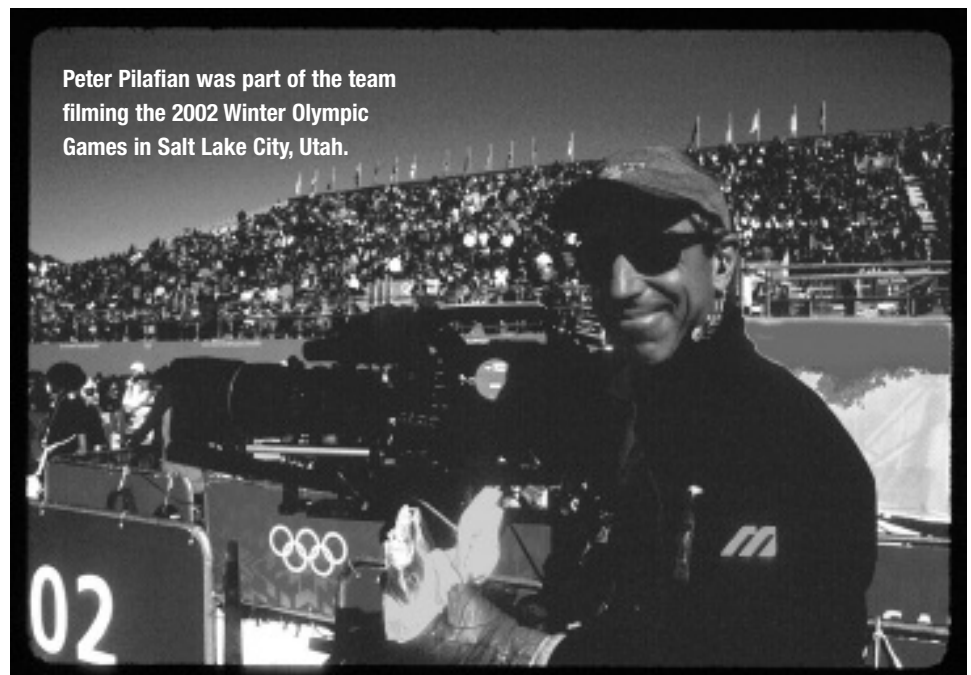
"I love what I do," Peter says. "I have fun doing it, and I love sharing it."

The first American expedition up Mt. Everest was in 1963, and this, coincidentally, was the year Peter graduated from the residential program at Goddard. Growing up in Detroit, he never even saw a mountain until he enrolled in Goddard, but when he

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began to enjoy hiking and skiing them in Vermont, he says, "I certainly didn't realize I would be doing that for the rest of my life."

A Goddard seminar introduced him to photography, and he remembers a man coming to class with a Hasselblad medium-format camera; the square-framing approach attracted Peter, especially with the promise of fall foliage to shoot, but as he often says, he didn't see himself doing that forever, either. He was a theater major at Goddard and an avid musician interested in developing "sound panorama and compositional soundscapes."



Peter Pilafian was part of the team
filming the 2002 Winter Olympic
Games in Salt Lake City, Utah.

This led him to check out an electric music lab at Columbia University. He recounts visiting a room of 20-foot-long computers and meeting Morton Subotnick, a pioneer electronic music composer, which inspired him to move to Los Angeles and build his own electronic sound system studio. He began doing sound engineering and recording for A&M Records, where he worked on albums such as The Mamas and the Papas' *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears* and collaborated with Joe Cocker. But in spite of his musical adventure, Peter says he needed to get out of the studio; he needed sun and mountains.

In 1976, he found himself working for CBS television as part of the American Bicentennial Everest Expedition, not only proving himself as a cameraman but also as a lifesaving mountaineer. When a fellow team member nearly fell from the Lhotse Mountain face down a 5,000-foot vertical drop, it was Peter's intuition (at 26,000 feet) to secure himself and dig in both his axe and crampons, saving them both from certain death.

Even with this terrifying experience, the terrain of the Khumbu region in Nepal remains one of his favorite places, and he has been back twice on Mt. Everest climbing and filmmaking expeditions. His other favorite places include Bali, Peru and the Tetons in Wyoming. But for him the most astonishing place in the world is the Grand Canyon.

One recent day, Peter says he woke up and felt that "an entire lifetime had gone by," and he wanted to reconnect with his past. He'd heard about classmates.com and decided to check it out, ultimately finding past Goddardites in his search. Though he says he had long forgotten all about Goddard—he knew it went through a "black period" and wasn't even sure the college still existed—he was happily surprised to find some old friends and attended the college's 2007 Haybarn Retreat and annual reunion. Peter says he felt "enormously comforted" by Goddard and felt that things had changed little since the early '60s.

"It was like a Hollywood time travel movie," he says. He even found his old dorm room, and he remembered the time he had gone into the woods and cut down four or five young trees to create a more appealing décor for the room.

"It was one of those affirmation moments that you're not just dreaming, it was real back then," he says. "It was a physical manifestation of the recesses of my murky memory."

He reconnected with musicians he used to play with on campus "before we were human beings" and reminisced that he still had things in common with the friends he had made in the 1960s.

Peter also gave a presentation during the reunion and showed his film *Someday Somebody Will Ski That*, which won the People's Choice Award at the 2006 Barry Corbet Film Festival (now the Alpinist Film Festival) in Jackson Hole, Wyo. He describes his visit back to Goddard as "wonderful, amazing, astonishing," which says a lot coming from a guy who has amazing experiences almost every day.

Currently, Peter is working on a one-hour documentary



Peter filmed humpback whales on a kayaking adventure near Glacier Bay, Alaska.

about an aerial tram being built for Jackson Hole, which is set to be finished in December for the *MegaStructures Series* on the National Geographic channel. He is also developing a documentary on environmental success stories in wilderness preservation in the greater Yellowstone region; the film is meant to be an inspiration for others to see the current progress and promote more visionaries to follow suit.

Peter is on the board of directors for The Alpinist Film Festival, which was held this year in January. When he's not behind the camera or on an outdoor adventure, he turns to his other loves: music and art. He's been performing with The Chamber Orchestra as a violinist, and he once won first prize in the Wyoming State Fiddle Competition. He is also working on an art series called "Hot Art," featuring his fine art skills with abstract video footage. His side projects involve working in Alaska on the Iditarod, developing training workshops for the Wyoming Film Commission and being involved with his community in environmental preservation.

He was busy the week we spoke, playing in the snow in Jackson Hole. He said he was filming, but a mountain and fresh snow sounds like play for this adventurer. Peter says he is always skiing.

"This snow stuff is so fleeting ... it's like a shadow," he says. "You have to jump on it." His schedule took him to Zurich the following week, where he said he'd also be sneaking in some skiing around film time.

"If you are passionate enough about something, someone will pay you for it," he says, and passion seems to drive his work and his life. He is passionate about music and the outdoors ... especially mountains. He is passionate about photography and filmmaking. His passions have taken him far. What is his secret?

"Wherever you are," he says, "be there 100 percent." ■