

Gorgeous place, disturbing history, come together in photo exhibit

Kalaupapa, located on the island of Molokai, is a beautiful place with a horrific past. Capturing this peninsula on film showcases its incredible beaches, surf, and 1600-foot sea cliffs, but also reveals relics of the leper colony, which was imprisoned by the ocean and cliffs for nearly 100 years. Beginning in December 2002, the Molokai Museum and Cultural Center will present "Exiles in Paradise," a photojournalistic essay of the social and physical banishment of the Molokai leprosy victims.

The 30 color and black-and-white photos that comprise the exhibit were created by photographer Robin F. Pendergrast, who lives in the Chicago suburb of Bull Valley, Ill. They have been artistically framed in an archival manner by Scott Teasdale of Woodland Art Gallery & Frame Shoppe in Crystal Lake, Ill. The lumira images were printed and processed by Fineprint Custom Photolab, Inc. in Fort Collins, Colo.

Through a series of 15 visits stretching over 20 years, Pendergrast compiled a body of work with more than 2,000 images that honor Kalaupapa's thousands of residents, all victims of leprosy. The photographic works juxtapose the beauty of the lush, secluded peninsula with the stark pain and separation of its past and present inhabitants.

But the story of how Pendergrast came to understand Kalaupapa and its people is an amazing tale of serendipity, tenacity and caring.

This story starts 130 years ago with the formation of Kalaupapa as a community of outcast victims of leprosy, now known as Hansen's disease. It then jumps ahead to a 1981 *Los Angeles Times* newspaper article about Kalaupapa's broken down fire engine,

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which lead Pendergrast to spearhead the donation of a fire truck from the Chicago area to residents of Kalaupapa. And the tale ends with Pendergrast's photo collection becoming a permanent exhibit at the Molokai Museum and Cultural Center.

From 1866 to the 1960s, Kalaupapa became a dumping ground for people suffering from leprosy, or Hansen's disease. Surrounded on three sides by towering sea cliffs and the Pacific Ocean on the fourth side, Kalaupapa was a natural prison, accessible for years only by boat. From 1873 to 1889, a Belgian missionary priest, Father Damien, served the colony and became a fierce advocate for their rights. Father Damien helped the Kalaupapa Settlement build homes, churches and coffins. He also publicized the plight of the community and the residents' forced banishment. Today, Kalaupapa is a National Historic Site, and is still home to scores of people afflicted with Hansen's disease.

Pendergrast learned about the hardships of the modern-day Kalaupapa Settlement residents -- who now reside in the area because they choose to, not because they are forced -- through one of life's odd coincidences.

In 1981, Pendergrast was a public relations executive and a volunteer firefighter/paramedic with the Northfield, Ill., Fire and Rescue. One day, he read an article in the *Los Angeles Times* that told of the Kalaupapa volunteer firefighters' broken-down fire engine. The island residents couldn't get the old fire truck started, so they often had to push-start it with the colony's garbage truck. They were unable to purchase a new truck, and because of the constant, strong trade winds, residents were highly vulnerable to fire.

Suzy Kellett, a long-time friend of Pendergrast, recalls how he immediately decided that he must help those Hawaiians get a working fire truck after reading that newspaper article. Pendergrast called numerous fire stations to track down a used fire

engine suitable for refurbishing. He and Kellett worked closely with Michael Nystrand, fire chief of the Northfield, Ill., Fire and Rescue, as well as the entire Northfield fire department, and manufacturers Able Fire and Safety Equipment Co., Federal Signal Corp. and Sunbeam Corp., all located in Chicago. Many volunteers helped restore the used fire truck to working order. Once the truck was operational, Pendergrast helped to procure transportation for it from Chicago to San Francisco via cargo plane courtesy of Flying Tiger Airlines. The truck was then freighted to Honolulu and then barged to Molokai.

On the morning of July 10, 1981, Pendergrast, Nystrand, and Kellett delivered the "new" fire truck to Kalaupapa. Kellett, who today is the director of the Washington State Film Office in Seattle and a personal life coach with Bountiful Life Coaching, recalls the moment vividly. "The morning we delivered the fire truck was almost more than I could bear in my heart. There are only a couple of barges a year that carry all supplies to Kalaupapa. So after Robin got the truck sent over to Hawaii, he wanted to bring it on the barge himself. He also wanted to help train the volunteer firefighters. So this barge arrived at about 5 a.m., the sun was rising, and there were these patients, with tears running down their face. As they stood on the shore, they knew a fire truck was coming, but I don't think they could imagine what the moment would be like. Robin drove this fire truck off of the barge with great fanfare, and the people were stunned and amazed that this stranger from Chicago would do all of this for them. They felt, on some level, that something magnificent had happened."

Fire Chief Nystrand, who worked with Pendergrast to procure the fire truck, also fondly remembers that July morning, when Pendergrast drove the shining red refurbished truck onto the Kalaupapa pier. "Robin is relentless when he champions a cause -- he does

it non-stop," says Nystrand. "We pounded the pavement and shook the trees to get the truck, the gears on it, the helmets and coats, protective clothing. We also got people to donate their time in polishing, fixing and loading the truck for its destination.

"It is one thing to read an article and say, 'that would be great to donate a truck to them,'" Nystrand adds. "But to actually take the idea and see it through to fruition -- and from my perspective to drive it off of the barge and see the faces of the elated residents -- it was personally rewarding. It gave me goose bumps."

After the fire truck was delivered and the volunteers were trained to use it, Pendergrast continued to visit Kalaupapa's residents and found other means by which to help them live more comfortably. Hansen's disease causes deforming skin lesions and a loss of feeling in affected areas of the body. The disease was once highly contagious, but now can be arrested and controlled with antibiotics. However, because many patients still suffer the disease's debilitating effects and deformities, they also encounter stigma and fear. That's why they choose to stay together at Kalaupapa. Current residents number fewer than 100, and the majority of them are aged 50 and older; no minors live in the settlement.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Pendergrast was able to bring Kalaupapa residents smoke detectors, CB radios, videotapes, VCRs and food. Many of these items were donated by corporations or bought through private donations. In addition, he established the Kalaupapa Fund, which was partially supported by the proceeds of a play, entitled "Damien, the Leper Priest of Molokai." This one-man play, a soliloquy by Father Damien about his life and times, was produced and performed in several locations. Pendergrast is currently producing the play and incorporating the photographic images within the story sequence.

"Robin hasn't spent a lot of time in Kalaupapa -- it is difficult to get there. But in the amount time he was there, he did a lot and took thousands of photos," says Ken Fiske, from Bull Valley, Ill., who is a member of the Molokai Museum and Cultural Center and a volunteer for various philanthropic efforts in Illinois. "I met Robin through another photographic exhibit, and I personally had visited Kalaupapa three times. Pendergrast put together the "Exiles in Paradise" exhibit for the Firehouse Fine Arts gallery in Crystal Lake, Ill., in 2001. He combined the photo exhibit with producing the play 'Damien.' But he and I decided these photos also should be in Molokai. I contacted Noe Keliikipi, the director of the museum, and told her about the photos. She was delighted to accept them and was thrilled to have the photographic exhibit donated for a permanent exhibition."

David Kimball, the art supervisor of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, will hang the exhibit in the Molokai Museum and Cultural Center.

Fiske adds, "Compared to the rest of the Hawaiian Islands, Molokai is a small island. There are only about 5,500 people living there, and a lot of them are related to people who were sent to the Kalaupapa colony. So there is a close connection here to the people who are presently living there and the people who were banished years ago."

Through his work, Pendergrast asserts his belief that the inhumanities of yesterday's leper colony mirrors, in principle and practice, the stigmatization and victimization of today's AIDS patients.

Pendergrast can quantify his experiences at Kalaupapa with hundreds of newspaper article clippings, stacks of letters from federal and state senators and representatives, a story on NBC's Nightly News, and segment on the 1987 television show "Heroes: Made in the USA."

However what the photographer cannot clearly show -- through his lens or boxes

of memorabilia -- is how his "journeys" to Kalaupapa and with its people have shaped his life. "I have had a lot of health problems throughout my life, with some life-threatening experiences," Pendergrast explains. "And I have been very fortunate to have survived them. I was also a volunteer paramedic for years. But the reason I did all of these things was to make a difference, to realize the value of helping others. People are so narcissistic today, so selfish. After September 11, things changed for a while, but in my estimation, the pendulum has swung back to greed and selfishness. Helping others is the highest gift one can offer."

Those who have seen Pendergrast in action over the years agree. "I think Robin has made a profound difference in these people's lives by the impact of his caring. Especially when what the world has done, forever, is forget them," says Kellett. "The gift of the fire truck held more meaning than anything I can imagine. And then he went beyond that, later, to obtaining other items, such as VCRs and tapes and shipping them to the Kalaupapa residents. With this disease their vision is poor and their cartilage deteriorates, so there isn't a lot they can do; they have difficulty walking, they have difficulty being in bright sunlight because their eyes are sensitive. Robin looked around and wondered 'what can I do that will make a difference?' The fire truck was his initial bonding with them, and he has stayed consistently with them in spirit and in action all these years."

And now, much like Father Damien's mission to educate the public about Kalaupapa's leprosy patients, Pendergrast's photo essay at the Molokai Museum and Cultural Center will tell visitors the story of Kalaupapa and its past and present-day people.