

*Filmmakers Kell Kearns and Cynthia Lukas, producers of many documentaries that bear witness to the momentous changes ongoing in life on earth in our time, suggested I interview them at “one of the most beautiful places in the Southwest US”. We hiked high into the Pecos Wilderness. As a St. Bernard named Gaia soaked in a mountain stream overhung with shimmering aspens, we sat nearby in an alpine meadow adorned with many-colored flowers and butterflies, and talked. - Lee Mitchell*

“It’s truth and a mystery. When we abandon the arrogant self and walk a selfless path that spreads compassion in the world, miracles happen, ‘doors open where we did not know there were doors’. We succeed where our self-aggrandizing baby-being fails.”

That’s how documentary producer-director Kell Kearns describes the advocacy films he and co-producer Cynthia Lukas have made that have inspired tens of millions of people. “It’s been happening for decades,” he continues. “In 1986 I called the King Center in Atlanta to ask about making a little film on the roots of MLK’s nonviolence. Two days later I get a call saying Coretta Scott King wants us to make a new biography of her husband centered on the first national celebration of his birth. Unknown to me she had been using one of our earlier films as a nonviolent training tool, and liked it. The resulting movie became an official event of the King Holiday, was the highest rated PBS special of the year, and now is in thousands of schools and libraries. So it goes on the path.”

Their work in progress, a massive retelling of the life of Mohandas Gandhi, is no exception to how things go “on the path”. In the summer of 2011 Kearns and Lukas spoke in Berlin at the premiere of their film, “Globalized Soul: Stories from the Tipping Point to a New World”. In the audience sat Arun Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, who lived his childhood in his grandfather’s ashrams. Over tea afterwards Dr. Gandhi mentioned that he would soon travel, at the age of 78, across India for a poignant visit to the places of his grandfather’s life and death.

“Kell and I exchanged glances,” Cynthia smiles, “and Kell asked, ‘Can we go with you and film the trip.’ I added, ‘Gandhi’s heart is the heart of what we do. It’s been one of our dreams to tell his life’s story.’” Dr. Gandhi agreed immediately. We began work on *Mahatma Gandhi: His Final Years and Hero’s Journey*.”

Although they raised some grants for the shoot, there was little time. They paid from their own shallow pockets to follow Arun Gandhi home to India. “When we made the PBS biography of the great Sufi poet Rumi, we took with us one of his great sayings,” Cynthia comments. “‘If you are a true human being, gamble everything for love.’ We see so many people who want to make documentaries that help make a better world in these crucial times. But, they quit after a few years. It’s too difficult to raise visionary money. They fail to understand that the universe responds when you show a willingness to risk everything for the good of all.”

The producers filmed Gandhi’s quarters in Mumbai and a nearby park where he gave the speech of his lifetime, proclaiming that Britain should “Quit India” and leave his homeland immediately. They filmed the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad from which Gandhi began his

famous Salt March that encouraged India to defy the history of revolutions and win freedom through nonviolent, “Gandhian” means.

“We traveled by train, often overnight, the way Gandhi did. We were surrounded 24 hours a day by this beautiful, ancient, god-soaked culture and its people,” Cynthia says.

Among many other sites, they filmed at Birla House in Delhi where the Mahatma was assassinated. There, Dr. Gandhi yielded to feelings that had been welling up in him since the tour of his family history began. He knelt where his grandfather died on his way to prayer and wept.

“From India’s cataclysm, its heart-wrenching rejection of Gandhi’s dream in the final years, and the transcendent triumph of his sacrifice, we’ll use flashbacks to tell his whole life’s story, which is unparalleled in human history,” Kell reveals.

The producers think some of the most moving images are of people who carry on Gandhi’s work. After decades of insistence, he succeeded in ending untouchability, but, the poor still suffer greatly. Kearns and Lukas filmed a brickyard where the children of women who carry loads of heavy bricks on their heads all day get decent food and education, and benefit from Gandhi’s experiments in nature cures and hygiene.

They filmed an agricultural collective that uses the Gandhian principles of local, self-sustaining, healthy farming; a nation-wide collective of self-employed women who credit Gandhi’s work for women’s equality; and a college founded by Gandhi in 1920, where enthusiastic students continue his traditions and philosophy.

A high point was their interview with 88-year-old Narayan Desai, who, as the son of Gandhi’s personal secretary, lived beside the Mahatma until his early twenties and wrote a four-volume biography. In late June they interviewed Dr. Rajoman Gandhi, scholar and grandson, who spent time with Gandhi in the last days of his life and has written a highly acclaimed biography.

“We may not have these people with us much longer,” Cynthia explains. “Our film will speak to generations to come through first-hand witnesses of the man about whom Einstein said, ‘future generations may scarce believe that such a one in flesh and blood ever walked upon the earth.’”

Kell wanted to make something clear: “Some think opportunities fall into our laps. Untrue. I’ve studied Gandhi since the 60’s. We’ve researched him intensely for a year. Our movies reach millions of people because of the hard work we put into them. We never ever give up until they achieve excellence. That’s what attracts ‘good luck’ as we define it. We are journalists and poets. The stories we want to tell inspire and uplift. So we tell them, and tell them well.”

*The Hero’s Journey of Mahatma Gandhi* is set for release early in 2014.