

Siuslaw News
P.O. Box 10
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Opinion

EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

CATHERINE J. ROURKE
For the Siuslaw News

Wim Mesman



Wim Mesman's story spans three continents, three cultures, eight decades, two marriages and one world war. Its roots lie in an archipelago large enough to fit within the entire United States and end nearly 8,000 miles away in Florence. A cross between an epic documentary and suspense thriller, his life reveals a journey of trials and triumphs, gains and losses.

It all began in the city of Makassar on Sulawesi, the world's 11th largest island east of Borneo. A major Indonesian shipping port favored by the spice, pearl and rattan traders of the Dutch East India Company, Makassar sat poised between two cultures on the brink of war, the East and the West, when Wim was born there in 1934.

The firstborn son of Dutch-Indonesian parents tracing their roots there two centuries prior, he was raised with four sisters and two brothers on a large fish plantation decided to the family in the 1800s by the local "raja." Wim enjoyed an idyllic childhood, sailing on "perahus," the traditional fishing boats.

He recalls a polyglot of 17,000 islands, 3,000 languages, four religions and multiple cultures. Despite their vast differences, Wim describes a "peaceful but not docile" people living harmoniously side by side. "Everything was done with a

handshake," he said. "Betrayal wasn't tolerated, and you were shamed if you didn't keep your word. If we could only accept our differences, with more tolerance for opposing beliefs, it would create a foundation for peace."

The island's former harmony turned to discord during the Japanese invasion in 1942 when the Mesman family was forced to leave the city for the plantation to the north at the mouth of the Marana River near Maros. Wim watched B-17s on their way to bomb Makassar. "They flew right over my head," he said.

Japanese military colonists seized the main house and the plantation, forcing the family into another dwelling.

"We were very accepting and didn't know what bad was," Wim said. "My mother was strong and fearless and taught me not to complain and accept everything for the best."

But things went from bad to worse. The Japanese deported those of Dutch descent to concentration camps where many were beaten, tortured and killed.

"The loss of material things doesn't matter. Everything we need is right there inside of us."

—WIM MESMAN

Wim saw his father, Willem, for the last time when the Japanese arrested him and two plantation foremen on suspicion as enemy informants. The family learned of Willem's death in the camp six months later.

"We were just innocent civilians," Wim said. "My father simply had a radio wire atop a mast, but they pre-

sumed he was transmitting messages to the enemy."

The Japanese needed the Mesmans to run the plantation to supply food for the troops, tolerating the family because they maintained good relations with the native people. They remained on the plantation from 1942 to 1945 while the war raged and Wim watched bombers crossing the sky.

"I was too young to understand what was really going on or what fear was," he said.

But Wim grew up quickly one night at age 10 when Japanese soldiers called for the women during a hard night of sake drinking. His mother and four sisters escaped by hiding in the mangroves.

Wim remembers standing with them neck-deep in the river all night, watching for water snakes and iguanas whose sharp teeth and powerful jaws could inflict serious wounds. That's when he learned one of his greatest lessons.

"If you are kind to people, they will be kind to you," he said, describing how his family had always treated the natives well as workers on the plantation. In turn, when these natives heard the Japanese were looking for the women, they rescued them by boat and housed the family in a nearby village until the Japanese eventually left.

"That was a turning point for me," Wim said. "The return kindness saved us from harm and I'll never forget it. I learned to treat all people, all nationalities and all religions with respect. Who is to decide right from wrong?"

That moral remained with Wim during the course of his life, from continent to continent, through his

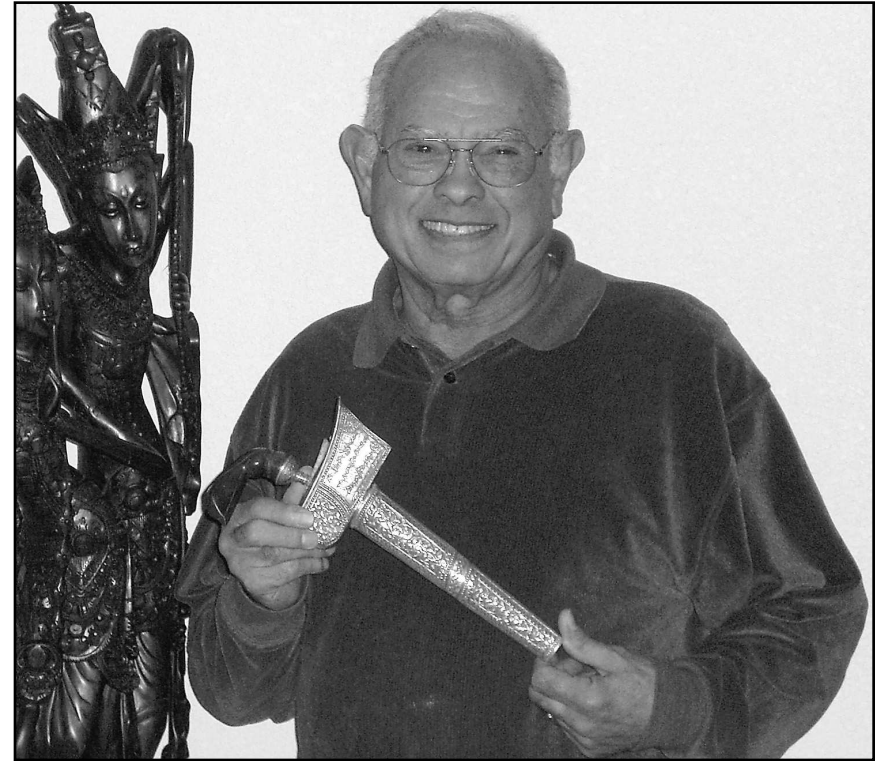


PHOTO BY CATHERINE ROURKE

Wim Mesman holds a handcrafted silver "kris," an 18th century Indonesian dagger exchanged between families as a "gift from the soul."

service in the Green Berets, his engineering studies and his tech career.

He married his first wife from Holland a year after emigrating to America in 1962, "drawn by the wide open spaces," and settled in San Francisco, working as a machine specialist for United Airlines for 32 years.

Wim embraced some additional lessons from his first marriage ("a balance of compromise") and when he lost a small fortune in a bad investment.

"The loss of material things doesn't matter," he said. "Everything we need is right there inside of us."

Wim discovered Florence during a coastal drive 20 years ago and immediately felt at home.

"I lived at the mouth of a river my whole life and Florence fit that bill," he said. "So much green and so few people."

Now, at 81, Wim focuses on life's top priorities: healthy living, his second marriage and his combined family of five grown children.

"You have to cut your losses and move on," he said. "It's not what you have but who you are inside that really counts."

Catherine J. Rourke is an award-winning writer, journalist and book editor who teaches creative writing at the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. She may be contacted at CJReditor@gmail.com.

LETTERS

A heroic story

Thank you Siuslaw News for the front-page story ("The Finest Hours," Feb. 3) featuring the opening of the film "The Finest Hours."

How special and appropriate that City Lights Cinemas owner Michael Falter and Disney could afford our U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) stations in Umpqua and Siuslaw rivers a "sneak preview" of a true, heroic story about their heritage and devoted duty to save lives and protect us all.

This is a tremendous family movie. It is also a perfect date-night film.

Go see it before it leaves our community theater. And, I wish the USCG members in Newport could still be invited to the theater, too.

We appreciate all of our USCG stations and families in Oregon, and we need to fight to keep the helicopter services in Newport in this congressional budget cycle.

Bill Olson
Florence

New high school

I read with interest that the Siuslaw School District will receive a \$4 million grant if the taxpayers pass a \$30-plus million bond measure to help build a new high school ("Siuslaw Wins State Lottery," Feb. 6).

Siuslaw School District Superintendent Ethel Angal stated that the district has the "opportuni-

ty to save our taxpayers \$4 million" by passing this bond measure and using the proceeds to help tear down the old high school and build a new one.

Angal explained the reason for building a new high school is that the 46-year-old existing high school has "reached the end of its useful life because systems are starting to fail and we are starting to have to invest a lot of general fund dollars in repairing and replacing systems like heating, cooling and water."

Reading this I thought a 46-year-old building does not seem to me to have reached the "end of its useful life." I researched what ever happened to the middle and high schools I attended in Milwaukee, Wis.

The middle school I attended, Steuben school, is still being used to educate students. It was built in 1929 and is therefore 87 years old.

The high school I attended, Washington High School, is still being used to educate students. It was built in 1911 making it 105 years old.

Obviously, these buildings did not reach the end of their useful lives when they passed the 46-year-old threshold. I'm sure during the life of these buildings, systems failed and were repaired and replaced. But the Milwaukee School District obviously concluded that it was not fiscally prudent to tear them down and build new because of system failures, thereby unjustifiably burdening the taxpayers in their school district.

As a homeowner, when my hot water heater fails, I repair or replace it. When my furnace fails, I repair or replace it. I certainly don't contemplate tearing down my house and replacing it when systems begin to age, because to do so would be fiscally irresponsible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Siuslaw News welcomes letters to the editor concerning issues affecting the Florence area and Lane County. Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters should be limited to about 300 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone number for verification. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received. Libelous and anonymous letters as well as poetry will not be published. All submissions become the property of Siuslaw News and will not be returned.

Write to: Editor@TheSiuslawNews.com

I believe Superintendent Angal has been intoxicated by the lure of getting a \$4 million grant that she feels is "free money" that she must spend or lose, without considering the tax burden a \$35 million expenditure for an unneeded new high school will put on Siuslaw School District taxpayers.

Angal should contemplate the waste associated with "premature replacement" before she tries to sell me on how she is saving me \$4 million by spending \$35 million.

Ron Duzy
Florence

Bev Holman

Thank you for publishing the beautiful picture of Bev Holman on your Opinion page Feb. 3. Those of us that knew her as a sister in heart and spirit will always remember her kindness, gentle wisdom and depth of character.

Bev was someone that did a lot for our community in quiet ways and never worried about taking credit for what she did. One of her many community contributions was as a member of PEO (Philanthropic Educational Organization), in which she worked locally and at the state level to provide funds to further women's education.

It was a privilege to have known her.

Rosemary Lauria
Florence

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