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OVERBUDGET BY \$11K
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Tonight -11°**
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ARTS & LIFE

calgaryherald.com

'Hat uncle' documents a life of giving

SPOTLIGHT

For the Love of Children will have a red-carpet premiere that begins at 9 a.m. Saturday. The event is sold out.

ERIC VOLMERS
CALGARY HERALD

Ashid Bahl figures he has lived all of his lives.

The youthful 60-year-old humanitarian and filmmaker reveals this near the end of a lengthy interview over lunch at an Indian restaurant in central Calgary.

Bahl, who believes in reincarnation, is convinced he has reached the end of the line, spiritually speaking.

"I was meant to come back when I had some unfinished business," Bahl says. "You do your business and that's it. I'm not coming back. You break that cycle of life and death."

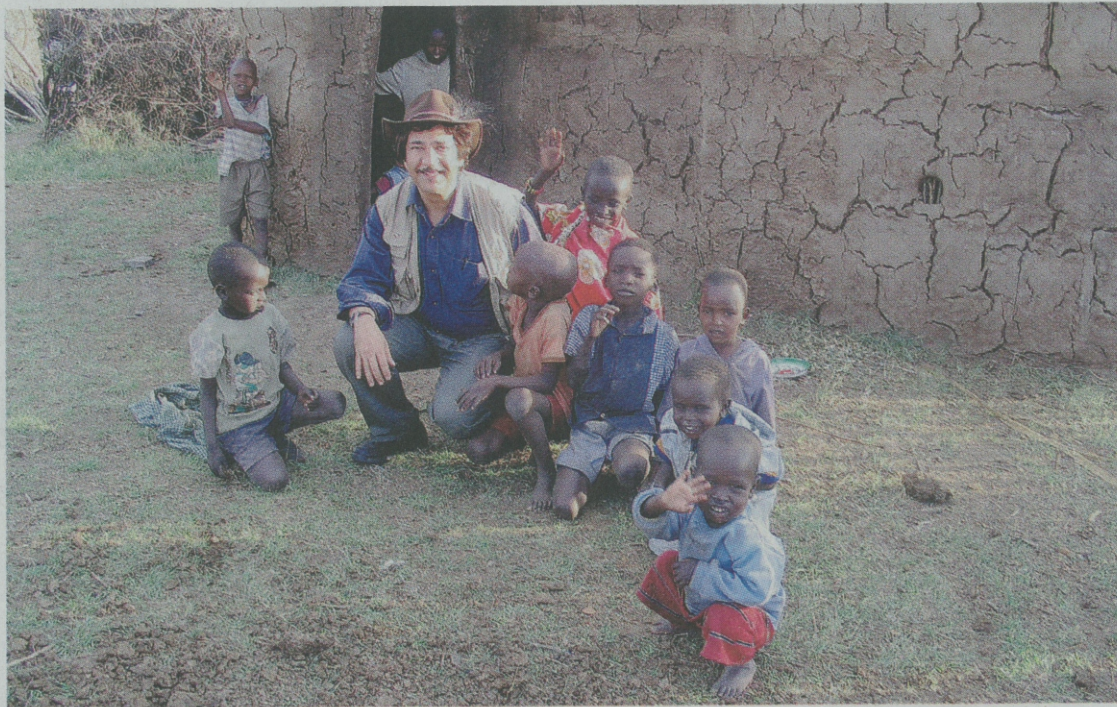
"That's why I look young. That's one of the traits of someone who is not coming back. They look much younger than they are because it is their last time around. A high priest told me that. He said 'You are not coming back.' I said 'I know.'"

Without delving too deeply into the beliefs of karma and reincarnation, this final ride apparently occurs when the soul has "learned the real lessons in life," Bahl explains. You become one with God and pure of heart, a state that is earned from good deeds done throughout your life.

And whether you believe in such things, it's hard to argue that Bahl hasn't safely earned his stripes in the karma department. For the past 33 years, his Calgary-based, non-denominational organization For the Love of Children has helped 100,000 kids around the world. From Afghanistan to Sri Lanka to the Sudan to Honduras, the organization has built or supported 76 schools is some of the most war-torn, impoverished places on earth.

Right now, he reckons his organization is taking care of 10,500 kids, which includes feeding, housing and educating them.

Bahl and his team often arrive at troubled spots shortly after natural disasters have struck, whether it be the Haitian earthquake of 2010, the devastating Indian Ocean



Calgary humanitarian and filmmaker Ashid Bahl spends time in Kenya, where he helped build a school.

tsunami of 2004 or the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan. It has all culminated in the native Kenyan learning some important lessons about the world and himself.

"A lot of people are looking for different things," he says. "Some people are looking for money or wealth. Some are looking for peace. Some are looking for God. In the midst of helping these children, I found everything."

It's a lesson he hopes to pass on to others through his first documentary, named after his organization. Bahl has shoehorned 33 years of these globe-trotting experiences into an hour-long film. For the Love of Children picked up the best feature documentary award at the Monaco International Film Festival in early December and was also given the prestigious Angel Trophy, which is awarded each year to the film that best expresses the non-violent nature of the festival.

On Saturday, the documentary will have its red-carpet premiere in Calgary at the Chinook Centre, premieres in Vancouver, Ottawa and Toronto will follow and the film will eventually be available on Netflix. In Calgary, all proceeds will go to benefit victims of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

Bahl has already been on the ground there helping with relief efforts, but it was too recent a disaster to be included in his film.

As with many documentary makers, knowing when to stop shooting and release the film was no easy task. His work certainly hasn't stopped. Nor was it easy to decide what to include and what to leave out after three decades.

"It pretty well covers 33 years," he says. "You have to do the new stuff and the old stuff, mix it all together. That's the biggest task. How do you put 33 years in one hour? I had over 200 hours of (footage) that I had to condense. So you pick stories. You don't want to make it too long. You want to tell your message and leave some space so they want more. You always want to leave them with that feeling."

The film is certainly an emotional whirlwind, following Bahl to various corners of the world. He talks with angry mothers in Peru, displaced by the 2007 earthquake and fed up that corruption is interfering in aid delivery. We hear miraculous stories of survival involving the Haitian earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

And it doesn't take long into a conversation with Bahl to realize he has far too many stories to fit

into an hour-long film. On this afternoon in Calgary, the perpetually smiling father of two has chosen to wear the trademark Indiana Jones-like fedora, which he has worn in dozens of countries throughout the world. In some places, the children call him "hat uncle."

Over lunch, Bahl shares his anecdotes with a childlike enthusiasm and gift for storytelling. He talks about the semi-nomadic Maasai people in his native Kenya, for whom he built a school, who asked for a cow shed after two herders were killed by attacking lions.

He talks about how he travelled through Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami in a pickup truck to deliver aid and to meet with members of the separatist Tamil Tigers, asking them to "leave my kids alone and let them go to school." He talks about perilous journeys into the most dangerous areas of Sudan, spots where NGOs tend to be kidnapped, robbed or worse. He talks about how Tibetan children in Orissa, India once unexpectedly asked him for a bus for their new school. Turns out they were frightened to walk to school because of snake bites and wolf attacks. "There are 120 different species of snakes," he says.

"There are bigger animals like

elephants and tigers. But the wolves also attack the kids. Can you imagine? The poor kids."

He casually drops names into the conversation. He met actress and fellow humanitarian Angelina Jolie, gave advice to Prime Minister Stephen Harper about keeping Canada compassionate and was recognized by Queen Elizabeth II with a Diamond Jubilee Medal. For the past 15 years, he has worked with the Dalai Lama helping Tibetan refugees in India.

"He thought I was from India at first," Bahl says. "He said, 'You are the first Indian, Ashid, who is helping my people.' I told his Holiness that I was from Canada. He said 'Wait a minute. You were born in Africa, you were coming in from Canada and you are helping my people?' He was amazed. But we got along really good. Spiritually, we connected very well."

Yet the story Bahl seems to tell most often is the one about how he first set out on this path and found his life's mission. It was that moment when he became addicted to giving. Born into a well-to-do family in Nairobi, he said he was troubled as a boy by the inequality within his own school. When he was 11, he was playing with a new toy truck his parents had bought him. A poor boy was obviously envious, so young Ashid gave it to him. He liked the feeling. Soon, he was giving away his lunch to hungry students on a daily basis.

The film opens with a dramatization of the toy-giving incident.

"The look on his face, of disbelief that I had given it to him, and happiness on his face, for me I found a lot of pleasure doing that," he says.

Bahl came to Canada at the age of 19 with his family. He began his charity in 1980, doing it all part-time while working for the Canada Border Services Agency while raising his family. Through fundraising, the organization has raised roughly \$11 million over the year, helping children both in Calgary and abroad.

"It's a blessing and it's really a miracle too," he says. "I didn't believe in miracles. But there's nothing in my hands. Where did it all come from? When you are trying to do good, people come from all over to start helping you."

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