

Tracker to discuss wilderness survival at Centenary

By BRIAN HINELINE
Staff Writer

ASBURY — Tom Brown, Jr. sees what most overlook. He also knows how to disappear. He can survive where others may give up and die. And he can teach you these life skills.

Recognized as a leading international authority on wilderness survival and tracking, Brown operates the Tracker School and will speak at Centenary College in Hackettstown on Thursday, Nov. 13.

His unique abilities have been honed through a lifetime devoted to studying nature.

"I grew up in the Pine Barrens in South Jersey," said Brown. "The wilderness was basically my backyard. There was not too much to do as a kid, so I began to hang out in the woods."

As a child, Brown met a Lipan Apache elder named Stalking Wolf, who was the grandfather of a friend. Stalking Wolf had journeyed throughout North and South America learning natural truths. Brown soon began referring to him as "Grandfather."

"We met when I was 7, and he was 83. He became my best friend. Practically everyday after school and on weekends I was with him. That started my odyssey," said Brown.

Stalking Wolf taught Brown the art of survival, tracking and the ways of the wilderness. Brown's passion for what he had learned led him to devote his life to Stalking Wolf's teachings. Brown opened the Tracker School in 1978 and published the first of his 16 books that same year. He has since helped find missing persons, solved crimes and consulted on numerous film and television projects.

A story from Brown's most recent book formed the basis for the 2003 movie "The Hunted," in which Tommy Lee Jones played a tactical instructor asked to hunt one of his former students, played by Benicio Del Toro. Brown consulted on the film and stayed at the director's side on the set throughout filming. However, Brown was disappointed by the finished project, which he considers to have become commercialized during final production.

"What they left out appalled me. I wanted it to deal with the reality of trackers. It turned into one big knife fight. That fight would last 30 seconds in a real situation. They should have toned down the knife fight and the gratuitous violence. That is not what I am about. I tell people not to base my philosophy on what you see in the movies," said Brown. "I learned a lesson. I have since turned down some projects for some pretty big networks. You really have to pick and



Photo by Mary O'Connor

Internationally known tracker Tom Brown Jr. will discuss wilderness survival and tracking at Centenary College on Thursday, Nov. 13. Brown operates the Tracker School in Asbury. His discussion is free and open to the public.

choose what you are going to do."

Still, several scenes Brown wrote made the final cut and other deleted ones appear on the DVD release, along with an interview with Brown.

He remains optimistic about two projects currently underway for Court TV, including a reality-based tracking program with a game element which will begin shooting in December.

When not consulting in Hollywood or teaching classes, Brown helps law enforcement agencies find missing persons and clear unsolved crimes.

"Trackers make the best crime scene analysts. Often when police take crime scene photos, they also capture other evidence as well," said Brown.

He cited a case in Florida where a law enforcement officer was killed in a cemetery. The cause of death was determined to be suicide. However, by looking at photos of the victim, Brown discovered a second bullet casing which was on the ground had been carried off in the sole of an officer's shoe.

"I could see it in the ground where he was walking," said Brown. His investigation led to a confession by the actual killer.

In March, Brown found a missing 13-year-old boy who ran away from home. After searching for six hours with nine officers, a bloodhound and a helicopter pilot, Ocean County law enforcement officers called Brown. He found the boy, who was sleeping in the woods, in two hours.

Brown teaches his skills at the Tracker School, where 95 percent of the courses are open to the public. He also instructs Navy Seals, members of the FBI and other government and mili-

tary agencies in secret advanced training sessions.

More than 25 courses are offered at the Tracker School. Classes are taught in New Jersey, California and Florida. The introductory standard course lasts a week, and students live at the school. Instruction begins early in the morning and ends well after dark. "People are usually exhausted by the end of the week. But I only have them for a week, and I want to give them as much as a can. I teach them to see through Grandfather's eyes and get more out of daily life," said Brown, who keeps in touch with many students after they complete their courses through letters or emails. "I don't believe the school ends when the classes end," said Brown.

According to Brown, students frequently write to tell him how the courses have changed their lives. Ninety percent of his students come back for additional classes. Former students come from all walks of life, including politicians, musicians, housewives and homeless people.

A veteran of Brown's classes named Greg appeared in the first "Survivor" television series. Upon arrival, Greg immediately began collecting animals and edible plants, building a shelter and starting a fire; however, none of that was shown on television because the show's producers wanted to make the contestants appear inept in the outdoors, according to Brown. "It was more like staying at a five star resort than wilderness survival," said Brown of the show. "They gave them water and put them in a beautiful environment. Anyone can go 40 days without eating. It was a cakewalk."

While Jones and Del Toro did not spend time at the school to prepare for "The Hunted," they were instructed by Brown during production. "Tommy Lee is a decent outdoorsman," he said. "Benicio did not have that training, but he was a quick learner. We did such a good job with his camouflage that the cameras could not pick him up. He liked to play games with the crew and disappear into the woods."

The knife Del Toro's character used in the movie was designed by Brown over seven years and 30 prototypes. It can be used for many outdoor cutting tasks, preparing hides and self-defense.

Recently, Brown added a children's program, Coyote Camps, to teach nature awareness and wilderness survival young people.

"I wanted to teach kids my skills. It's amazing to watch a seven- or eight-year-old track a groundhog across a gravel road," said Brown. "They discover you can learn more about an animal through its tracks than if you actually see it — such as if its belly is full or empty, if it is frightened and if it is male or female."

Tom Brown, Jr. will speak from 7 to 9 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 13 in the George H. Whitney Chapel in the Edward W. Seay Administration Building at Centenary College in Hackettstown. He will also be available to autograph his books. The event is free and open to the public. For more information, call (908) 852-1400, ext. 2238.

For more information on Brown and the Tracker School's classes, call (908) 479-4681, email info@trackerschool.com or visit www.trackerschool.com.

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