

Cue Magazine

Volume 8 Number 12

BULK MAIL
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
BURLINGAME, CA
PERMIT #207

Three Dollars

C O N T E N T S

features



5 New Children's HealthVan II

KNTV-II teams up Lucile Salter Packard of the Children's Hospital on mobile Children's HealthVan.

Publisher/Managing Editor.....Pat Henry
Senior Editor.....Ingrid Whitehead
Editor.....Mariska van Aalst
Copy Editor.....Philip L. Jones
Production.....Pat Henry
Graphic Design.....Chris Poehler
Account Executive.....Kellie Haatvedt
Operations Manager.....Renee Taylor
Tech. Computer Consultant.....Chris Pochler
Logo Design.....Waterwork Art
Circulation Manager.....Charles McFarland

Contributing Writers:

Richard Bischoff
Paul Grippaldi
Paula Sonenberg
Julia Terr
Deborah Thacker

Editorial Advisory Board:

Michael Cunningham.....Pres., Western Images
Paul Grippaldi.....Co-owner, FastForward
Joe O'Kane.....Dir., S.J. Film/Video Commission
Gregg Snazelle.....Pres., Snazelle Films
Robert Stewart.....Attorney

Cover: Created by C.P. Productions

Cue Magazine is published on the 15th of each month. Editorial office P.O. Box 2027, Burlingame, CA 94011-2027, 415.348.8004, FAX 415.348.7781. Design and contents are copywrited for 1996 by Pat Henry's Cue Magazine, and may not be reproduced in any manner except by written permission of the publisher. Cue Magazine is not responsible for opinions expressed by its contributors and staff writers.

6 A Journey to the "White Hotel"

Dianne Griffin and Tobi Solvang travel to Eritrea, a small Northeast African country.

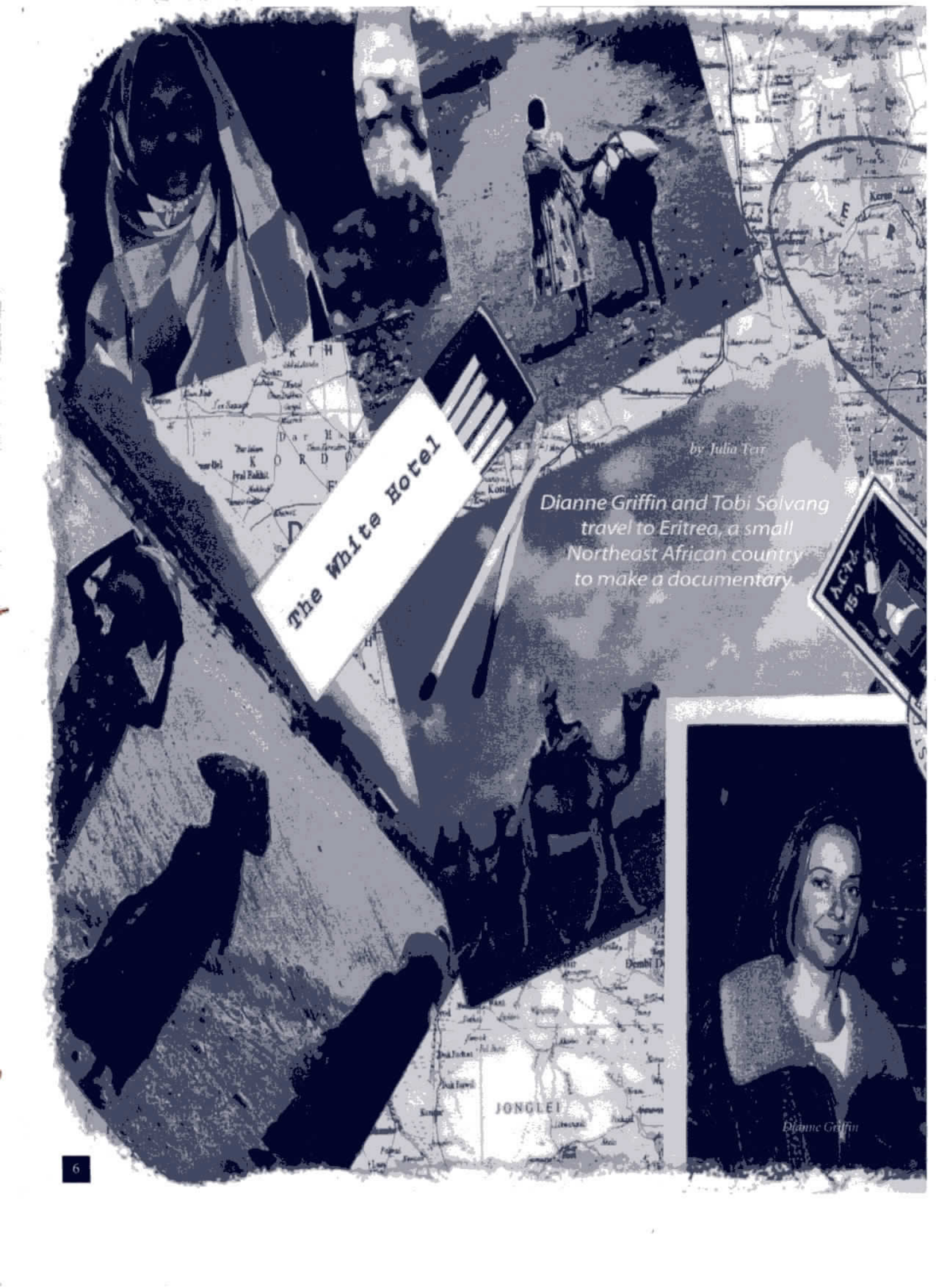


8 PSA Launched with the Help of the Media

Industry professionals join forces to create a PSA announcement for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

departments

10	audio feedback
14	short takes
19	post pourri
25	classified
26	calendar



The White Hotel

by Julia Terr

Dianne Griffin and Tobi Solvang travel to Eritrea, a small Northeast African country to make a documentary.



Dianne Griffin



Tobi Solvang

A JOURNEY TO THE WHITE HOTEL

DIANNE GRIFFIN AND TOBI SOLVANG FINISH EACH OTHER'S SENTENCES as if they were sisters. In some ways they are alike—they are educated, outspoken, adventurous, sensitive, bold, and headstrong. And like sisters they may disagree—Dianne tends toward the sensible while Tobi the spontaneous; Dianne tries new foods while Tobi is finicky; Tobi drinks coffee and Dianne takes tea. When the two made their way to Eritrea (a small Northeast African country between Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and across the sea from Yemen and Saudi Arabia) to make a documentary, their sisterly bond began to form, and all their similarities and differences rose to the surface, as will happen when two people immerse themselves in an unfamiliar, exotic environment half the world away from home.

Dianne and Tobi went to Eritrea to make a documentary about HIV and AIDS. This was only a launch pad, however. The final product, *White Hotel*, is a documentary of astonishing breadth and depth. Issues tackled include: war and freedom; sickness and health; travel and home; men, women, and children; feminism and female genital mutilation; and it is the story of two gutsy American women who get swept up in the process of making a documentary.

Dianne and Tobi met in the tight circle of San Francisco independent filmmaking. Dianne had several producing credits to her name, including *Ramona*, an independent feature made in San Francisco that was quite successful on the festival circuit. Tobi had made several short films in her undergraduate years at UC Irvine and in graduate school at San Francisco State. They met on a low budget feature which Dianne production managed and Tobi assistant directed. Working closely, as production managers and assistant directors do, they found that they worked extremely well together. They had a good rapport, and they maintained a mutual respect for one another. They decided to search for their own project. Dianne would phone Tobi or Tobi Dianne and they would exchange ideas. Finally they found it, a research team consisting of four medical school students would be working on their fourth-year thesis projects to study AIDS in Eritrea, a war torn developing country that had no previous studies to speak of, and sits in close proximity to other countries ravaged by the plague-like disease. Dianne jumped. She and Tobi could document the study. She was a well seasoned traveler who'd studied in Ireland, been to Europe, spent time in Iran, Eastern Europe, Berlin when the wall came down, Czechoslovakia when the Velvet Revolution was just ending, and Mexico. Tobi had also traveled, but Mexico was the most exotic developing country she'd seen to date. Dianne explains, "We started hearing more and more about Eritrea. They were at war. What is this about? Why haven't we heard about this country? We were both intrigued by the mystique, the mystery of Africa." The two set their sights and began to plan.

They talked about approach and style, and they agreed that they should be included as characters in their own documentary, rather than to ignore their presence, pretending that there weren't two white American women asking the questions and holding the cameras. They decided that it would be important to include themselves for a more truthful depiction of the events and discoveries they would witness, but they didn't agree on the extent that their own stories would play in the final piece. Dianne was impressed and influenced by Ross McElwee's documentary *Sherman's March*, but Tobi didn't want their characters to loom too large, as she was cautious of falling into a self-indulgent mode. This would prove to be a point of contention all the way through final

Continued on p. 12

cut. Pre-production was tough. Although they'd worked on many films, they had a hard time getting money, and they ended up borrowing. "I never thought it wouldn't happen though," Tobi says. "We decided to go and that was that. We were going. We didn't entertain 'No.'"

"They pooled their money and scraped enough to purchase a Sony EVW300 3-chip Hi-8. They also had two Canon palm corders. They managed to get a lot of sponsorship in the form of supplies rather than cash. Powerbar gave them four cases of power bars. Tobi was particularly relieved because she is a self-admitted picky eater. They also got water filters, discounts from Adolf Gasser and The Good Guys. They chose Hi-8 Evaporated instead of Particle tape, opting for sparkle rather than stability. Since war was in progress in Eritrea, they had trouble getting confirmations and arrangements made with the Eritrean Department of Health. In order to send faxes from San Francisco, they had to go through overseas operators and international ship operators who put their faxes through to a ship out in the Red Sea. The faxes would then be sailed or rowed onto dry land and brought, eventually, to their destination. Needless to say, the fax bill was huge.

Then, on the day before leaving for their journey, Dianne got terrible news. Her father had been killed in a train wreck.

When they arrived in Asmara, capital city of Eritrea, they set up a home base in the *White Hotel*, a cheap place with a shared shower, which would become their documentary's namesake. In Asmara they found a city embroiled in an outpouring of emotions—the end of a 30-year war. The twenty-seven-year-old Tobi responded by becoming swept up in the celebration—she danced, partied, drank. She absorbed the party atmosphere, and partook in the festivities. She even dabbled in a vacation romance. "I was excited," she explains, "I was feeling the whole spirit of independence." She became known by their new found Eritrean friends as "the friendly one." Thirty-six-year-old Dianne was friendly, but remained a bit aloof, keeping herself carefully at arm's length. She not only avoided celebratory drink, she became hypochondriac and paranoid, and obsessively cleaned, filtered, and took fastidious precautions against possible contamination. She was reacting, in part, to her father's death. She hadn't had a chance to grieve or even digest. "Here these people had fought for thirty years," she says, "They were elated. I was not. I had seen a lot of violence in my childhood. I was pessimistic." Their Eritrean friends began referring to Dianne as "the old one." This label referred to both her more serious demeanor and to the fact that an Eritrean woman of her age would already have a complete set of children, and maybe even a grandchild or two. Thus Dianne and Tobi felt themselves tugged in very different directions as they embarked on the production process.

"AIDS is about very personal relationships," Tobi says, "No one is immune." Both Tobi and Dianne were involved and sensitive as they approached their subject matter. As they studied the HIV infection rate through the health department, they learned that HIV is transmitted heterosexually in Eritrea. Homosexuality is either non-existent or hidden



so deeply that it cannot even be a factor studied for statistical purposes. "It's a very traditional society," Tobi explains.

"It's not OK to date," Dianne adds, "but it's OK for men to go to bar girls, prostitutes. There's no dating; they don't court. They have arranged marriages. The bar girls are young girls—" "—there aren't many options for women in Eritrea," says Tobi, picking up the thread.

Dianne finishes, "They can become house workers, get married, or they can become bar girls. But because of the war there was one more option for women—they could become fighters."

This led Dianne and Tobi down a new trail for their project. They found a society on the brink of a feminist revolution. A society which had previously hidden away its women, occupied them with household duties and child-rearing, now needed these women to face the brutalities of war on the front lines alongside the men. "They wanted to get the women out of the huts," Tobi said.

Eritrea found that its women were good fighters. "They said that in battle a man would surrender sooner than a woman,"

Dianne explains. "The women were ferocious." Dianne and Tobi had found a new point of interest for "White Hotel," and their project took a turn to follow this new path. Now they found a society in which there were three types of women: wives, bar girls, and fighters. "Upon returning from the war, the fighters totally stood out from other Eritrean women," Dianne says. "They were more secure, they didn't process their hair, they were stronger, they had a different walk."

"They wore pants," Tobi adds.

Juxtaposed with the new feminism just starting to blossom in Eritrea was another factor, a practice deeply rooted in tradition and culture, which Dianne and Tobi needed to explore: female circumcision. Also known as female genital mutilation, it was a topic Dianne and Tobi needed to bring to light in their piece. Because it was a startling paradox side by side with the new feminist spirit, because it was a major factor in

Continued from p. 12

the transmission of HIV and AIDS, and because for two American women it is a completely foreign, horrifying, unthinkable concept, they asked, "Why do you circumcise?"

"They didn't know," Dianne tells. "They couldn't answer. It's tradition." Through the Health Department Dianne and Tobi found that female circumcision results in terrible scarring that often causes extensive bleeding during sexual intercourse and during childbirth. During the war Eritrean bar girls made money by following the soldiers around, both Eritrean and Ethiopian. New diseases were entering Eritrea from Ethiopian soldiers and, after the war, from the newly reopened ports. Therefore, if husbands indulge in the accepted practice of extramarital sex with the bar girls, they then bring home sexually transmitted diseases to their wives, which then is transmitted from their wives to their future children. HIV and AIDS are not discussed in Eritrea, and the people are not educated about its transmission. Any discussion is hushed. Bar girls will not tell their patrons, husbands may not tell their wives. Dianne and Tobi pursued these issues with sensitive interviews, stealthily documenting the Eritrean bar scene.

They sought out the personal stories of the Eritreans they encountered. A doctor they interviewed described how he'd been a prisoner of war for four years. He'd been kicked, beaten, tortured, slashed and electrocuted. When the war was over the doctor searched for his torturer. Finding him, the doctor asked, "Do you remember me?" "Yes," the torturer replied. And the doctor gave him a bag of precious, hard-to-come-by oranges and said, "I forgive you." Forgiveness under such extreme circumstances made the two women deeply consider the meaning of forgiveness and its place in their own lives. Dianne and Tobi found many such moments, where life and positive qualities overcome even the most grizzly state of affairs. Even shots of people in the streets are surging with motion and life—wheelchairs whirl down the streets along with bicycles—and their hand-held pans and motion cuts surge with the same energy and life witnessed on the screen.

When Dianne and Tobi returned to the United States, they went to Seattle to begin their post production process. They sold the Sony to get money to transfer their 55 hours of Hi-8 footage to Beta-SP on the first pass, preserving the footage and maintaining the best possible quality. It was worth it, as *White Hotel* is positively sparkling and beautiful. They worked cheaply, off-line on VHS window dubs to come to an edit decision list. Later they returned to San Francisco to work on-line on Avid with 6 hours of selects to reach their final cut, and then they transferred to 16mm film for festivals. In Seattle Tobi and Dianne followed the music scene, and they acquired music for *White Hotel*, music pulsating with the same sort of life-beat they had carefully captured on tape. They spent six months working on a cut until they realized that they had more of a story to tell; their own personal stories needed to be included. They went back to the drawing board to recut.

The post production process was tough. Dianne and Tobi had a fifty-



fifty partnership, which would often end in stalemate over a creative conflict. Once Dianne threatened to walk out of the project with half the film. Another time Tobi threatened to remove from *White Hotel* every frame concerning herself. Luckily they had written a contract at the beginning of the project which deferred stalemates to an impartial third party. They used this clause, informally, during their editing process.

Six months and perhaps a hundred scripts passed during the writing process in order to recut. Working from a shot list and note cards they wrote a voice over narration to run through the piece, and they included footage of themselves. They included their impressions and interpretations of Eritrea as well as their own stories. And they delved deep into their own stories, Dianne reaching to reconcile her feelings about her family and her father, and Tobi grappling with her lost of objectivity as she released herself to the magic of vacationing, nearly to the point of peril. The Eritrean journey is real, physical, truthful, and it also becomes a reflecting pool in which Dianne and Tobi see themselves. It is like the fiction of Paul Bowles, only it is not fiction at all, and Eritrea takes on a quality of being a landscape of the mind. Dianne and

Tobi's experiences become deeply intertwined and interesting, but I won't divulge any more secrets...you'll have to see it yourselves.

It took three long years. During their process they had gone from documenting an HIV/AIDS study to the aftermath of war to the new found role for women to the physical and mental subjugation of women to the beauty and variety of the countryside to

their own physical, mental, and spiritual journey. The end product is poetic, and beautiful, and its equations are subtle. The documentary allows the viewer to connect many elements from Eritrea, its people, its environment, and its spirit to the personal lives of these two white American women, and perhaps the final layer to *White Hotel* is the viewer's own journey. Was it by chance that Dianne and Tobi met on a low budget film project in San Francisco? Was it coincidence that an opportunity to go to Eritrea knocked on their door? Serendipity? "We were meant to go there," Dianne states definitively. "There is a fate in the Universe,"

Tobi agrees. "We were drawn to the journey, and it wasn't just coincidence."

Haven't you heard? San Francisco is looked upon as being a documentary center for this country. It's the talk of the film and video professionals, and it's true. *White Hotel* is one exciting example. As advice for aspiring documentary makers, Dianne and Tobi offer this: "Find a story you are willing to devote time to. It will be 100 percent of your lives. You can make things happen with almost no money, but you have to have the time to work with it." Would they do it again? Dianne says yes, but Tobi needs to have a break for a while. "It's a lot of work," she says. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done." **CUE**