

# The power of love saved climber's life on Mount Everest

By Mardi Suhs

On Sept. 18, Universal Pictures will release "Everest," a film starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Kiera Knightly. It's an adventure drama about the 1996 tragedy on Mount Everest that took the lives of eight climbers. The climbing tragedy has been the subject of best-selling books, television news shows, blogs and magazine articles — and controversy.

One of the script consultants for the movie lives in Harbor Springs. But he won't be part of the release fanfare. Instead, 74-year-old Lou Kasischke will be home caring for his wife of 47 years, Sandy, who became ill in 2011.

Their love story is the reason Kasischke did not die on Everest with those other climbers in 1996. He was there. He knew them all. And he might have died with them.

A passion for climbing

Kasischke was 53 when he signed up to climb Mount Everest. The successful attorney had already scaled six of the highest summits in the world.

Kasischke developed a passion for climbing in high school. An avid skier, he skied at Caberfae in the 1950s and trained for the Everest climb at Boyne Highlands. He explained that he has a "good body chemistry for high-altitude climbing," that is all about genes, not endurance.

Although eight people died during the 1996 Everest climb, there were survivors.

One of them, author Jon Krakauer, published his version of events in 1997, entitled "Into Thin Air." The best-selling book generated criticism and controversy in the climbing community.

The truth of what happened that day, according to Kasischke, depends on whom you ask.

"No one has all of it," he said. "My story has a materially different point of view than Jon Krakauer ... it's a story of mistakes and human error. At noon on May 10, it was just another hard climb. What happened at noon determined the outcome. We were within a stone's throw of the summit."

Last year, Kasischke published his own account of the expedition titled "After the Wind, 1996 Everest Tragedy, One Survivor's Story." He wrote most of the book in 1996 and 1997 as a way to understand the emotions and thoughts he was trying to sort through. At about the same time, he was hired by Universal Pictures to consult with the screenwriting team for the movie version of the event, "Everest."

"They needed me to do the story," he said. "I was the very last guy who made the decision to turn back, so I was in the best position to know what happened and what went wrong."

“Near the top of Mount Everest at noon, on 10 May, 1996, things went wrong,” he writes in the book. “Some climbers lived. Some climbers died ... I was there. I was a climbing member of the New Zealand-based expedition led by Rob Hall.”

Kasischke’s book tells two stories; first, he takes readers through what went wrong that day and what he believes caused the tragedy. The second story is “about the voice of the heart, a love story.”

“The second story is the very personal story of my survival,” he said. “People often ask how it is that I was in the same place at the same time — and other people died and I lived. This is why I published the book. I wanted to tell the story of the power of the relationship, the voice of the heart. My wife became ill in the last few years. I did this as a tribute to honor her. The power of that relationship is what saved my life.”

At 29,000 feet, Kasischke faced a decision. The top of Mount Everest was in sight, just a few hundred feet away. He had been on the mountain for six weeks, enduring high-altitude conditioning and practice climbs. He didn’t care about anything except reaching the summit. And he knew he had the will and determination to make it.

But something happened.

In his book, he writes: “All I could hear was the wind and my own breathing ... I looked at the climbers above me. I realized things had gone wrong ... I decided I didn’t care ... This was Everest ... sheer will kept me going ... it was getting steeper ... the wind sounded like low-flying jets ... I can do this.”

“Then it happened.”

Kasischke will share details of that moment and the love story that saved his life when he speaks in Cadillac at 1 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 12, as a guest of the Friends of the Library.

“I’m coming to talk about my book,” he said. “I wrote it 15 years ago but just decided to publish it in the last year or so. It’s been remarkably well received. I’m quite astonished actually. I don’t have a single bad review.”

What you need to know:

When eight climbers died on Mt. Everest in 1996, Michigan’s Lou Kasischke was there. He’s the author of: “After the Wind: 1996 Everest Tragedy, One Survivor’s Story.”

Kasischke was also a consultant on the film, “Everest,” starring Jake Gyllenhaal, Keira Knightley, Josh Brolin and Robin Wright. Scheduled for release this month, the drama/thriller focuses on climbers from two expeditions that fight for survival during a fierce snowstorm on Mt. Everest.

Lou Kasischke will tell his incredible story of survival at 1 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 12 at the Cadillac Wexford Public Library Community Room, sponsored by the Friends of the Library.