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So crazy, it's funny

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By Mark Morical

The Bulletin

Timmy O'Neill is a philosophical climber and comedian.

And he never runs out of material.

If it's the Pabst Brewing Building in Milwaukee, he'll climb it. If you just broke up with your sweetheart, he'll make you laugh.

O'Neill will spout off on lengthy, complicated tangents, then suddenly utter something to put life in a simple perspective. He finds clarity in his comedy in much the same way he finds it walking across a rope stretched hundreds of feet off the ground.

"My message is so garbled," O'Neill says, "the only message is insanity."

Most would agree, whether they hear him speak or see him slack-lining (walking on an inch-wide nylon strap) between the Bridger Jacks Towers, 1,000 feet high in Indian Creek, Utah. But through the insanity comes an inner peace for the zany O'Neill.

"I just love making people laugh," he says. "It's like a drug for me. The rock climbing and kayaking and remote wild mountaineering is also a medicine for me. It's a salve for my soul."

And his is certainly a restless soul.

O'Neill will share his crazy antics — both on the microphone and on the rocks — during a screening of his latest climbing film, "Return2Sender," tonight at 7 o'clock at Bend's Tower Theatre.

The Bend screening is part of a 14-city Western tour that started in Boulder, Colo., on April 13 and finishes in San Diego on May 18.

In "Return2Sender," a film by Peter Mortimer, O'Neill takes on some of the tightest cracks and most intense rock faces the West has to offer.

"It's mind-blowing," O'Neill says of some of his exploits. "What you go through psychologically is a very intense, almost mind-blowing experience. I do not turn fear off — I tune it in. I use fear as a tool. I keep it right beside the pliers and hammer in my garage."

O'Neill, a 35-year-old resident of Boulder, is a cult figure among climbers. A renowned adrenaline fiend, he is known for climbing the "nose" of El Capitan in a world-record three hours and 24 minutes in 2001, a 3,000-foot climb in Yosemite National Park (Calif.) that takes the average climber five days.

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O'Neill has climbed limestone cliffs in Cuba and granite monoliths in Greenland, but he is also known for his urban accomplishments. In fact, his nickname is the Urban Ape. He's climbed a Titan 1 missile in Colorado and even multiple-story college dormitory buildings in Philadelphia for the award-winning Mortimer film "Front Range Freaks." His urban climbing skills are on display in the film "Urban Apes" and on the new Discovery Channel Series "Urban Explorers."

Most climbers are familiar with bouldering (climbing massive rocks close to the ground without a rope), but O'Neill has taken the discipline a step further with his urban style, which he calls "bouldering."

"Urban climbing is the daily dosage," O'Neill says. "It's the climber's interpretation of the urban environment."

"Life is extremely immediate for me. It's right here, right now. I love assessing risk. I grew up assessing risk."

O'Neill was raised near Philadelphia with seven siblings, climbing the tombstones and monuments of a nearby cemetery.

At age 19, he briefly attended Temple University before hopping a bus to Wyoming in what turned out to be a seven-year road trip. He lived like a climbing bum all those years, traveling with little more than a backpack and a climbing harness.

"There are no rules in rock climbing," O'Neill says. "I hit it hard for seven years. I lived on \$100 a month."

During the past several years, O'Neill has explored the world's greatest mountain ranges, climbing from Pakistan to Patagonia. He's even achieved something of a celebrity status, hanging out backstage last week with the popular rock band Maroon 5 at a concert in Everett, Wash.

But for all his climbing accomplishments, O'Neill says he gets the most pleasure out of his comedy.

"Who cares what I've climbed?" he says. "My biggest accomplishment is making somebody sad feel good."

O'Neill has experienced a recent run of bad luck with injuries, breaking his knee cap after flying over the handle bars of his bike 2> months ago and suffering whiplash after a triple-rollover car crash in Baja, Mexico, two weeks ago. He was there filming a series called "Ultimate Playgrounds," which will air on the Outdoor Life Network.

O'Neill says he has many friends in Bend, adding that he has climbed at Smith Rock State Park near Terrebonne on several occasions. He dreams of one day setting up a highline between Monkey Face and the main section of Smith Rock. He would then slack-line the rope in the same manner he accomplished his feat in Indian Creek, Utah.

So, what does it feel like to be 1,000 feet in the air on a skinny nylon rope?

"It feels like home," O'Neill says. "It's a place I've been before. It's an extremely abnormal location, but I'm an extremely abnormal person."

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