

# How the kindness of others saved a Tibetan snapshot

Funding a film on a fight for freedom was a battle in itself. By **Gary Tippet**.

**E**VEN as a schoolgirl, Lara Damiani wanted to look beneath the surface. At Mary McKillop College in Adelaide, she would write Midnight Oil songs on the blackboard to prod her friends to think beyond the music.

So it seemed natural that her first venture into documentary filmmaking — in fact her first film of any kind — should try to draw the curtain on one of the world's longest-running freedom struggles in Tibet. Or so it seemed with a flash of inspiration and neophyte bravado over a cup of

coffee in 2006. "I wanted to do something with some meaning. The Beijing Olympics were coming and I thought it was the right time to throw some focus on the issue," she says.

But Damiani's film *Tibet's Cry for Freedom*, which has its first Melbourne showing on Wednesday, was much easier said than done. Apart from nerve-rattling trips to secretly film inside Tibet and China, the project cost her life savings and two bank loans, maxed out three credit cards and reduced her to auctioning her clothes and furniture on eBay.

But just as it seemed close to collapse, Damiani was saved by the kindness of strangers. Actress Kerry Armstrong came on board to do the narration for nothing

and a Canberra company provided \$25,000 worth of post-production, but she was still struggling.

"And then, just as I was about ready to pack up and move back with my parents, I got a phone call," she says. A Tibet supporter had seen her website — also donated — and heard of her difficulties. He asked how much she needed and Damiani told him \$137,000. He said he could probably make a contribution.

"A little later he texted me and said he'd be sending \$100,000," she says. "My friends said it had to be a joke. I was in Fremantle, but by the time I got home the cheque was sitting in my post box."

The donor wanted to remain

anonymous but he had saved the fledgling venture.

The documentary includes interviews with the Dalai Lama (after begging his office for five minutes, he gave them an hour), the Tibetan Prime Minis-

**They took nerve-rattling trips to secretly film inside Tibet and China.**

ter in exile, and freedom fighter Ama Adhe. "That amazing woman spent 27 years in prison; that's one year less than Nelson Mandela," says Damiani.

"They talk about these

things, about torture and repression, but they're still smiling. It's so inspiring. The people are warm and peaceful and so happy, considering everything they've gone through."

After filming in Dharamsala, the Indian home for Tibetans in exile, Damiani and a friend, professional photographer Claudio Raschella, went to Tibet, masquerading as honeymooning chefs so they could film and take photographs. They followed that with another "holiday" in Beijing.

The documentary has been picked up by New Zealand and Czech television and is to be screened in film festivals in California, Strasbourg, Finland and Jakarta. Its Melbourne showing, at a Tibetan fund-raiser at

the Classic Cinema in Elsternwick, at 7pm on Wednesday, will also feature music by Tibetan singer Tenzin Choegyal, who provided the music for the soundtrack — again for nothing.

The fund-raiser will also feature *Leaving Fear Behind*, a documentary by Donhdup Wangchen and Buddhist monk Jigme Gyatso, from footage gathered at great risk inside Tibet.

Wangchen and Gyatso were arrested after completing the film in March last year. Gyatso was tortured during seven months in jail, beaten, hung by his feet from the ceiling for hours and kept tied for days to an interrogation chair, according to the group Filming for Tibet. Wangchen has not been seen since the arrest.



Filmmaker Lara Damiani on location in Tibet.

PICTURE: CLAUDIO RASCHELLA