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From a Moraga home to the Dalai Lama

By Matt O'Brien
Contra Costa Times
Posted: 10/13/2010 12:50:46 PM PDT
Updated: 10/13/2010 01:58:08 PM PDT

MORAGA -- When Marcella Adamski last met the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader encouraged the Moraga psychologist to take on a special assignment.

Interview the oldest Tibetan refugees, those who remember living in Tibet before the Chinese occupied the land in 1959, he told her. Find out what they remember while they are still able to share their stories.

Adamski gave it a try. Eleven years and 120 interviews later, Adamski will get a private audience with the Nobel Peace laureate Thursday morning to present him with the results of the ongoing Tibet Oral History Project.

"He said it was important to do interviews with the elderly refugees before they passed away," said Jennifer O'Boyle, an administrator of the project. "They're the last generation to live in a free Tibet."

Adamski and a team of American and Tibetan interviewers did most of their work in southern India, where the Karnataka state became a refuge for thousands of Tibetan exiles after the 1959 occupation. Adamski also interviewed a handful of elders in the Bay Area and hopes to do more locally. The project is run on a shoestring budget and based out of her Moraga home.

"There's a pretty big Tibetan community in the Bay Area, especially in the East Bay, so there's lots of elders we can work with here," O'Boyle said.

Adamski began interviewing Tibetan refugee women and children in the 1990s while working on a United Nations project. The project

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earned the Dalai Lama's attention and he encouraged her to begin a new project with a focus on elders. Many of the interview subjects are in their 80s and 90s. Interviewers asked the elders to share fond memories of Tibetan culture, history and ecology but also their recollections, often painful, of the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

The Dalai Lama, the Buddhist spiritual leader forced to flee Tibet as a 23-year-old in 1959, has been visiting Silicon Valley this week to give talks and hold classes on faith and compassion. Adamski will meet him in Menlo Park to discuss the oral histories.

"I'd love to get some ideas he has for how to make these stories more accessible to people around the world," Adamski said.

She has thought of trying to get the interviews translated into Chinese, so that people in China, who today hear the government's version of Tibetan history, might someday hear the

eyewitness stories of Tibetans.

See interviews with the elder refugees and learn more on the project's website, www.tibetoralhistory.org.

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