



AAC Publications

Eitan Green, 1985 – 2014

On May 31, Eitan Green, 28, a fellow guide, and four other climbers were swept off of Mt. Rainer's Liberty Ridge, apparently in an avalanche. Eitan died far too soon, but at least he lived having never lost the magic of climbing.

Eitan first climbed at age eight, when he and his dad passed a rainy day rappelling with a guide at Otter Cliffs in Acadia. A dozen or so years later, Eitan was guiding on that same cliff.

His attendance of a conservative Jewish middle school outside of Boston gave Eitan a profound spiritual intelligence, if not a strong resistance towards authority. This is not to say, however, that Eitan lacked discipline. In high school Eitan studied with vigor, knowing that if he wanted to take a stance, he better have his facts straight. He also mastered the drums and trained to become an expert in karate, which he taught in living rooms around Massachusetts. Eitan amusedly recounted when kids just a few years his junior called him "sir." And yet, such pursuits seemed too conventional, too supervised for him.

The mountains ("an office with a great view but a leaky roof," he'd joke) were perhaps the only place large enough to contain Eitan's great talents under one "roof."

Zach Summit, Eitan's climbing partner since childhood, recalled working as a farm hand in the European Alps before the two went to college. Tending to a herd of goats as a sunrise illuminated a ridgeline, Zach recalls Eitan having an epiphany that if he set the right goals and worked hard, he could live a life in the mountains despite it seeming improbable for a suburban kid.

And work hard he did. In college, Eitan excelled in seemingly every aspect a person could. Despite his rebellious independence, Eitan wasn't too iconoclastic to realize he had to pay his way. He held a job with campus security while working for his EMT license. Later, driving an ambulance around central Maine, Eitan found himself face to face with poverty and poor health that few of his peers were aware of.

Eitan brought this dollars-and-cents reality with him as he pursued a career in guiding. One summer Eitan worked as a support cook on Rainier. When he wasn't at Camp Muir, Eitan lived in a tent on a lawn next to a house, while guides slept inside.

Being a "water boy" on Rainier sparked Eitan to train for the try-outs held by the only guide service on Rainier at the time. The affair sounded like reality-TV, a spectacle that culminated in an uphill race where only podium finishers were considered for employment. Eitan's marathon-like running regime paid off. He did well and was promised a job. He was ecstatic; he bought plane tickets and banked on having the job in Washington.

But before Eitan even left Maine, the job was revoked for no apparent reason. The news was hard on Eitan; he took it as a personal rejection. In addition, the experience gave him the impression that guides can be pushed around by employers that may not have a guide's best interest in mind. Despite realizing the brutal realities of the profession, Eitan persisted. He found work at guide services in New England and mastered technical skills on the region's storied crags.

Eitan's passion for climbing dovetailed with his intense focus on academics. He learned Nepali and traveled to the Himalaya in order to research global climbing communities. His undergraduate honor thesis was praised, he won the anthropology department award, and he graduated magna cum laude from Colby College in Maine. In 2014, the anthropology department created a memorial award for students who follow Eitan's exemplary scholarship.

When Eitan graduated, he could have done what so many maturing climbers have done: take a comfortable job that limits time spent in the electric cold of the mountains. But Eitan didn't. One of his first jobs after college was maintaining the spigots that create the ice flows in Ouray. It was a wet, bone-chilling affair that would have deterred many a wannabe, but Eitan kept at it, at times resorting to shoveling snow and living in his car to pay his way.

Soon thereafter, Eitan found work at San Juan Mountain Guides in Ouray, teaching clinics on the very ice he'd created. He also gained a spot on the Alpine Ascents International roster. After five years on the job, Eitan seemed to have arrived. He started talking about buying a house, getting married, and starting a family. And he began drafting plans for a guiding service that would improve the security and livelihood of guides, while improving their bottom line.

Eitan was loved because he cared about those around him. His smile was radiant—it seemed to wake people up from any dark day. One of his closest classmates at Colby remembered Eitan as someone "who made you feel like you mattered." As such, it was no surprise to learn that guides, climbers, and non-climbers alike held memorial services for Eitan across the country.

I attended one in North Conway, New Hampshire, on a stormy night, a Friday the 13th. A full moon lurked behind the rain clouds, and we gathered at the crag beneath overhanging routes called *Sanctuary* and *Satanic Verses*. The cliff itself was called Cathedral. It felt like we had all of the ingredients for a proper séance.

We barbequed and imbibed and told stories of climbing with Eitan. The night wore on, and I left the cave feeling disappointed, as if Eitan's spirit hadn't arrived. I found myself hiking back to the car in the black, dark woods with no headlamp. But something made me stop. I turned around and looked up to the cliff.

A touch of moonlight hinted at the granite reaching for the sky. Through the trees I saw the glow of fire in the cave. It looked like a molten core, a warm heart in an otherwise cold mass of granite. A good round of belly laughter washed from the cave. It was a sound that could make anyone smile. Someone hooted a couple of times in glee, and then the unseen voices returned to their pleasant din. The dark woods didn't feel so bad anymore. Maybe Eitan had arrived after all.

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Images



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