



Niels Tietze, 1986 – 2017

Sometime on November 13, Niels Tietze, 31, fell to his death in what appears to have been a rappelling accident on Fifi Buttress in Yosemite National Park. Niels and I met in early May 2011 when he rode into Camp 4 on a motorcycle adorned with a sheepskin pelt and a brimming haulbag for his first season with Yosemite Search and Rescue (YOSAR). His pilgrimage followed the death of his middle brother, Kyle, in 2010. He had dropped out of his university and come to Yosemite seeking salvation on what he called the “godly granite” of the Valley. His wry smile, penchant for philosophizing, and blatant grief instantly drew me to him.

Raised on the edge of Salt Lake City with Mt. Olympus as his backyard, Niels grew up the youngest of four—three boys and one girl. Part of a tight-knit clan of capable eccentrics, Niels easily outclimbed his older siblings. But as passionate as Niels was about the vertical realm, and as much as he relished his solitude, Niels felt compelled to contribute to the greater human experience. It was that duty that helped propel him, still grief-stricken, to YOSAR in 2011. Niels took his search for purpose a step further in 2012 when he spent three months cramped in a tiny room with the indefatigable Timmy O’Neill, training as ophthalmic assistants in Nepal. From then on Niels volunteered a few months each year with the Himalayan Cataract Project, helping to bring sight-restoring surgery to thousands across Nepal and Ethiopia.

As a man who was obsessed equally with beauty and the absurd, it would not be unusual for Niels to approach a climb in tattered denim and on horseback or with freshly picked flowers in his hair, a faded, superfluous scarf wrapped around his head, and Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” blasting from a duct-taped speaker. Joy often exploded from Niels as he indulged in adventurous exploits: gracefully climbing desert sandstone, playing a ceramic flute to drive his family’s Dobermans into frenzied howls, or wrangling cattle on his friend’s ranch in rural Utah. But such happiness contrasted with frequent torment. His parents wrote after his passing that Niels was “a man who in so many ways embodied the complexities of the Universe.”

Capricious, well read, and strange, Niels was a modern-day Renaissance man. While his physical prowess was made evident by such varied climbing accomplishments as a free ascent of El Capitan’s Salathé Wall and a rapid climb of the Himalayan peak Ama Dablam, Niels will be most missed for his frantic passion, his pure love of (dis)honest fun, and his bottomless affection for those nearest and dearest to his full, aching heart. He is at peace, at last.

– Libby Sauter

Editor’s note: Libby Sauter and the editors condensed this tribute from a longer remembrance piece that she wrote for Alpinist.com.

Images



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