



AAC Publications

Tom Zajicek, 1950 – 2017

On August 6 we lost yet another incredible man to the mountains that he loved. Tom Zajicek was killed in a 90-foot fall while descending Starlight Peak in the High Sierra of California. It was one week before his 67th birthday. I had the honor of meeting Tom 34 years ago, when the doctor passed little newborn me into his giant rock-scarred hands in a small hospital in western Wisconsin. This was six months after he had summited Denali, independently climbing with a few other self-taught mountaineers from the farmland of Minnesota.

My dad was the real deal. He was an old-school alpinist with an incredible passion for adventure and a sincere respect and love of wilderness. High-spirited, animated, enthusiastic, and friendly, Tom was a delight to encounter. He was a mentor and teacher to friends and youth—inexperienced or experienced, it didn't matter to Tom. He would take you under his wing and bring you out into the wilderness, to the crag or to the canyons that he loved, and through that experience share with you his love of nature. His is the story of a humble man from the Midwest who found what made him happy and never stopped pursuing it or sharing it with others, right up until the end.

Tom was born in Hutchison Minnesota, in 1950, starting his lifelong love affair with the wild in his backyard, on the Crow River, adventuring in canoes. The progression from small-town Minnesota to climbing the highest peak on the continent in the early '80s may now seem like a regular occurrence, but having grown up in a small town in Wisconsin I can tell you it was not. From the moment Tom discovered wilderness and climbing through local outdoor clubs, he knew his life calling. After a short career as a wildlife biologist and science teacher, he went back to school to obtain his master's degree in experiential learning. He began working in outdoor education, teaching backpacking, climbing, and mountaineering. His students from the Red Wing, Minnesota, Environmental Learning Center remember him as a kind, patient, and enthusiastic teacher. His exuberance and curiosity for life were contagious.

Whenever he could steal away from teaching and our family in Wisconsin, he would drive out to the Tetons, the Bugaboos, the Alaska Range, Red Rock, Joshua Tree, the Selkirks, Yosemite, or the Wind River Range. He was also getting out there for the love of it. He would invite anyone interested to come along and teach them the ropes without judgment. A story told at Tom's memorial from a former student recalled a climbing trip to the Devil's Tower in which they encountered a stranger in the campground who was enthralled with watching the climbers. Tom asked this young man if he wanted to "try it out" and climb a route with them the next day. He brought him to the summit. He was a mentor at heart. He was generous with his knowledge and experience and willing to share. He changed many lives and encouraged many adventures with this quality. Tom's endless curiosity and his genuine enthusiasm for adventure were inspirational.

He took my brother Ben and me into the wilderness on hiking, canoeing, and skiing trips as soon as we could walk. We were both in climbing harnesses before we were able to ride a bike and cannot remember a time before we were first camping with our dad, learning about nature, and experiencing all the types of fun it had to offer!

Tom was a master of many trades and talents, ranging from biology and teaching to carpentry and beekeeping, industrial abseiling, and home-energy auditing. He lived a life of constant change. Everywhere he moved, he plugged into the local outdoor community and got involved with building climbing gyms, organizing ice climbing festivals, and getting people outside. Everywhere he lived, he

got to know the local crags, peaks, and wild places while continuing to travel to international climbing destinations. He made close and meaningful friendships all along the way.

In 2007, Tom moved to Durango, Colorado, where he spent the last ten years of his life “living the dream,” finally in close proximity to the mountains and the canyons that he loved. He led trips for local outdoor groups and worked at Backcountry Experience, where he could share his passion for gear and swap stories with other outdoor enthusiasts.

He spent a great deal of time climbing in the San Juan Mountains and canyoneering in Utah. At the age of 64, he spent one month mountaineering in the Cordillera Blanca, climbing Vallunaraju, Artesonraju, and Ishinca, followed by weeks of exploring ancient ruins off the beaten track in the cloud forests of Peru, inspired by friend and neighbor Vincent Lee. During this decade, I had the fortune of joining my Dad on a number of trips. We climbed peaks in Colorado, backpacked in New Zealand’s Southern Alps, scrambled the West Maiden in the Arrigetch Peaks of the Brooks Range, and trekked in Peru. He told me countless stories of his experiences in the mountains, from the close calls to the weather shutdowns and the unbelievable summits. He shared the spiritual connection he felt with mountaineering and how much joy it brought him. Just over one year before he died, we shared a spring ascent of Snowden Peak in Colorado, getting out of the mountains in the dark and making it back to Durango just in time for Thai takeout. We were adventure buddies, and he was my soul Dad.

Tom will be remembered by his larger than life laugh and huge smile, his kindness and enthusiasm, his countless animated stories, and his endless planning of the next trip. He was a close friend to many and the dearest father a girl could ask for. His legacy of selfless mentorship and his passion for wilderness, knowledge, and adventure will live on in those who knew him. He is loved and missed beyond words.

– Anna Zajicek

Why this Passion for the Hills?

(From the notebooks of Tom Zajicek)

Why this passion for the Hills?

Is there value in mountaineering?

For me there are 3 principle values I seek in climbing peaks and mountain hiking. First is beauty. To experience the amazing beauty in Nature.

Second is sharing the experience with like-minded friends. This is the social experience I most value.

Third is the physical and mental challenge, just to be physically able to do it, is to feel alive! And to be competent and skilled in something worth doing for its own sake. No one’s paying you to be out there, you are doing it because you love it.

Images



Tom Zajicek on Vestal Peak in Colorado.

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