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Brad Gobright, 1988 – 2019

Brad Gobright grew up in Orange County, California, along with his sister, Jill, three years his junior. His parents, Pam and Jim, who are avid hikers, brought the family to Lone Pine Lake in the Sierra Nevada when Gobright was 4, cementing his love for the outdoors. At age 8, Gobright summited Mt. Whitney with his father. “He was the youngest kid to sign the book at the top that year,” Pam says. “When he came down, he was like a changed kid. From then on, it wasn’t about being at school for him. It was about being outdoors and getting to the mountains.”

Gobright started frequenting the Rockcreation climbing gym in Los Angeles, and over the next few years attended climbing competitions in Colorado and Virginia. When Gobright was 8, he went to Mt. Woodson, outside San Diego, to crack climb. Despite his ability to tackle difficult climbs or maybe because of his obsession with them, Gobright struggled with school. When he finished high school, he enrolled in community college, but after a miserable semester realized school wasn’t for him.

“I think you need to go to Yosemite and try to get work there for the summer,” Pam told her son. “You should spend a summer away from us, finding your way.” Gobright took a job as a housekeeper at Yosemite’s Ahwahnee Hotel for two six-month seasons. “The joke is that he just never really came back,” Pam says.

From 2013 to 2016, Gobright lived seasonally in Boulder, Colorado, climbing extensively in Eldorado Canyon, where he free soloed the Naked Edge (5.11b), Doub-Griffith (5.11c), and Hairstyles and Attitude (5.12b/c). He climbed obsessively, sending routes like Musta Been High (5.13c R) but forgetting to bring shorts to wear under his kneepads, and thus redpointing the climb in his underwear. It was also in Boulder that Gobright began setting speed records, climbing the Naked Edge around 20 times with Scott Bennett until they whittled their time down to 24 minutes, 57 seconds, bridge to bridge, in October 2014.

In 2013, Gobright and Bennett free climbed four walls in Zion National Park in just 19 hours. “Watching him go up that dihedral,” Bennett says of belaying Gobright on the crux 5.12+ corner pitch of Moonlight Buttress, “he didn’t stop. [It was] how you would imagine a robot climbing— just unstoppable.”

At the exact moment he turned 30, in June 2018, Gobright was on the Boot Flake (5.10c) of the Nose of El Capitan completing the Triple: climbing the Nose, the South Face of Mount Watkins, and the Regular Northwest Face on Half Dome in a day with Jim Reynolds. “It was really fun climbing with Brad because I could climb things that I couldn’t climb with anyone else,” says Reynolds. In 2017, Gobright and Reynolds set a Nose speed record of 2:19:44. “I could also trust Brad in the sense that he never let go,” Reynolds says. “The partnership we had allowed both of us to imagine great things and be able to go for them.”

Gobright loved climbing too much to maintain a steady job, though in recent years he enjoyed spending summers helping with a kids’ climbing course at the Sender One gym in Los Angeles. “I’m getting paid to go to camp, and afterward there’s nothing better to do than jump on the hangboard and train,” Gobright wrote in July 2018. He’d also taken an AMGA course and started to guide a little, and was finding some stability as a professional climber sponsored by Gramicci, Evolv, Friction Labs, Blue Water Ropes, and Metolius. His roles in Reel Rock 12’s Safety Third and Reel Rock 14’s The Nose Speed Record solidified his ability to be a full-time pro.

Gobright also was known for his antic sense of humor. “Bawk. Bawk. Ba-kaw!” Gobright would call from the bushes in Yosemite. He would then hop out to the trail, asking befuddled tourists if they’d heard the rare Yosemite chickens. For three years, he dated the climber Taleen Kennedy, and one day the pair went to the Virgin River Gorge, Arizona. They parked on the side of the highway, next to a blasted-out roadcut—a short walk from the actual climbing. “This is it!” he told Kennedy, pointing up at the chossy wall. It wasn’t until Kennedy had flaked out the rope and put on her shoes that he said, “I’m kidding. The crag’s up the hill.”

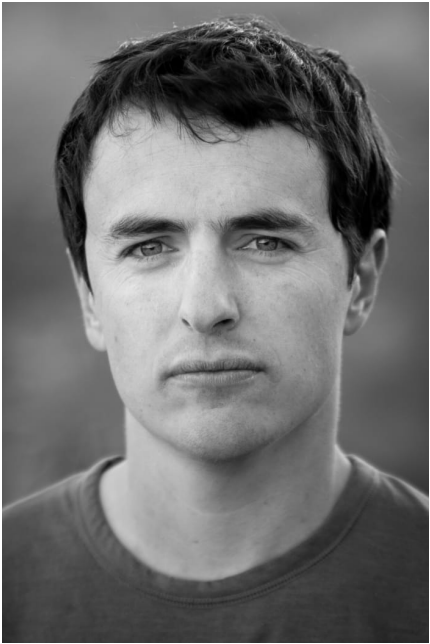
Gobright had begun free climbing harder in recent years, putting emphasis on being more calculated and safer. At Indian Creek, in March 2018, he sent Carbondale Shortbus (5.14-), which has a notoriously difficult beginning protected by thin gear. He also began to focus more on El Capitan free climbing. In the spring of 2019 he did three one-day free ascents in a single season: Pineapple Express, The Shaft, and Golden Gate. Gobright had arrived in Yosemite a round-faced boy with a predilection for donuts and had developed into a thoughtful and funny man—and a fearsomely accomplished free climber.

On November 27, 2019, Gobright died in a rappelling accident on the 1,500-foot El Sendero Luminoso (5.12d) in El Portrero Chico, Mexico. The world is a darker and far less entertaining place for Brad Gobright’s absence. He shared his light and bottomless passion for climbing with all who met him. If there is one thing we can do like Brad, it is to go brightly.

– James Lucas

Editor’s Note: This tribute is adapted from a long piece by James Lucas for Climbing magazine, available at Climbing.com.

Images



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