



## AAC Publications

---

### Dana Joan Isherwood, 1936 – 2021

**After a youth and early adulthood spent in the flatlands, Dana's peregrinations brought her to the Sierra Nevada, where she learned to climb and met an explorer named Bill Isherwood.** Dana had loved before—she even had two daughters—but Bill swept away all who came before him. Months after they met, he took her to Peru, where they joined a team aiming to summit the Nevado Huascarán, Dana's first major expedition.

Dana fell in love with the climbing life: rustic guesthouses, improvised menus, burros carrying equipment to base camp. She wasn't a tall woman, but she had broad shoulders, large Hobbit feet, indomitable lungs, powerful hands, and an iron will. She didn't reach Huascarán's summit, but she did stand on top of nearby Maparaju, and she was learning and getting stronger.

Not long after Peru, Dana and Bill were in Yosemite, rappelling down Glacier Point Apron, when they met two women on their way up. The Isherwoods joined the women on a ledge to wait for a storm to pass. One of the two, Arlene Blum, shared that she wanted to climb Denali but had been told by a travel company that women could not go beyond base camp. Right there, Arlene and Dana hatched a plot for a team of women to climb Denali—unassisted by men.

In June 1970, six "Denali Damsels" flew to base camp on the Kahiltna Glacier. Not long into the climb, the expedition leader, Grace Hoeman, became ill with altitude sickness, yet she refused to turn back. Shepherded by the other climbers, Hoeman reached the summit, but soon after fell unconscious. The climbers wrapped the comatose woman in a sleeping bag, then lowered, dragged, and carried her down. Ultimately, they all descended safely.

Blum would later say, "Dana was very strong. I remember her climbs because of her strength. She was [also] a great organizer—getting gear and everything. She was fantastic at that."

After Alaska, Dana enrolled in a Ph.D. program in geology at the University of Colorado. Women scientists were rare, but Dana didn't let that stop her; science was another great reason for heading to remote, frigid places. She made three trips with Bill to Baffin Island, where Bill was also doing research. The two finished their dissertations and graduated together in 1975.

The Isherwoods returned to California and took jobs at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. Dana led an investigation into groundwater transportation of radioactive material created by underground nuclear tests.

During vacations, she climbed. In 1978, she led a team of Americans to attempt Pik Kommunizma (now Ismail Somoni) in the Soviet Union. They didn't summit, so the next year they tried again, an attempt that also failed. Three years later, she returned to the USSR to climb in the Caucasus. Bill went also, and their good friend Cleo Dymott. As Dymott's journal recorded, whenever any of Dana's fellow travelers fell ill, she handed out medicines from the kit she always traveled with.

October 1984 found Dana, Bill, and Cleo in western China, at Four Maidens Mountain (Siguniang Shan), in a trip organized by the American Alpine Club. The Isherwoods summited one peak, but then cloudy weather sent everyone down to base camp. Meanwhile, a second AAC group was camped beneath nearby Celestial Peak, poised to attempt its southwest face. That night, two Celestial

climbers came around to the Four Maidens base camp bearing a precious gift: a bottle of Jack Daniels. A happy reunion ensued on that remote yak pasture thousands of miles from home.

In the fall of 1985, Dana was chosen for a one-year assignment as Congressional Science Fellow. Her title was legislative assistant for energy issues, and her boss was Senator Al Gore. It was a challenging job, but hard work was Dana's superpower. When she finally took a vacation, she flew to Pakistan, where she and Bill supported a team attempting to summit Gasherbrum I.

In 1993, Dana received a diagnosis of breast cancer. She underwent treatment and made a full recovery. After that, when Lawrence Livermore decided to downsize its workforce, she grabbed the buyout and retired in order to travel and climb.

In November 1996, she joined a group of breast cancer survivors with their sights set on Mt. Vinson, the highest peak on the Antarctic continent. The climbing team did not reach the summit, so two years later Dana joined a different team and tried again. This time, Dana came within 1,200 feet of the top, but she suffered back strain from her heavy pack and decided to descend.

In 1997, Dana began traveling to Tibet in trips organized by a small nonprofit, Kham Aid Foundation. Dana met many Tibetan teenagers from ultra-poor backgrounds who were being sponsored to attend school. This led to Dana becoming director of KhamAid's education program. Each spring and fall, she flew to Chengdu, China, and boarded public buses to make an arduous weeklong trip to visit schools. The Isherwoods also sponsored a student themselves.

Dana also used her time in Tibet to trek in the mountains. Eventually, she persuaded Bill they should move to Beijing. There she started learning Chinese and undertook many self-guided trips with Bill around the region.

After returning to the U.S., the Isherwoods moved to the Cascades' eastern foothills. They took cruises in Antarctica, Norway, and French Polynesia. They kayaked off the shore of Vancouver Island, traveled to Turkey, Berlin, Egypt, the Panama Canal, and many places in between. Bill told their friends, "Our trips have gotten tamer as we get older, but we still get out there and have fun."

Following a recurrence of Dana's cancer, they moved to a house near Olympia, Washington, to be closer to Dana's daughter. There, Dana and a friend set up a reading group to learn about neuroscience, an interest stemming from Dana's Buddhist practice. She also joined a local group of Democrats and helped organize talks by candidates.

In the course of working, traveling, and studying in the Buddhist world, Dana had collected many treasures: paintings, statues, even protection yarns personally blessed by the Dalai Lama. In her last years and months, she gave them all away. She will be remembered for her strength, kindness, and indomitable spirit.

— Pam Logan

## Images



During a 1999 climbing trip to New Zealand.



Dana and Bill Isherwood.



Dana and Bill Isherwood.



Denali summit. Dana Isherwood at top left.

Article Details

Author	Pam Logan
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	In memoriam