



## AAC Publications

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### Jolene Unsoeld, 1931 – 2021

**Former congresswoman, mountain climber, and lifelong adventurer Jolene Unsoeld began climbing with the Mazamas in 1949, her first ascent being the south side of Mt. Hood in logging boots with caulked soles.** In the summer of 1950, after her first year at Oregon State College, she did the WyEast route on Mt. Hood and then climbed Mt. Shuksan. She met her future husband, Willi Unsoeld, that fall at OSC; she always said that he had fallen in love with her GI mountain pants, she with his Aladdin mountain stove—as well as his storytelling around the campfire. They got engaged on the top of Mt. Saint Helens.

Their first summer together as a married couple in 1951 was in the Grand Tetons, where Willi was hired as a guide. Thereafter, she got to climb every other summer, between each new baby that came along. Her climbs included the first ascent of the Direct North Face of the Grand in 1955.

The “fierce intimacy of marriage,” as Jolene put it, and family life were of utmost importance to the parents of Regon, Devi, Krag, and Terres. They were able to manage through long separations, including Willi’s expeditions. But the three years of Peace Corps in Nepal, where Willi was assigned as deputy director, were for Jolene an “ideal match for Bill and me: adventure, service, and full involvement of the whole family,” as she wrote in her memoir, *Wild Adventures We Have Known*, published in 2016. Jolene flourished: raising four kids in a foreign land, teaching English, and working to help local Nepali women.

When the family returned to the United States, they lived first in Andover, Massachusetts, where Willi was deputy director of Outward Bound. In 1970, the Unsoelds returned to the Pacific Northwest, where Willi became a founding faculty member of Evergreen State College. Jolene joined the local chapter of the League of Women Voters and the Coalition for Open Government. She registered herself as a lobbyist, occupation: “Professional meddler, unpaid.”

The following years included the death of daughter Nanda Devi in 1976, when she fell ill on the mountain she was named for, and Willi’s death in an avalanche, with that of a student, Janie Diepenbrock, while leading an Evergreen college group in 1979 on Mt. Rainier.

Jolene became a spokesperson for the value of risk. In 1979, just four months after losing Willi, she was the keynote speaker at the annual conference of Association for Experiential Education. She spoke of her losses but also of the importance and understanding of why we take risks. She elaborated on the topic again as keynote at the annual Wilderness Risk Managers Conference (WRMC) in 1994. “I understand our need to avoid the inevitable moment that comes to us all—death,” she said. “But to control death is to control the life—and that’s a kind of life Bill and I would not have wanted to live.”

Jolene was elected to Congress from Washington state and served from 1989 to 1995. As a congressperson, she was an early progressive, backing environmental and feminist causes and pushing for government transparency.

From the 1990s to 2017, in addition to writing two autobiographies, Jolene would go on two-week adventures each year with her daughter Terres. Her last climb was an ascent of Kilimanjaro with Terres in 1995.

Let us conclude with more of Jolene's own words, from her speech at WRMC: "When tragedy strikes, we can't just sit around and feel sorry for ourselves. We have to rise up and make something of our life—for no other reason than to keep ourselves from drowning in grief—but for a very much better reason of trying to make the world a better place—so when it is our turn to go, we can rest easy—knowing that somehow, in our own little way, we made a difference.... I cannot say I know what wild adventure awaits us on the other side. But I am open to all possibilities."

— **Jed Williamson and Terres Unsoeld**

## Images



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