



## AAC Publications

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### Hilaree Nelson, 1972–2022

**Partners are everything. The bigger the objective, the more we require excellence in our partners.**

The more experience we gain, the more we realize that our choice of partners is about more than their technical skill set. Excellence in the mountains and in life is a blend of compassion with strength, humility with professionalism, humor with courage, leadership with co-operation, and vision with vulnerability.

Hilaree Nelson, who died on Manaslu in September after starting a ski descent from the 8,163-meter summit in Nepal, was a truly excellent partner because she elegantly moved between each of these admirable human qualities while maintaining her true north. Although she once said, “having that space to be the first female [to complete certain descents] was really helpful” during the initial decade of her skiing career, that vision shifted with the new millennium because, in her words, she wasn’t learning enough or pushing herself. The next phase became organizing her own expeditions and intentionally seeking trips with alpine climbers into realms where the outcome was less known.

With over 40 expeditions in 16 countries, half of Hilaree’s life was spent planning or executing committing adventures to remote high mountains, usually several in one year. Her vision never wavered. It was always to challenge herself with something new that had seized her creative mind. In 2012, she summited Everest and felt so great upon returning to the South Col that she added a summit of Lhotse and became the first woman to summit two 8,000-meter peaks in 24 hours. Except, for Hilaree, the goal wasn’t being the first woman as much as it was seeking an answer to the question, “I wonder?”

On her first expedition to India, in 1999, Hilaree was given a photo of Papsura, a 6,461-meter peak with an aesthetic couloir that she began to dream about skiing. She attempted it in 2013 without success. In 2017, with life and love partner Jim Morrison, she returned to make the first descent in what she called “a sort of combination of all I’d learned since my first ski expedition,” for which she was named a National Geographic Adventurer of the Year. In 2018, again in partnership with Jim, Hilaree made the first ski descent of the coveted Lhotse Couloir, a 7,000-foot line that had seen previous attempts by some of the world’s best. Her endurance and strength had become legendary.

While she loved the highest mountains, Hilaree was a self-proclaimed professional adventurer who was captivated by immersion in many wild places and in life. In 2010, she joined me on my first trip to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, where we made several first ski descents of the highest peaks in the Brooks Range and skied 100 miles to finish on the Beaufort Sea. Alongside polar bear tracks and with infant children at home in the care of their fathers, Hilaree and I resurrected the elements of our souls that had always been mountain questing and were now mixed lovingly with motherhood. I can clearly hear her saying, “That sucks” in response to me sharing a hard moment, then drawing her characteristic audible deep inhale through lightly clenched teeth to show she got it and that she was ready to move on and up whenever I was.

Alongside her excellent mothering of two sons, and her leadership as captain of The North Face’s global athlete team, Hilaree sought pure joy. She held her friendships tightly and cultivated new ones, always uplifting people wherever they were without allowing comparison.

She celebrated the raw beauty of each moment and used it as her center during tough times. She carefully evaluated each choice in life, each trip she went on, and each mountain partner.

"It doesn't always unfold the way I expect it to," she once said. Hilaree, we admire your courage in stepping into the unknown and leading with compassion. With endless gratitude for sharing your excellent partnership with us.

— **Kit DesLauriers**

## Images



Hilaree Nelson in northern Alaska in 2018.



Hilaree Nelson (right) and Jim Morrison en route to the first ski descent of Lhotse in Nepal in 2018.

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