



AAC Publications

Michael Gardner, 1991–2024

Photo by Sam Hennessey

"To live till you die is to live long enough." —Lao Tzu

Dear Michael, your life wasn't nearly long enough for us.

Heavy shock and grief swept our community on October 7, 2024, with the tragic news that Michael had fallen at a hanging bivy while attempting a new route on the north face of Jannu East (7,468m) in Nepal. This was his second attempt to climb the face with his longtime climbing partner and close friend Sam Hennessey. Sam descended safely. Aside from a few articles of equipment found, there was no trace of Michael's body, and objective hazards were too great to continue a search. Michael came to rest there, but his spirit soars on.

Michael shared the Lao Tzu quote above on social media after his last annual pilgrimage to the site of his father George's death on the Grand Teton in 2008. Mike was only 16 years old when his father died. In the remaining 16 years of Mike's precious life, he didn't waste a day.

Since he was young, I watched Mike grow up with his beautiful family. I lived next to the Gardners at Guides' Hill with our family of Exum guides, and my winter home was close to theirs in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. Michael's dad was my close friend, mentor, and climbing partner; his mother, Colleen, is a close friend and a soul sister. Michael always had the remarkable presence of an old soul, paired with exuberant youth and a joy of living—infused with perma-stoke—that was magnetic. He carried that forward for three all-too-short decades, not just shining but beaming his light far and wide.

Most remarkable, and what I will always hold dear, was Michael's presence in every moment, the kindness he had for all things great and small, and his bright smile (mustache and mullet included) that lit up every space he shared.

Mikey walked, climbed, skied, and skateboarded the Earth he cherished with grace and humility. His accomplishments were remarkable and leave a legacy in alpinism and ski alpinism of the purest style. His passion and zest for living life to the fullest, combined with his natural athleticism and confidence, enabled him to reach his ultimate potential with trusted partners in the wildest places, inspiring us to no end. He thrived on shared adventures with gifted partners, with minimal resources and high levels of commitment.

Over a period of seven years, Mike and Sam set new standards for light and fast alpinism, often with skis on their backs. Their visionary tactics in climbing big alpine routes in ski boots was as impressive as their athleticism in shredding variable mountain snow conditions with only 60mm underfoot. In 2019, for example, they climbed the Infinite Spur on Mt. Foraker and skied down the Sultana Ridge and Mt. Crosson in a 48-hour single push. In the spring of 2021, they climbed a new route (Anubis, 2,500m, AI5 M6) on the Isis Face of Denali, straight out of the West Fork of the Ruth Glacier, then traversed to Kahiltna Base Camp, in just 18 hours. Shortly after, they completed a 36-hour ascent of the Bibler-Klewin route on the Northwest Buttress of Mt. Hunter, then both guided the West Buttress of Denali, further acclimatizing for their biggest ski-alpinism objective yet in the Alaska Range. With Adam Fabrikant, they climbed the Cassin Ridge, then made the first ski descent of Denali's Northwest

Buttress, descending 10,000 feet to exit via the Peters Glacier onto the tundra, where they switched out ski boots for tennies and made numerous bone-chilling glacial river crossings on minimal calories to complete their grand traverse in just 64 hours. And caught the last bus back to Talkeetna.

In addition to being a great alpinist, Michael was a talented guide who in a very short career guided 12 Denali climbs, six Vinson Massif climbs, and over 150 ascents of the Grand Teton. He skied and climbed on every continent and spent five seasons in competitive freeskiing, with consistent podium finishes. He was named one of the 20 best skiers in the world under age 18 by Powder magazine. Mike loved competitive skijoring, and after only one season, he proudly won the coveted big belt buckle after landing a backflip midcourse at his hometown event in Ridgway, Colorado.

At the young age of ten, Mike's skateboarding talent landed him his first sponsorship. He always attributed his athleticism and success in life to his skateboarding experiences, which he shared with humility and depth—in eloquent words and stunning photos—in publications and on social media. His bold, expressive, and eloquent style reflected his passion and love of life.

More than all of his other accomplishments, those who knew Mike recognized that he had mastered being human. With heavy hearts we go on, all the better for sharing the path, a rope, turns, and stoke with Michael. As we attune to his expansive unconditional love, we'll meet him again, cheering us on as always. Like so many, I'm grateful to have loved and been on the receiving end of Michael's abundant love.

"It is not the length of life, but the depth of life." —Ralph Waldo Emerson

—Angela Hawse

Images



Michael Gardner in Nepal.

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