Alpine Mentors

A Volunteer Program Trains The Next Generation Of Alpinists

Welcome everyone!" Bundled in a thick parka against the autumn chill, I toss my notebook on a picnic table in Ouray, Colorado, and address a group of ten climbers. They have come from all over the United States and even Europe for the first Alpine Mentors session. "Over the coming days we'll go sport climbing, trad climbing, and dry-tooling, learn some leader-rescue skills, and head up to the north face of Mt. Sneffels for an alpine climb. By the end of the week, we'll know which four of you are prime for mentorship."

I explain to the group that my fellow mentors, Vince Anderson and Bryan Gilmore, and I will debrief each climber with our impressions of their strengths and weaknesses as an alpinist. And, finally, we'll select the four climbers with whom I'll spend many, many weeks over the coming two years. "Whatever happens, know that first and foremost I'm looking for people who are ready for mentorship and committed to alpinism," I say. "This isn't a climbing competition, this is the start of a team. A team that's going to spend a lot of time together. So, unless there are any questions, let's head up to the Pool Wall for some sport climbs."

And so began the first day of what would add up to 119 days of traveling and climbing together. Nine months earlier, on January 1, 2012, my wife, Eva House, and I had launched a website with an outline of our vision for a free, two-year climbing-mentorship program. From dozens of written applications I had invited ten climbers to Ouray. And from these we selected four climbers: Buster Jesik, 26, from Colorado; Colin Simon, 24, originally from California but a recent graduate of University of Colorado Boulder; Marianne van der Steen, 27, a Dutch woman who had committed to a month-long trip to the western United States in hopes of joining our project; and Steven Van Sickle, the oldest of the group at 28, a self-described "Air Force brat" who had been living in Ouray for seven years specifically for ice climbing.

OCTOBER 2012. BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON, COLORADO.

"I racked everything on one sling so I can hand all the gear to you at once—makes the transition faster." Colin and I are standing on a ledge below pitch five of Escape Artist. "Okay. Anything else?" he asks. "Keep placing good gear, keep moving. Stay in the flow; there's one more pitch in your block. Do you know where you're going? You're on belay."

"Yup. Climbing." And with that Colin moves down and right to the first good jam of the Lighting Bolt Crack, steps up twice, and places a solid cam.

Formalized mentorship programs for alpinists began in France in 1991. The Club Alpin Français program, which they call the Groupe Excellence, initially was directed by Luc Jourjon, assisted by half a dozen top guides, and has operated continually ever since on a two-year cycle, now with a mixed-gender group of ten young alpinists. The CAF funds the group, and as with similar groups elsewhere in Europe, the program pays a salary to instructors and all expenses for participants. Most of the programs share a two-year framework, with gradually increasing scale and complexity of objectives, leading to final expedition.

I first learned of such mentorship programs back in the 1990s, as a 20-something aspiring alpinist. At the time, I would have killed for such an opportunity. Luckily, I found mentorship the old-fashioned way, sharing many a rope with older partners. As my experience grew, I wondered if a more formal mentorship program might be possible in North America. In 2010, having survived a near-fatal climbing accident, I vowed to do something tangible for the sport and culture of alpinism. Mentorship seemed to have the power to bring really positive change to our geographically diverse North American climbing community.

The Alpine Mentors model we created differed from the European programs in several important ways: 1) We were entirely self-funded and self-organized; 2) we operated on an all-volunteer basis; and 3) we were open to climbers of any nationality. To make our program work, we needed to raise money for two key expense items: liability insurance to protect the mentors who volunteer to share their knowledge and experience, and meals, lodging, and travel expenses for mentors. Eva and I volunteered for all the administrative work, fund-raising, and operating what, by early 2013, had become a federally recognized 501(c)(3) non-profit.

By keeping the mentoring entirely volunteer and asking the “mentees” to pay for nothing but their own expenses (which would not be insignificant), we achieved a key legal benefit that I understood from my 25 years of working as a professional mountain guide. As long as no money was changing hands, we could freely access all public lands in the United States, from state forests to national parks, without having to acquire or buy into commercial operating permits, a requirement that would have kept us from getting off the ground at all.

Eva and I took an entrepreneurial stance toward the entire project. We’d try it, and if we couldn’t raise money to fund our expenses, or if the market didn’t demand this service, we’d shut down. Our first donor stepped out of a crowd in Tokyo. I’d just concluded a slideshow where I’d briefly mentioned this new idea, and an American businessman and climber asked a few questions and then handed me a fat envelope of Japanese yen. As I counted out the bills in my hotel room, it dawned on me that Alpine Mentors was now real. People, even strangers, would trust Eva and I to create this channel for enriching our common culture of climbing in the mountains. For the first time I allowed myself to feel some confidence that we might succeed.

In January 2013, Eva and I hit the floor at the Outdoor Retailer trade show in Salt Lake City. We had a program, we had four participants, and I had successfully run 30 days of mentored climbing around Ouray and Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. We went to 30 meetings over four days and came back with promises of financial support from Polartec, Patagonia, Outdoor Research, Grivel, Liberty Mountain, Asolo, MSR, and La Sportiva. If these companies all came through with their promised donations, we would be able to operate in the black for year one. Every one did.

MARCH 2013. CANMORE, ALBERTA.

Fifty-six-year-old Scott Backes is reclined in an easy chair, wearing a fresh T-shirt for the first time in two days. It reads “Kiss or Kill.” After every climb the mentors debrief the mentees by rope teams. This is where most of the reflection, discussion, and learning takes place. Many of these sessions go late into the night.

“When you’re at the end of that second day of climbing, and your calves have already melted, and you’ve got 300 feet of black ice to get off the face, you kind of need to be able to simul-climb,” he says to our small group, gathered in a condominium that has been loaned to us for two weeks by the parents of a climbing friend. “Being able to do that, with confidence, is going to make the difference between being alive and not being alive.”

In the Canadian Rockies we spend two weeks climbing frozen waterfalls and all-day alpine routes. After a couple of ropes get stuck on the descent from Asteroid Alley on Mt. Andromeda, one of these days stretches more than 24 hours. As a group we quickly realize that the mentees are slow

on moderate fifth-class climbing terrain. Difficult technical climbing is almost always slow, but the amount of time spent on Backes' "300 feet of black ice" is one area where the mentees could see dramatic improvements. As lead mentor, I begin laying plans to emphasize this skill during our next excursion.

OCTOBER 2013. COURMAYEUR, ITALY.

The Courmayeur guide's office sits on the town square, opposite the Catholic church. It is the second-oldest mountain guide's office in the world (the oldest being a short crow-flight away, in Chamonix). The head guide uncorks champagne and makes a speech welcoming us to the Alps, wishing us luck and assuring us we are in good hands. Over an extravagant spread of olives, thin-sliced sausages, and delicate cheeses, four of the most senior guides on Monte Bianco orient our young alpinists to the most storied mountain massif in the world. The guides unfold climbing topos and trace descent lines on a large 3D map of the range.

One week later, spindrift is whipping into a not-quite-sealed crevasse and settling gently upon all of us. Thinking we could cruise miles of moderate, exposed alpine terrain across the Rochefort Arête to the Canzio bivouac hut and on to the summit of the Grand Jorasses, we had left the valley on the first cable car. Sometime around midnight, lost amid blowing snow, I had pulled the plug, turned us around, and led the team back to a crevasse I'd spotted seven hours earlier. Colin and Buster make hot drinks and dinner. I pull out a light sleeping bag and a bivy sack; Buster has gone light and has only a foil emergency blanket. I snore, the others shiver, and at dawn we leave our little cave and head down. Lessons learned.

JUNE 2014. DENALI.

The wind whips and fast-moving clouds obscure everything around us. I pace Marianne, kicking steps at a slow, even tempo across the hard-packed snow slope. Turning the corner, I see Buster and Colin reach the summit and wordlessly high-five. Raphael Slawinski, my co-mentor, and Steven Van Sickle must be on the north summit of Denali by now.

We are acclimatizing for a planned attempt on the Cassin Ridge. We move in the way top climbers move on Denali: on skis, mostly unroped, climbing to the 14,200-foot camp quickly, and then acclimatizing with light packs, never camping higher. This time it takes us almost ten hours to summit from the 14,200 camp, over three hours longer than what I'd consider a good time for the West Buttress, but conditions are snowy, the weather stormy. No one else is here.

Dr. Raphael Slawinski, a veteran of this mountain who had climbed with the group earlier, on our trip to Canada, is the perfect mentor. A tenured professor of physics, Raphael balances a healthy professional life with a marriage and a passion for climbing. As so often happens, our dinnertime discussion turns to these topics. Our relatively youthful charges are wrestling with how to find jobs that also allow them to climb.

From the beginning my aim had never been to train mountain guides (the American Mountain Guides Association exists to do that), nor was it to train the "best" climbers or the "next Steve House"—questions I was often asked. Mentorship and climbing, as I observed again and again, fundamentally are both discussions about being human. About expressing physically what you enjoy doing, while maintaining a balance with relationships and work. My first objective was to show them that climbers they look up to, like Raphael and me, are actually quite timid about taking risks. But we are also confident in important ways. Sometimes that means knowing I can simul-climb 300 feet of black ice in a few minutes. High on Denali in thick blowing clouds, it means knowing that I can navigate down to Denali Pass and then to the 17,200-foot camp in under an hour in a total whiteout. I've done it several times. For me it is a relatively casual situation; for someone who doesn't have

that ability, the very same situation could prove fatal.

In dangerous situations you have to know in your head and in your heart that you will not fail. You build your safety net as you go, marking waypoints or placing cams, while hoping that you'll not need either. We have many types of safety nets, and we build in these redundancies to allow for survival and, in the end, for growth. The successful climber knows well the fine edge between recklessness and safety.

OCTOBER 2014. GARHWAL HIMALAYA.

The morning air feels like water: deep, cool, still water. I feel it ripple across my shoulders as I cross the goat-cropped grass, look up, and stop. Above us are the three summits of the Brahmasar massif and our objective. Two years earlier, at the North Rim Campground in the Black Canyon, I'd posed the questions that have since defined everything we've done as a group: "Where do you each want to be in two years' time? What do you want to be able to climb?" The answer was unanimous: technical routes, at moderate altitude, alpine-style, in the Himalaya. At 5,850 meters, Brahmasar didn't even need a trekking permit, let alone a climbing permit or the dreaded liaison officer. The main summit was untouched. And the summits of B-2 and B-3 each had seen only a single ascent.

The door to mountaineering in the Himalaya was opened for me by the Slovenian Alpine Association. I was studying in Slovenia and was mentored by experienced climbers, who eventually invited me to join an expedition to Nanga Parbat. I turned 20 in base camp, and after I'd climbed to 6,400 meters and the expedition put two climbers on the summit, we still had a month before our flights home. I lit off across Baltistan and up the Hunza Valley, traveling, trekking, and taking in the mountains. The thing about climbing in the Himalaya is that it seems so complicated and expensive—almost impossible. Until you go there and see that it's not. That was my goal with this expedition: to show them how easy and cheap it can be.

After the first ascent of a 5,300-meter spire, by Steven and me, and some scouting of lines on the Brahmasar group, the group dearly wants to claim the first ascent of Brahmasar I. But an attempt by Buster, Colin, and Steven ends at just under 5,500 meters. (Marianne had opted out of the final expedition to India due to personal reasons.) They retreat to ABC with heavy hearts but the satisfaction that they couldn't have done much differently—or much better. As always we debrief their climb: Their decision to retreat followed a difficult bivy, compounded by hard climbing on dangerously loose rock, far from home. The unknown has outweighed these climbers' confidence, as it should have.

With Alpine Mentors I wish to pass on a view of mountaineering that strictly accepts the mountains as they are, with an ethic of climbing them by fair means and an appreciation for the most aesthetic route possible. I, and many others, have long held that climbing is not only a physical act, but also a spiritual pursuit. Walter Bonatti once said that each climb is a "victory over your own human frailty." Simple words that say much, for these struggles expose our values. And once our values are seen, we can mold them.

AUTUMN 2014. SEATTLE, WASHINGTON.

Steve Swenson had been one of our volunteer mentors during our Canmore trip in the spring of 2013. Inspired by what he saw and experienced, Steve asked, "Would you be interested in having me organize a regional program based in Seattle?" In the fall of 2014, having selected its first group of mentees, Alpine Mentors Pacific Northwest began its inaugural two-year program with sessions in Seattle and Squamish, British Columbia. Eddie Espinosa, regional manager of the American Alpine Club, offered logistical support for Steve's efforts. The volunteer mentors have included Perry Beckham, Jim Donini, Colin Haley, Sarah Hart, Bob Rogoz, and Wayne Wallace.

The future of Alpine Mentors in North America lies in emphasizing regional groups, operating within the established group-development process, with a two-year cycle. Keeping things local not only reduces the time commitment for volunteers, but also the cost of running the program. With these efficiencies we can insure and operate more regional programs.

DECEMBER 2014. OURAY, COLORADO.

Forty climbers crowd the small upstairs room of Backstreet Bagels. With 20 posters and a social-media push, we've lured people from as far away as Portland, Oregon, to our first Alpine Mentors Ice Bash. Our tag line is: No clinics. Only climbing. Dirtbag lodging deals. Slideshow. Beer.

At the Ice Bash I want the mentees to have their own experience of mentoring less experienced climbers. They now have much to share. The Ice Bash also marks the graduation of our first class. After all we've gone through together, a ceremony to celebrate this transition seems important to all of us. After we hand them engraved wooden ice axes from Grivel as mementos, Buster, Colin, and Steven stand before the crowd to narrate a slideshow about their Alpine Mentors experiences, telling their story to their own tribe.

About the Author: Steve House lives in Ridgway, Colorado. Of Alpine Mentors, he says, "In my 44 years of life so far, this has been one of the biggest challenges I've ever undertaken. Overshadowing all else has been the deep knowledge and unbridled generosity of our climbing community. The biggest thank you goes to my wife and co-founder, Eva House. Without her business and marketing acumen, we would not have been able to create this project. We also owe big thanks to the volunteer mentors for our first cycle: Vince Anderson, Scott Backes, Jon Bracey, Jim Elzinga, Bryan Gilmore, David Göttler, Rob Owens, Ines Papert, Steve Swenson, and Raphael Slawinski." Visit www.alpinementors.org to learn more about the organization or make a tax-deductible donation. To get involved directly, email climb@alpinementors.org.

Images

Moving up on Denali.

From left: Buster Jesik, Steven Van Sickle, Jim Elzinga, and Steve House at Brahmasar high camp.

Steven Van Sickle summits Sickle Spire (5,334m) during the Alpine Mentors expedition to India in October 2014. Behind is Brahmasar (ca 5,830m), the team's main objective.

The southwest face of Brahmasar. (1) The Jesik-Simon-Van Sickle attempt on unclimbed Brahmasar I (the tower above and right of their line). (2) Elzinga-House route to the summit of Brahmasar II.

Planning the Black Canyon trip. From left: Steven Van Sickle, Colin Simon, Marianne van der Steen, Bryan Gilmore, and Buster Jesik.

Steven Van Sickle leads the way to base camp.

Steve House, Marianne van der Steen, Buster Jesik, and Steven Van Sickle (from left) make the most of an unplanned bivy in the Alps with a bottle of Italian genepì liqueur.

Colin Simon belays Steven Van Sickle in the Canadian Rockies in spring 2013.

WORLDWIDE MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

GROUPE EXCELLENCE ALPINISME NATIONAL
France / Founded in 1991 / Cycle: 2 years
The oldest mentorship program for young alpinists, run by the federation of French alpine clubs (FFCAM). Each cycle trains 10 young alpinists, with a final expedition. Big Climbs: first ascents on the Mooses Tooth and Bear Tooth in Alaska (2013); Piolet d'Or–winning expedition to Kyrgyzstan (1993).

SPANISH MOUNTAINEERING TEAM
Spain / Founded in 1997 / Cycle: 3 years
Run by Spanish Mountain Federation. Teams of six men and six women train in the Pyrenees and Alps, with expeditions to Nepal, Peru, and Pakistan. Big Climbs: first ascent of Salkaton in Nepal (2014); northern ridge of Teng Kang Poche (2007).

DAV EXPEDITIONSKADER
Germany / Founded in 2000 / Cycle: 2.5 years
Funded primarily by the German Alpine Club (DAV), with other sponsors. Each cycle involves teams of six men and six women. Training camps lead up to group expedition. Big Climbs: first ascents in India (2013); first all-female ascent of Cerro Torre's west face (2015).

NATURFREUNDE ALPINKADER
Austria / Founded in 2012 / Cycle: 3 years
Funded by Naturfreunde Österreich, a youth outdoor organization. First class did educational modules from sport climbing to winter mountaineering, followed by two years of training and an expedition to Peru in summer of 2014. Big Climbs: many ascents in the Cordillera Blanca and Cordillera Huayhuash (2014).

SLOVENIAN YOUNG ALPINISTS GROUP
Slovenia / Founded in 2012 / Cycle: ca 3 years
Operating under the Alpine Association of Slovenia, the group consists of 10 young alpinists. Group members are encouraged to select their own objectives and are responsible for all aspects of expedition planning. Big Climbs: east ridge of Ice Tooth in Tibet (2013).

NEW ZEALAND ALPINE TEAM
New Zealand / Founded in 2013 / Cycle: 3 years
Run by Expedition Climbers Club Inc., which hosts the Remarkables Ice and Mixed Festival each year. Established in hopes of reviving large-scale annual Kiwi expeditions. First team will do expedition to Peru in June 2015. Big Climbs: first ascent of south face of Mt. Suber (NZ, 2014); North Pillar of Fitz Roy (2014).

— *Allie Levy*

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