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### **Wild Adventures We Have Known: My Life With Willi Unsoeld**

By Jolene Unsoeld, with lectures by Willi Unsoeld

**WILD ADVENTURES WE HAVE KNOWN: MY LIFE WITH WILLI UNSOELD.** Jolene Unsoeld, with lectures by Willi Unsoeld. [Unsoeldstories.com](http://Unsoeldstories.com), 2017. 407 pages, \$30.

*Wild Adventures We Have Known* is a trip through the attic of a fascinating family, a trek to the top of the world, a descent into double tragedy, and a journey to one woman's recovery and activism. It focuses on her earlier life with mountaineer/philosopher Willi Unsoeld, legendary for his West Ridge ascent, traverse, and bivouac on Mt. Everest with Tom Hornbein in 1963. The book is beautifully illustrated, its images supporting the caption beneath a poster found in the Unsoeld home: "A ship in a harbor is safe. But that's not what ships are for."

Jolene Unsoeld is a night owl, conducive to quiet reflection on a life in which personal loss has been with her for 40 years, since the mountaineering deaths in 1976 and 1979 of her daughter and husband. She is a master storyteller on the early joys of that life, its tensions and triumphs.

The Unsoelds went to Nepal with Willi serving as deputy director of the Peace Corps in the country. And then came the 1963 Everest climb. The reader is left breathless by the book's intimacy. Jolene Unsoeld was resistant to her husband making the climb. He had already been on three Himalayan expeditions: Nilkanta (1949), Makalu (1954, and Masherbrum (1960). "Prior to my departure for Kathmandu, Jo and I separated three times, and we were set for divorce," Willi is quoted in the book. "I don't see how it could be otherwise, because to go to Everest you really have to lay it all on the line...your family, the future, the life that you've planned together."

Yet, weeks later, with Willi on the mountain, the couple exchanged letters of extraordinary warmth. Jolene Unsoeld shares those letters. "Let me be with you, Bill," she writes. "I need you so. Unless I am part of your happiness and sadness and searching, I am nothing."

Willi Unsoeld would lose nine of 10 toes to frostbite, the cost of a bivouac at 27,900 feet. The Unsoelds would settle into a new life, with Willi present at the creation of the Evergreen State College and Jolene embarking on a career of citizen activism.

*Wild Adventures* culminates with twin tragedies. Vibrant, athletic daughter Nanda Devi Unsoeld, at 23,000 feet on a climb of the Himalayan peak for which she was named, says "I'm going to die," lapses into unconsciousness and is gone within five minutes. The account by Willi, who was there, and the decision "to commit her body to the snows," is aching. The body is committed with a final yodel, so often the way Willi and Devi communicated.

"There was no time to process," Jolene Unsoeld writes. Willi had come back sick from Nanda Devi. Jolene's mother had drowned in the Columbia River. Son Krag Unsoeld was injured in a bicycle accident. Three years later, leading Evergreen students on a climb of Mt. Rainier, Willi Unsoeld and student Janie Diepenbrock were killed in an avalanche.

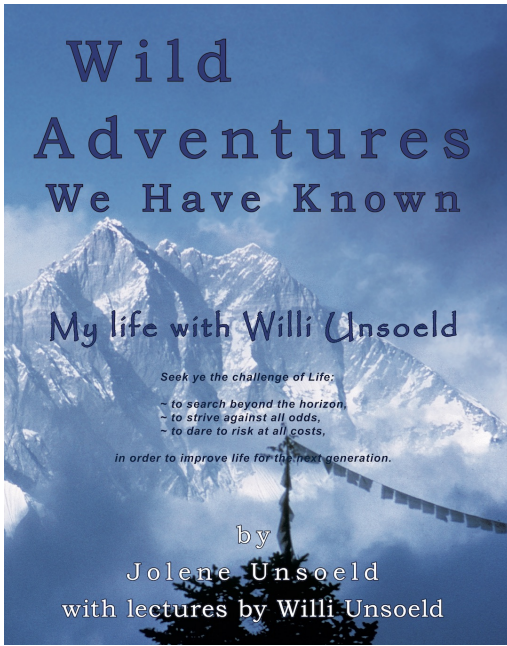
The book ends with a lesson entitled, "How to Handle Grief." Writes Jolene: "It was several years before some sort of a transition took place where that vision of beauty no longer overwhelmed me with grief. And then, one day, I was driving down I-5 and received a blast of beauty from a sunset. And

there was no more pain. I could feel Bill and Devi in the car with me. We were all together again.”

She is now in her 80s and marks the Everest climb’s anniversary each year by talking on the phone with Tom Hornbein. Still, in her words, Jolene Unsoeld is “ready to start again. I am ready for my next wild adventure.”

– Joel Connelly

## Images



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