

A LIFE AFFECTED

SURVIVAL ISN'T THE END OF THE STORY

BY MEGAN MICHELSON



The calm after the storm. // Photo: Courtesy Ptarmigan Films

The avalanche—a Class 3 slide; five feet deep, 100 feet wide—made national news. Seven clients and staff of Selkirk Mountain Experience, a backcountry lodge and guiding operation outside Revelstoke, B.C., were dead. That was January 20, 2003.

Last fall, nearly eight years after the slide, a feature-length documentary about Ruedi Beglinger (owner and lead guide of SME) called *A Life Ascending*, premiered at the Banff Mountain Film Festival. The 2003 slide was the first injury or death in Beglinger's then 18 years in business, and the film examines how the tragedy has affected him and his family. Of course, Ruedi and his family aren't the only people still feeling the effects.

Heidi Biber watched on that day in 2003 as the entire 35-degree slope ripped out below her, and buried and killed her close friend, Kathy Kessler. Biber, who was then a hospice nurse in Truckee, California, administered CPR on nearly all of the victims that day, including Kessler. But help came too late to save her friend.

Biber's life has moved forward in the years since the accident—she got married, had a daughter, moved to a new town, switched jobs—but images of the avalanche still replay in her mind on a jarringly regular basis. She somehow lived when seven others did not. Biber recently shared with *Backcountry* how the avalanche changed her life and affects her still today.

“I had been to Selkirk Mountain Experience two years prior, and I thought it was just a fabulous place. I wanted my friends to experience it, so I convinced a group of us to plan a trip there.

“We split into two groups. All of my friends were in the first group, but Kathy decided to go with the second group. I remember saying, ‘Bye, Kathy. Have a good hike.’

“On the climb, I asked Jean-Luc, who was in front of me, if I could step ahead of him. I was sixth from the front. At the top, we felt and heard the *whoomph* behind us.

“Within a second, Ruedi was gone—he sat on his splitboard and just flew down the hill toward the debris. He had an excellent record of safety. I've never blamed him for what happened.

“It was a five-foot crown. It ripped to the ground.

“As I got closer, there were a few people who were buried to their necks and *(continued on next page)*

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digging themselves out. There was a huge amount of debris. I went into this surreal, this-isn't-happening mode. It was as if I were looking through this weird lens and a movie was rolling.

"I kept saying, 'Where's Kathy?' When we finally found her, in my shock I said, 'This isn't her.' I worked on her [CPR] for what felt like a very, very long time.

"If I had not gone ahead, in front of Jean-Luc [who died that day], I would have been in that avalanche. It just baffles me to think of that, even today.

"There were a couple of miracles that day. But not many.

"The helicopters came quickly. The hardest impact was as we were flying out, we could see the bodies next to their holes. It was like a war zone.

"I don't use that old cliché, 'At least they were on the mountain when they died.' It was a disaster.

"Being a hospice nurse, I had seen a lot of death before. But this was new, an accident

like this. I went into complete shock. I cried and cried. I didn't want to be touched, I just wanted to be in a cocoon.

"I wanted to be the one to call Kathy's husband, Scott. He was supposed to go on the trip, but he had some last-minute circumstances that prevented him from going. He probably would have been hiking with Kathy if he were there.

"I felt tons of survivors' guilt. Why Kathy? Why not me? It took a long time to get beyond that.

"I haven't talked about this with anyone for a long time.

"After the memorial service, all I wanted to do was sleep but I didn't sleep well. I remember thinking, 'How am I going to deal with this?' A few months later, I saw a counselor who worked with people suffering from post-traumatic stress.

"There were very few people who knew what to say to me. It's like someone who has cancer—people don't know how to approach you.

"The chemistry in your body and brain can change after an episode like that. Now, when I sense danger, my fight or flight endorphins start surging more rapidly than they did before. When I'm kayaking or a car pulls out in front of me, adrenaline goes all the way to my fingers, and my heart starts racing.

"I still backcountry ski. I love it. It's a huge passion.

"I'm carrying on with my life. I have my five-year-old daughter now and that's slowed me down. My desire is still to get out there, but I have a daughter now, and I can't go big.

"As much as I loved doing hospice work, I decided I needed to get away from all the death in my life, so I'm a school nurse now.

"I think about the experience more frequently than you can imagine. It's random. Sometimes it's when I'm out skiing, but not always. I think about my friend Kathy. The tapes go through my head, but they're not as emotionally charged as they used to be.

"If she's into it, I would take my daughter backcountry skiing some day." ■

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