

WHAT'S UP WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHER?

NIC ALEGRE FINDS GOLD



Angel Collinson next to the heli—helicopters on helicopters. As the most iconic female heli skier ever, Angel next to a helicopter makes sense in a spot like Petersberg, AK.

NIC Alegre's career took off when he got kicked out of Canada. American by birth and passport, he'd been living in Whistler, BC on and off for several years, working as an aspiring photographer. He'd leave every six months, as required by immigration, and spend time in Los Angeles and back home in New York. In August 2014, he was heading back into Canada to attend a music festival near Nelson, BC, when he got stopped at the border in Vancouver.

"The border is so weird—one time, they'll be so nice to you, then the next time, they'll hate you and tell you, 'You can't come in,'" he says. Turns out, he'd overstayed his last visit a few days beyond the allotted six-month timespan. The Canadian border patrol told him he wasn't welcome in Canada anymore. So, Alegre moved to Tahoe that fall and tried to figure out his next move. Not being able to shoot in Canada is tricky for a ski photographer. Plus, he was just getting started, working with well-known skiers and scoring his first published photos in major ski magazines. Thankfully, he could still go to Alaska.

In the winter of 2016, Teton Gravity Research needed a photographer to join the film crew and athletes at Fantasy Camp, a base camp deep in Alaska's Neacola Mountains, where they spent several weeks shooting for TGR's annual ski movie. Pro skiers and TGR athletes Sage Cattabriga-Alosa and Nick McNutt had worked with Alegre the year before and they recommended him to TGR.

"To put me on that Alaska trip required a lot of trust for someone they'd never worked with before," Alegre says. When TGR cofounder Todd Jones arrived at Fantasy Camp that year, he remembers asking, "What's up with the photographer?" Alegre was regularly wearing cutoff sleeves, black leopard print and a furry scarf. It was ridiculous, even for Fantasy Camp, where athletes and filmers show up to dinner in a bow ties or Superwoman outfits.

Cattabriga-Alosa looked at Jones and said, "Just wait. You're going to love him."

And he did. "Nic and I hit it off right out of the gate. He was an up-and-coming photographer at the time, but he really just had what it takes," Jones says. "You look at his work and what he does with images—it blows my mind every time. His composition is insane. Of all the years I've worked with photographers, he's in the top three. He has the eye. He has something special."

Two years ago, Alegre was named TGR's first staff photographer. Now 34, he lives full time in Jackson, WY, where TGR is based.

"He's accelerated very quickly. He's not afraid of anything. When it comes to a challenge, he always says yes," Jones says. "We'll be like, 'We're going on this gigantic ski tour.' Nic may show up with the wrong ski gear, but then he just grinds it out, makes it work, and brings home the gold in terms of his images."

LONG BEFORE he was a skier, Alegre was a surfer. He grew up near the tip of Long Island, NY, in a town called Amagansett. His mom co-owned a bed and breakfast; his dad was a tennis pro in neighboring East Hampton. They encouraged him at a young age to create his own path in the world. He started surfing when he was 8 years old and spent his summers running around the beach and playing in the ocean. His family would take occasional wintertime trips to Okemo, VT, or Mont Tremblant, QC, where he learned to ski and, eventually, snowboard. The high-school quarterback, he was a talented athlete.

Meanwhile, Alegre's mom gifted him a film camera for his 15th birthday and while he enjoyed taking photos of abstract



Photo: Courtesy of Teton Gravity Research

scenes, he never envisioned he'd make a career out of it. He graduated from Pennsylvania's Villanova University in 2008 with a degree in history ("I figured the best way to get perspective was to study the past," he says). Then the recession hit. Finding a job was challenging for anyone during that time, but Alegre moved to New York City and got a gig as a fact checker at a travel magazine in Manhattan. Next, he worked as a media buyer for a marketing and advertising agency. He was working on the Toyota account during a massive safety recall of Toyota vehicles. "I lived in the office that year," he says. While stuck in his cubicle during one especially hot, sticky summer in New York City, he started writing down places he wanted to visit on Post-it notes, which he'd stick to his office wall: Whistler, Panama, Europe. "Looking back now, I've checked all of those places off my list," he says.

While flipping through a ski magazine, Alegre spotted an ad for a weeklong workshop that renowned ski photographer Blake Jorgenson was leading in Whistler. So on a whim, he signed up. "It was one of those moments I'll always remember, when life can go one way or the other," Alegre says.

Jorgenson remembers this much from that workshop: "Nic had a borrowed camera, was on a snowboard, and he wasn't very good, but he was extremely likeable and happy to be involved. The workshop ended up giving him some direction of the life he wanted to lead, and we convinced him that it was totally possible."

At the end of that weeklong class in 2010, Alegre made a decision. "I was like, 'That's it. This is what I want to do.'" He

quit his job in the city and moved west, first following a friend to San Francisco before hopping in and out of Whistler. Pro skier Logan Pehota, then just a teenager, had been the skier at Jorgenson's photo workshop, and Alegre and he had kept in touch. The two of them—plus Logan's dad, pioneering freeskiier Eric Pehota—would regularly go out and shoot together.

Alegre learned how to snowmobile and started peppering established ski photographers, like Jorgenson, Paul Morrison, Eric Berger and Jordan Manley, with questions. He began sending his work into magazines and had his first published shot in *Powder* in 2014 from an urban shoot with 4bi9 Media in Sapporo, Japan.

"I was never afraid to ask questions and figure out what I was doing wrong," Alegre says. "You have to be afraid not to fail. I was shooting to get better and I was slowly figuring out how I could get my photography to look like how I was seeing it in my head. Once my technical ability caught up with what I was envisioning, that's when I really had it."

Alegre describes his images as purposeful. You'll find a skier in many of his shots, but the whole thing seems to transcend skiing. His photos are gritty and real, as if they have souls of their own. The person in the shots is placed intentionally within the environment. "I'm not looking for your standard powder shot," he says. "That's not my thing. I'm looking for what everyone else isn't looking for."

"Photography is a reflection of you—why are you taking the photo?" he says. "What do you want people to see in it? A photo is a mirror into the soul of the photographer." ❧