

You Know Her as Shane's Wife

In the past decade, Sherry McConkey has found the strength to raise a teenage daughter and build a non-profit from the ground up.



BY MEGAN MICHELSON
PHOTO BY ZACH DOLEAC

WHEN PIONEERING FREESTYLE SKIER Shane McConkey died in a ski-BASE accident in Italy in 2009, he left behind a daughter, Ayla, then 3 years old, and a grief-stricken wife, Sherry McConkey. A year later, Sherry formed a foundation in Shane's name that gives back to environmental and social causes. To date, the Shane McConkey Foundation has donated more than \$288,000 to organizations like Protect Our Winters, the Sierra Avalanche Center, and the Humane Society. Through his death, Sherry says Shane gave her a new opportunity to believe in herself. Ten years later, Sherry, who grew up in South Africa, shares what she has learned about single parenting, the rise of Saucer Girl, and the message she has for Shane.

My mother once told me that I was going to be bankrupt by the time I was 18 because I always wanted to give everything away. I couldn't think of a better job for me than running a foundation where I get to give everything away.

When I left South Africa at 21 and decided to travel the world, I learned to ski, to climb, to mountain bike. I ended up in South Lake Tahoe and I got a job making snow at Heavenly. I was hanging around Lake Tahoe and I saw the harvest moon and said, "I'm not leaving this place."

Ayla loves to ski. I go skiing with her and I'm so overprotective, but I pretend I'm not. I lost her in the woods on Red Dog last winter and I just couldn't help but worry. I had all of ski patrol searching for her. She was fine, of course, waiting at the bottom for me.

When Shane died, I suddenly had everything on my hands. So, I became a yoga teacher, I raised my child, I started a foundation. I had to deal. I didn't have any other option. I had to figure out our financial future. That's a lot to do by yourself. I had to shovel my roof, stack my wood. It doesn't end. It makes you motivated, proud of yourself. I learned to believe in myself.

Every year, we throw a big party and fundraiser at Squaw Valley called the Pain McShlonkey, or the PMS. I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate Shane. He would so approve of this day. It's fun, silly, and it reminds everyone not to take themselves too seriously. Ayla is always part of it—she dresses up as Saucer Girl.

One morning I found Ayla at the kitchen counter googling her dad. We talk about him all the time, but I think she senses such sadness from me when I hear his voice, that we don't usually watch his films. She was in the kitchen just belly laughing at him on the screen.

Being around Shane was nonstop entertainment. It was impossible to stay mad at him. We had so much fun. He was a loving man and a horrible cook. He worked really hard.

Ayla is so perceptive. She says, 'Mama, are you ever going to love again?' She's so in tune with everything. She gets sad for me. She gets sad that Shane isn't around to be proud of her. Maybe I will love again. I haven't tried. My life is full and wonderful. It's not like I'm looking for another Shane. That doesn't exist.

I'm so proud of how Shane's legacy has continued. I still constantly get messages from strangers all over the world who say, 'You have no idea what Shane did for me.' That makes me proud.

What would I say to Shane now, if I could? I'd say thank you. He's given me everything—most of all Ayla—but also this life. He set us up so well. He's given me the opportunity to discover me. But I'd also give him the bird, because he left us.