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[Stories of resilience]

IN THE WAKE

SIX ATHLETES DIED FOR ADVENTURES THEY LOVED. SIX WIDOWS REMAIN.
WHEN A WORLD IS SHATTERED, THE NOISE SILENCED, WHAT LIES BEYOND?

■ BY MEGAN MICHELSON AND BRIGID MANDER

We don't know exactly what draws us to the mountains, or the ocean, or the sky.

For some, it's the beauty and serenity, the wild that surrounds us and the chance to exist in places where few feet have trod or skis have descended; the thrill of speed or flight; the knowledge that a positive outcome is not assured; the desire to push oneself to the brink.

For others, it's thrill and fame and hunger: to go bigger, faster, higher. It's a whirlwind of sponsorships and pressure and risk. The noise is loud, and the hype pervades and it's one more trip to ski the Italian Dolomites, or BASE jump off Tahoe's Lover's Leap or skydive from a helicopter, or surf Mavericks. It's all in and it's nonstop and a rush and exhilarating and fast.

And then it stops. All is quiet. The noise silenced. And what is left?

Wives, mothers, husbands, fathers, sons and daughters.

The greater mountain community grieves for those who perished—Alex Lowe, Doug Coombs, Shane McConkey, Rob Ranieri, Luke Lynch and Erik Röner along with a long list of others—but this feature focuses on the women and their children who remain.

The following stories represent one demographic in various stages—from most recent loss to furthest out—of the grieving process as they attempt to move forward with a life forever altered.

That grief comes in waves. At least that's what Emily Coombs says.

Her husband, renowned freeski pioneer Doug Coombs, passed away 10 years ago while attempting to reach a fallen comrade in La Grave, France.

Emily says these waves are unpredictable, varying in frequency and size. But every so often, and even now a decade later, a monster swells and swells. And it feels like it might never break. And then it does. And it almost kills you.

The six women on the following pages talk of the moments they remember most vividly about their loves, and about the second they learned it was over. They talk of crippling fear, of sadness like a vice. They talk of hope and support systems, and of how difficult it can be to accept help. They offer words of wisdom.

"Love is the greatest risk you can take in life," says Jennifer Lowe-Anker, whose husband, Alex Lowe, perished in a 1999 avalanche in the Himalaya.

Six athletes died doing what they loved: mountaineering, skydiving, skiing, BASE jumping. Six widows are left in the wake. Each woman has a different story, but they exhibit a shared strength. The sun rises and sets and rises again stronger each day. These are stories of love and fear, risk and loss. These are stories of resilience. – *The Editors* >>



ERIK RÖNER
1977-2015



LUKE LYNCH
1975-2015



ROB RANIERI
1984-2012



SHANE MCCONKEY
1969-2009



DOUG COOMBS
1957-2006



ALEX LOWE
1958-1999

[*Less than one year*]

ANNIKA RONER

The day Erik Roner died, he offered to watch their two kids while his wife, Annika, went for a pre-dawn waterski on Lake Tahoe the morning after a lunar eclipse. When she got home, Erik was at the kitchen counter with Oskar, 5, and Kasper, 1. It was September 28, 2015.

Erik gave Annika a long kiss, and said, "I love you. I'll see you later." He was off to a charity golf tournament at Squaw Valley, California, where he and three others were skydiving out of an airplane to kick off the event. When Annika's sister called later and said Erik had been hurt, Annika rushed to the scene, her body numb and convulsing in tremors on the drive over. "I think that was Erik squeezing me as he passed away," Annika says now.



Erik, 39, a professional action sports athlete and a star of MTV's "Nitro Circus" show, had hit a tree on what should have been a routine skydive for the experienced jumper. "I told Oskar the next day that Erik was gone," Annika says. "He still thinks his dad is here, like a spirit on his shoulder who's always there for him. When I'm having hard days, he says, 'Come on, Mom, just ask Dad to help you.'"

For weeks after Erik's death, friends and family gathered at the Roners' dining room table around the clock, offering support and home-cooked meals. "This community, my friends—they're unbelievable," Annika says. "I'll be in the grocery store and people will come up to me and say, 'If I can help, let me know.'"

Although Erik was calculated with his risks and often backed away from stunts that didn't feel right—especially after having kids—Annika still worried. "I would never tell him no. If he's not the man he wants to be, he's not going to be the father or the husband he wants to be," she says. "But I was very vocal about what I was scared about." Ask about her biggest fear and she'll pause, then half in tears, say, "I was scared of him dying."

Annika and Erik's first date was spent BASE jumping in Idaho. They got married after skydiving out of an airplane onto a Lake Tahoe beach, and in her wedding vows, Annika said to Erik, "For being extreme, you're the kindest person I know." Erik lived his life fully—some would say on the edge—but Annika says he longed to live a simple life at home with his family. "He was ready to tone it down," she says.

Two nights before he died, Erik told Annika he couldn't believe how in love with her he was. "I miss his face, his expressions, his being. I miss him holding me and his kids," Annika says. "I'm in love with someone who isn't here anymore."

Now, Annika is learning to cope with her new reality. "At first, it was shock. Now it's deeper. I cry every day," she says. "I'm a single woman with two kids. They are my focus. That is my future."

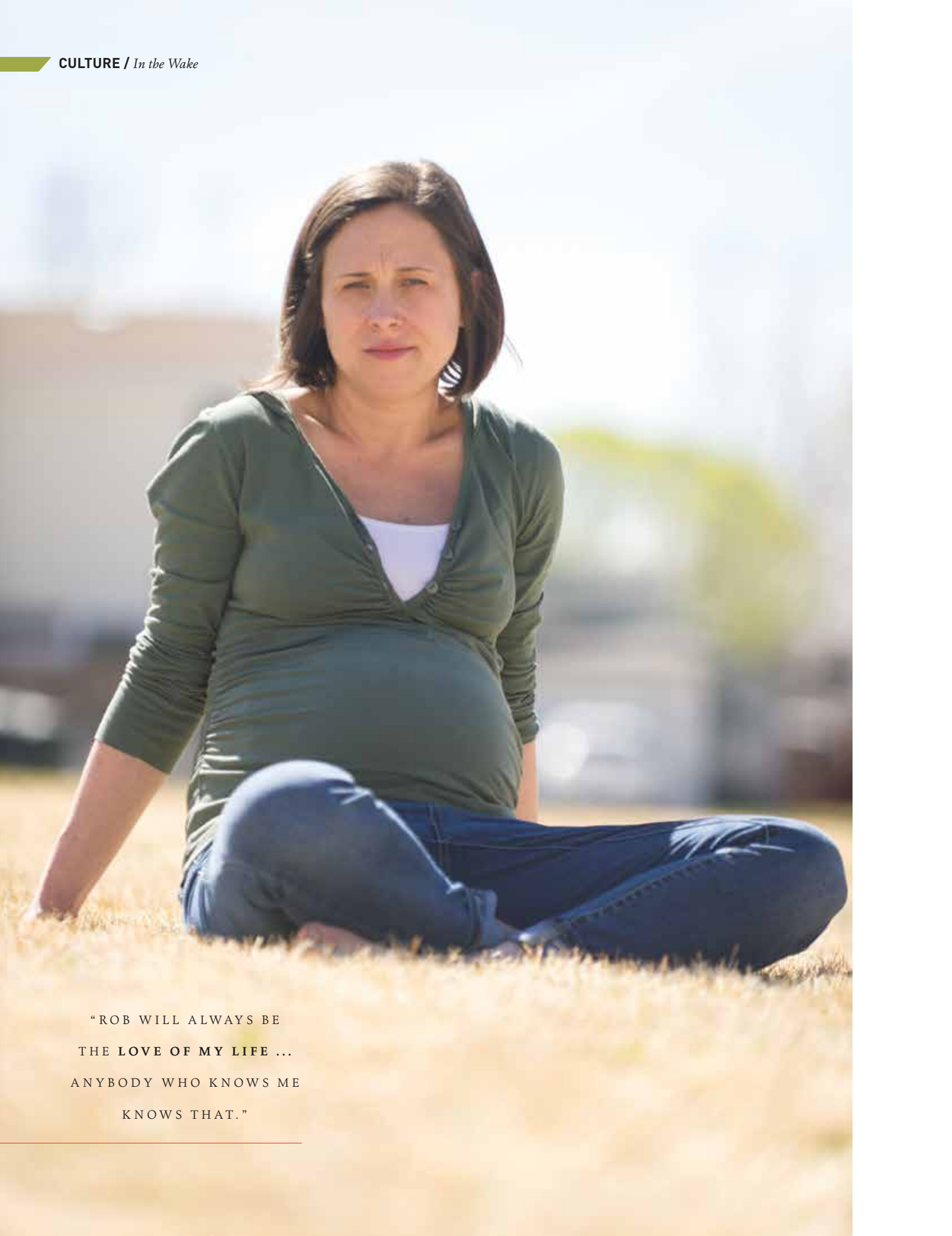
Annika says it often feels like Erik is still with them. His ashes rest in a wooden box in a canoe-turned-bookshelf at their Tahoe City home that Erik helped build. Annika took Oskar skiing at Squaw Valley this winter and on their way to the lift, Oskar said, "Dad's right behind us. He's going to come skiing with us today." Just the thought of it made her smile.

"You have to believe that one day, I'll be a stronger woman because of all of this," she says. "But I'm not there yet." —Megan Michelson

Annika hangs out with Kasper (left) and Oskar at her home in March.

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“ROB WILL ALWAYS BE
THE LOVE OF MY LIFE ...
ANYBODY WHO KNOWS ME
KNOWS THAT.”

[Four years]

A S H L E Y B E D E L L

Ashley Bedell and Rob Ranieri didn't have a typical wedding. The theme at Burning Man that year, 2008, was the American Dream and Ashley and Rob decided the best way to celebrate that dream was by getting married jumping out of an airplane over the Nevada desert. A video capturing their wedding shows them skydiving through the air holding hands then landing on the sand and exchanging rings and an exhilarating kiss.

"We got married how we wanted to, where we wanted to. It was us," Ashley says. "We did it our way, like the Sinatra song, our whole relationship we did our way."

A couple of years prior, Rob and Ashley had moved from their home state of New Jersey to South Lake Tahoe, California. Rob worked as a ski patroller at Kirkwood Resort before launching an IT business. He was always a magnet for attention, with his wild, electrified hair and the unicycle he loved to ride. Together, he and Ashley started rock climbing and Ashley, who'd always wished for the ability to fly when she blew out her birthday candles as a kid, introduced Rob to skydiving.

"Rob made me believe in love," Ashley says. "Here was this guy who accepted me for my quirky personality—I'd never had that before."

Their daughter Willow, named after Ashley's favorite tree, was born in late 2011. Ashley quit skydiving once they had their baby, but Rob worshipped the sensation of flying. Six months after Willow's birth, on May 22, 2012, Rob, then 28, went skydiving over Lake Tahoe with some friends.

The winds changed when Rob jumped and he was swept toward the frigid waters of the lake. Trained for emergency water landings, he tried to escape his gear and swim to shore, but it was too cold, too far. According to the GoPro camera he was wearing, he struggled for about 45 seconds before his body shut down. Rescue teams spent hours locating him, while Ashley waited at the hospital for news on her husband's condition.



Willow starts a game of tag with her mother, Ashley.

After Rob died, Ashley's world crumbled with shock. "Honestly, I turned myself off," she says. "That was my idea of resilience—to strongly and independently face something like that and not show emotion. That's what I had to do."

It's taken years for her to open up again. "It took that long to see what I was actually dealing with—Rob's gone, he's not coming back," she says. "Now I actually have to deal with this."

She and Willow, now 4, recently moved to Gardnerville, Nevada, outside of Lake Tahoe. And Ashley has been given a second chance at love—she and her new partner are now expecting a baby. "Willow is going to be the best big sister. Even though her family was halted, it's now going to continue again," Ashley says.

Rob is still very much in their lives and their hearts. Willow wears a locket around her neck with a photo of her mom and dad, and Ashley's willow tree tattoo on her calf includes an "R" for Rob, and a parachute. "Rob will always be the love of my life," Ashley says. "Anybody who knows me knows that." - Megan Michelson

[Seven years]

S H E R R Y M C C O N K E Y



Shane McConkey was supposed to call his wife, Sherry, after every jump. But on March 26, 2009, it was Shane's friend and BASE-jumping partner JT Holmes who called Sherry from the Italian Dolomites. He said two words: "Shane's dead."

They'd been filming for a Matchstick Productions ski movie when Shane's ski BASE jump had gone terribly wrong. Sherry went silent, then screamed. Their daughter, Ayla, just 3 years old at the time, sat next to her scared and confused. Shane was 39 years old.

Sherry was in Southern California, at Shane's dad's place, when she got the news. On her flight home to Tahoe, the grief began to sink in and she had a fleeting morbid thought: "I remember thinking, 'I hope the plane goes down so I don't have to deal with any of this,'" she says.

Seven years later, the wounds feel fresh when Sherry talks about that day. But she also radiates with the glow of a woman still in love when she remembers Shane, a pioneering professional freeskiier. The two married on the beaches of Thailand in 2004 and lived a vivacious, adventure-filled life in Squaw Valley, California. "He used to stare at me and smile. He just had that loving look," Sherry says. "His eyes showed everything."

Shane was a goofball, as well. He'd pull pranks like stuffing rocks into his friends' backpacks or stealing cash out of their wallets. Sherry, who grew up in South Africa and left home in search of adventure at age 21, was drawn to Tahoe for the same reason Shane was: the mountains. "Being around him was nonstop entertainment," Sherry says. "I loved him for his adventures and the way he wanted to invent things. He was the most passionate human I've ever met."

When Sherry would get angry with him, Shane would look at her and say, "You're so sexy when you're mad."

The month before he died, Shane wrote Sherry a Valentine's Day card—which she's since read hundreds of times—in which he described what he loved about her. Before he left for Italy, Shane had a dream that he died, which shook him deeply. "I couldn't sleep when he was gone because I worried," Sherry says. "I knew the consequences. We knew he could die.

Sherry and Ayla savor mother-daughter time.

We spoke about it a lot."

At his memorial, Ayla danced amidst the throngs of people and asked, "When is Daddy coming back?" Now age 10, Ayla says goodnight to her dad before bed and although she doesn't remember him, she often looks through the photos and footage that captured his talents and spirit.

Sherry, a quiet athlete with a stout sense of humor, has used mountain biking and yoga as therapy, but she still has hard days. "You don't want to be without the guy you love. The pain doesn't go away. It comes back and you can't breathe," she says. "But I've learned how to cope."

Sherry's also become a philanthropist: She launched the Shane McConkey Foundation two years after his death, which has since donated more than \$250,000 to causes like the Make-a-Wish Foundation and Tahoe-area schools and environmental initiatives, all things Shane believed in. She helped produce a documentary about Shane's life and mostly, she's dedicated herself to raising her spirited young daughter, who she says inherited Shane's empathy and goofiness.

"As a mother, I have to show resilience. I have to teach her everything that's right in life," Sherry says. "There are times when I feel like it's too much and I've had enough. But I always try my hardest to show Ayla that life is beautiful and we're so lucky. Life goes on and we need to be strong." —Megan Michelson

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