Dave

Dave Seidman

Dave Seidman was lost in his prime. As a person and as a world-class climber, he was the best of the best. In writing of 'Trips' and how they played (and still play) a role in our lives, it was impossible not to think of David Seidman and his tragic and early death. I thought memories of Dave would inspire discussions of his climbing adventures - and they did. But, there was a lot more. For example, I didn't expect that anyone would have a photo of the mountain where Dave died, taken by Alan Raymond on “an amazing 2005 Annapurna trekking trip in Nepal arranged by Brother Jim Noyes…. We raised a glass to Dave ..." Nor, did I expect that Alan would send me a photo from his father's 1930 Green Book showing his dad and my dad alphabetically almost next to each other - or that he met all those great guys (and wives) in that class - I did too, and they were absolutely wonderful - and that through his dad's Dartmouth friendships he met Sigourney Weaver before anyone knew who she was. And, I certainly didn't expect to be moved by the stories that a couple of cousins sent me about how much Dave Seidman meant to them. I can just inform you that when the news arrived of Dave's death, a whole bunch of his friends literally and figuratively pulled off the highway and cried. If these stories don’t move you, then I am afraid you have a heart of stone.

On the other hand, some of the information shared with me brought a smile and a chuckle. Steve Borofsky pointed out that Dave had quite the reputation as a "Collector of Dates" when they were delivered at the Gym for Mixers (remember them?), right across from the old Chi Phi. Steve's missive is ambiguous, however, as to whether Dave brought the girls to the fraternity so that guys without dates could have one - or that he somehow stored them in his room upstairs like so many cases of Miller bottles from the Ely, Vermont train wreck. By the way, you may not know that one of our classmates drove there and bypassed the beer so that he could stock up on frozen strawberries. Oh, my, what memories!

So, what do we know about that fateful climb? First of all, Dhaulagiri is Nepali for dazzling, white, beautiful mountain. When surveyed in 1808, it was thought to be the highest mountain in the world. By the mid-1800's, it was displaced and now stands at the seventh highest. But, its 22,970-foot rise from the Kali Gandaki River may be the most precipitous of any mountain in the world. First climbed successfully in 1960, the 1969 ascent was the next attempt on the mountain - and it was staffed by a "next-generation" group of climbers to follow in the steps of the 1963 American Everest expedition. At this point, I yield to Jim Noyes for his unique perspective.

Jim says he helped Dave write a piece or two of his mountaineering feats. In particular, he thinks of one that involved being strapped in a hanging tent on the side of McKinley for days on end, waiting for a nasty storm to abate. "Dave took that stuff so much in stride that he made it sound boring - my job was to remedy that. Dave didn't think the stuff he did was a big deal." Jim recommended spending time with Jim Janney '69 (which I did) and his comments can be found a little further down. When he first saw Dhaulagiri, Jim Noyes says his first reaction was, "no wonder they died; you can't climb that !!" And,

then, Jim lamented the loss of good friend and roommate Tom Russian, remembered his strong friendship established post-Dartmouth through trips with now-deceased Rocky Fredrickson, and highlighted his love of trekking, skiing, biking, and other forms of active travel - including visits to the shoulders of Everest and Dhaulagiri. For all of these people and all of these places, Jim writes "And a river runs through it." As for the news of the loss of Dave, Jim Noyes writes that "I heard about the tragedy while driving from Boston to Hanover in 1969; had to pull over and shed some tears."

Jim Janney '69 was a member of the Dhaulagiri expedition. He starts out by stating that Dave had been a hut boy. For anyone who knows about these guys, they competed all the time in terms of who could carry the heaviest load. And, Dave was the one who set records for each trail and each mountain. At Dartmouth, he taught rock climbing - and he took Jim freshman year to British Columbia and junior year to Alaska. Others who climbed included Michel Zaleski '68 and Bill Kniesel '70. At this time, Jim notes that Dave had plans to go to Med School in Saint Louis. But, beyond that he feels he was quite naive about life.

In 1968, Dave led a climb on Denali's South Face. In the process, Dave encountered a 100-year storm (for 8-9 days). Jim and others engineered a supply drop on their descent route (successfully - and critically importantly).

Jim notes that the climbing community was small - you could get involved if you knew somebody. Nepal had been closed for years - one had to plan a year ahead. Dave was planning the Dhaulagiri ascent.

On the climb, when the avalanche occurred, Jim was laid low with altitude sickness. If not careful, this could lead to pulmonary edema and, eventually, death. At least one other climber was suffering a severe case.

But, what about Dave as a person?

"Do you know how to drive a stick shift car?" This, it turns out, was the only question Dave Seidman had for George Spivey and his real-life cousin James (Jimmie) Johnson. These two Chi Phi Brothers were hoping to take Dave's 1965 TR 4 on a road-trip down to visit "unknown ladies" at Windham College in Putney, VT. While the answer to Dave's question was, of course, "No," the cousins nodded in the affirmative, even though they were pretty sure Dave knew the truth. George and Jim pretty quickly figured out the gears and rolled south to Windham, where there was a mutual feeling of "Glad to see you Sisters and Brothers." I trust that means everyone had a good time! On their return to Dartmouth, "heading back on Rt. 91, we felt good, enjoying the cold and full moon until a peculiar smell and smoke entered the car. Luckily, the problem was not a fire yet, but just the exhaust pipe messin' with the moisture between the metal floor and the rug. Whew! Did we tell Dave about our adventure? Nope! We were just thankful Dave had faith in two non-shift Brothers, who didn't blow up his TR 4 or themselves. When we see Dave, we'll tell him!" "I knew," George writes, "without knowing, when I heard on WCBS news radio New York, while driving from Hartford to New Haven after work...again on Rt. 91. Mountain climbers had been killed in Nepal. Before going home I picked up a copy of the New Haven Register and there on the front page was Dave's name... Oh! The spirit that Brothers share." My memories of Brother David Seidman, from Brother George Spivey. See you in June!

And, here is one of the most beautiful pieces of correspondence I have ever read.

Bill: I'm writing in response to the attached message from Jim Noyes re: the piece you're working on about Dave Seidman for the upcoming Class Newsletter. I roomed with Dave and Chuck Wright my freshman year. I was one of 12 African-American students accepted in the Class of '68. At that time Dartmouth was a long way from home for me -- socially, culturally and economically -- and Chuck and Dave helped me realize that a situation that didn't feel comfortable could be comfortable and beneficial. Since Dave played freshman football with me we had an opportunity to experience quite a few ups and downs together right from the start. I believe that God sends each of us angels at various times when we're not on solid footing, and for me Dave was one of those angels. Jim Johnson.

The following was written by fellow-climber Dennis Eberl:

David Seidman was a strong climber. He was the strongest member of our 1967 expedition on the evening that we reached the top of the South Face of Mount McKinley. The summit was still several miles away and at first we took turns breaking trail along the summit ridge. It soon became evident that Dave was in the best shape and we were content to follow in his track, watching him fall through the wind-crust to his knees every step while we struggled to keep up. Two days later we lost our way on the descent. Dave took the lead and confidently led us down the southeast buttress to a really needed food cache. On the hike out he carried a 125-pound pack for sixteen miles through soft snow and arrived at Base Camp looking fresh.

Dave was already a good climber when he arrived at Dartmouth, having climbed in New England and having worked as a hut-boy for the Appalachian Mountain Club. He became President of the Dartmouth Mountaineering Club in his junior year. The following summer, after making several first ascents in the Alaska Coast Range, he led a DMC climbing camp to the Selkirks, where he made the first ascent of the southeast face of Mount Cougar. The previous summer, he had led the first ascent of the north ridge of Mount Kennedy in the Yukon.

It was fun to climb with Dave; he was solid, good-natured and enthusiastic, as well as an excellent mountaineer. I saw him last at the American Alpine Club Annual Dinner in Philadelphia. He was enjoying life and excited about his climbing plans. He was handsome and dashing and when he presented his story of the ascent of Mount Kennedy, I suspect he titillated the imagination of more than one lady at the meeting. Dave seemed so alive and happy then that it now seems especially cruel that it should all end in that avalanche on Dhaulagiri.

Louis F. Reichardt is the lone surviving climber on Dhaulagiri that fateful day. He writes:

Vin Hoeman and I both felt that we were finally in our element. The unfamiliar world of Nepal – temples, customs and intestinal ailments — lay eight thousand feet below. While we enjoyed the land and its hospitable people, it was the mountains which had lured us halfway around the world. Then, just as we reached them, Al had to be evacuated. Those tense moments were finally behind us. Vin and I were alone in a tent at 15,000 feet on the ice of the East Dhaulagiri Glacier, trading tales of endurance and privation from past expeditions. A few hours before, the whole expedition had carried loads to this

camp in a gentle snow storm and had left us with a monstrous cache. In the morning, we were to climb higher to explore a route to the top of Dhaulagiri's East Ridge. This afternoon and evening, though, we had time to talk, monitor our pulses as indexes of our acclimatization, and read.

The following day proved to be a hard one for me. Vin had brought a pair of snowshoes, while I had only crampons. We spent several hours in an unequal battle against the snow on the lower part of the glacier, Vin walking easily while I thrashed along behind. Finally, the terrain steepened, and the snowshoes had to be abandoned. The battle became a shared one, as we climbed to 17,000 feet encountering few technical difficulties. We returned to camp convinced that "easy" altitude could be gained on the glacier before attacking the ridge. The next morning, joined by Paul Gerhard, we went five hundred feet higher to the elevation at which we intended to leave the glacier. To our left was a rare break in the bank of rock created by the glacier's attack on the ridge. A spur of rock and snow led from above this chute to 20,000 feet, technically a moderately-easy route. A large crevasse cleft our path on the glacier at the lower rim of a huge basin that we would have to cross to reach the chute, but we could see there were no obstacles in the basin. To forge a route which could be followed easily, we sent down a request for logs to Boyd and spent another evening at 15,000 feet monitoring pulses and expectations.

Joined in the morning by Pemba Phutar and Tensing, we carried a small tent, food, and climbing equipment to the edge of the crevasse. Vin and I had intended to remain there that evening and to explore further in the morning, but when we descended in the afternoon to collect the logs, we learned that they would not arrive that day. Boyd Everett, Dave Seidman and Bill Ross were occupying our old camp. They had been working hard with the others carrying loads to this height. Now they wanted to see the route. Boyd thought it might be easier to leave the glacier immediately and gain our elevation on the ridge. We decided to spend the night together — an evening transformed by the many taped symphonies Boyd had brought with him. Our camp became "base camp", a psychological change that seemed destined to be repeated as we moved up the mountain.

Bill Ross and I had to wait in the morning for Mingma to bring the logs from below. Then, with them balanced on top of my Kelty, we set out after the others. Sunshine and companionship conspired to make a relaxing morning. The pace was slow, and friendships were being renewed in this first large sortie on alpine terrain. Still, the twelve-foot logs made a strange load, frequently threatening my balance, on what already seemed a curious day, one in which we were carrying loads up a route that might be abandoned. I, at least, knew that the logs could be abandoned with the route. After mentioning this to Bill, he replied, "I think we are committed to something up here."

"Quick! Let's get the logs across so Boyd can cross without taking off his pack." Bill and I reached the crevasse a few minutes before the others, but it took time to rig the ropes properly. Everyone had time to arrive and unload. They stayed to inspect the proposed route. Encouraged, they remained to kibitz. Then an afternoon fog descended upon us. A few minutes later, just as Bill and Vin were finishing the delicate pivoting of the timbers to the crevasse's far rim, a roar entered our consciousnesses. Neutral for a moment, it quickly posed a threat. We had only an instant to seek shelter before it consumed our world.

I found only a change of slope in the glacier for shelter and was repeatedly struck on my back with debris – all glancing blows which did not dislodge my hands. When it was finally over, assuming that it was snow that had been unable to bury us, I stood up fully expecting to be surrounded by the same seven companions. Instead, everything that was familiar – friends, equipment, even the snow on which we had been standing – was gone. There was only dirty, hard glacial ice with dozens of fresh gouges and scattered huge ice blocks, the grit of the avalanche. It was a scene of indescribable violence, reminiscent of the first eons of creation, when a still molten earth was forged; and at the same time it was uncannily silent and peaceful on a warm, misty afternoon. A triangular cliff of ice, thrust out of the glacier by some invisible band of rock, had collapsed and the resulting debris had cut a 100-foot-wide swath across the broad basin, filled the crevasse, and overwhelmed us.

Yells of reassurance became expressions of my disbelief. A systematic search down the slopes revealed little above a high cliff and convinced me that everything had been carried over it. I spent an hour in this search and in a less thorough one of the debris below – a period of time allotted as a compromise between the conflicting demands for immediate rescue and for summoning people and equipment to help. Then I made the loneliest of trips down the glacier and rock to the 12,000-foot acclimatization camp, shedding crampons, overboots, and finally even disbelief on the way. I returned with equipment and people to make a more thorough search of debris, but with no success. Probes were useless; even ice axes could not penetrate the huge ice mass, roughly the size of a football field and twenty feet deep. We had no rational basis for hope. The avalanche was ice, not snow. The few items of equipment found were completely shredded. No man could have survived a ride in such debris.

We spent another week on the mountain retrieving equipment, not so much for its value but because of our reluctance to sever bonds with the past. Much in each of us died that day, and time spent alone with memories of past hopes, exertions and companionship seemed necessary then and appropriate later. I remember them now as my closest climbing companions – men who believed in testing their own limits and who enriched the lives of their friends by sharing their experiences and motives, men who died enjoying their avocation in a place they might have chosen.

As we wrapped up our conversation, I asked Jim Janney about his personal life. He said that until his recent retirement, he had been a family doctor in Salmon, Washington. He has a son and a daughter and one grandchild. “Oh,” he said, “and my son is named David.”