



Dear Hilaree

BY JULIA BARTON

A letter to Hilaree Nelson—perhaps history’s most accomplished female ski mountaineer—who paved the way for generations of women

Dear Hilaree,
In September of 2018, I was sitting in a college dorm room that I shared with a girl I’d just met. I was a month into my freshman year in Los Angeles, far away from my home in the Northern Rockies and doing my best to navigate what was quickly becoming a messy transition in my life.

Also in September of 2018, you and your partner, Jim Morrison, climbed the 27,940-foot Lhotse, the world’s fourth tallest summit, and completed the first ski descent down the Lhotse Couloir. Who’s to say if you knew it at the time, but this expedition became one of the most defining of your career, topping an extensive list of mountaineering feats.

Hilaree Nelson’s expedition career is defined by firsts, including countless first descents on skis and her summit of two 8,000-meter peaks—Mount Everest and Lhotse—in a single push. PHOTO BY NICK KALISZ / THE NORTH FACE

It was about a month before I came across news of your Lhotse descent. I remember seeing the photos of you near the summit, a pink sunrise lighting up the horizon behind you, and thinking: *I can’t believe someone skied that—I can’t believe it was a woman.*

I’d kick myself for thinking such a thing now. Throughout your decades-long career, you’ve proven time and again that women can (and do) hold their own in the mountains, but your descent of the Lhotse Couloir is the first time I remember seeing headlines about a big-time objective being ticked off by an athlete who wasn’t a man. It was the first time in my life as a skier seeing a female athlete complete something that a male counterpart hadn’t already achieved.

Often when female athletes accomplish something, the fact that they’re women overshadows the gravity of their effort, but not with you. You weren’t the “first woman,” you were the first, and also a woman. The power in this distinction weighs heavily on how achievements are perceived differently depending on if the athlete is a man or a woman. Headlines never say “first man.”

About a year later, when the film about your Lhotse descent came out, I screened it on my laptop from my twin bed, now a year into college. You looked beautiful. Not in the makeup-clad-runway-model way, but in the I-just-did-something-that-lit-my-soul-on-fire way. You looked strong and adventurous and accomplished and *feminine*.

Those first two years of college were turbulent for me; I struggled with the isolation of the city, the distance from anything that resembled a comfort zone. I didn’t know how to be myself and everything I thought was expected of me at the same time.

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Hilaree Nelson, whose career thrived in the remote landscapes of the Earth's tallest peaks, became one of the world's most accomplished ski mountaineers over decades of adventures. PHOTO BY NICK KALISZ / THE NORTH FACE

I grew up in a mountain town where the coolest thing you could own was a new pair of skis and summers were spent with a coating of dirt on my skin and sleeping in tents in the backcountry. Despite trying, I didn't know how to fit in with this new demographic of people who cared more about the brand of my dirty white sneakers than the mountains I'd been to. Seeing you check whatever boxes you wanted to, expectations be damned, made me want to follow suit.

Then, on September 26, 2022, I saw those same images of you from Lhotse—among dozens of others—on social media, but this time they were announcing your disappearance. Two days later, Jim confirmed your death. You were just 49 years old.

You, a pioneer, a sure-footed and calculated adventurer, a beacon of inspiration to countless around the world, were knocked off your feet by a small avalanche while skiing down Manaslu, the eighth-highest summit in the world. You were dragged 5,000 feet down the south slope of the rugged Nepali peak and remained there until Jim and a search crew recovered your body.

Oh, how the world has mourned you.

Posts about you filled my news feed and social media with remarks from your peers, friends, reporters and simple, every-day adventurers like me, lamenting the loss of the woman who carved out space for subsequent generations of women to succeed in the outdoors.

"There are no words to describe the love for this woman, my life partner, my lover, my best friend, and my mountain partner," wrote Jim in the post that announced your death. "I did everything I could to locate her but was unable to go down the face as I hoped to find her alive and live my life with her."

The love and grief coming from your partner stung the most. Jim's words were yet another reminder that part of what made you such a hero was the full breadth of your identity. Indeed, you were one of the greatest mountaineers in history, but you were also a beloved partner, and a devoted mother.

"I had this close, intimate look into their lives and saw how absolutely wrapped up in [Hilaree's] love Jim was," professional skier Michelle Parker told me. "They embodied this very passionate lifestyle and it was beautiful to witness."

An outpouring of love and remem-

brance also came from your friends, other female athletes whose careers you so beautifully touched.

"I haven't been able to process my confusion over the loss of [Hilaree Nelson]: a friend, mentor, and big sister to me," wrote professional climber Emily Harrington in an Instagram post. "There's immense hurt for her, [Jim Morrison,] and her family, but also a disjointed and broken numbness over the reality of her absence. It's painful and disorienting and I'm not there yet with how to handle it."

When I spoke with Emily about you, she told me she met you on Mount Everest in 2012 (As far as places for two of my biggest outdoor idols to meet each other, Everest only makes sense). You two stood atop the world's highest peak as the only women in the group, an expedition that began a decade of adventures together.

Emily, like so many, credits you for helping to forge her path as a professional outdoor athlete. The five-time U.S. National Champion climber, who in 2020 ascended the 40-pitch Golden Gate route up Yosemite's El Capitan in less than 24 hours, said she never saw her own athletic career continuing after she became a mother because "it just didn't seem like something that [was] possible."

But you, Hilaree, retained your sponsorships, kept adventuring and pushed your career further while raising two children.

"Because of [Hilaree] I started thinking 10 years ago that this is totally possible for me," Emily said. "I can keep being this person. I can keep having goals and objectives and passion and show my kid that his mom has a passion and continues to follow their dreams."

When I spoke with Emily, she was just weeks from the due date of her first child, and she was still in the climbing gym doing what she loves.

The sobering truth of outdoor recreation at the level at which you performed is the inherent risk which Emily said athletes must accept when they pursue such a career. It's the passion for pushing boundaries and the feeling of

accomplishment that makes the risk worth it, she explained.

"I think [Hilaree and Jim] were incredibly mountain savvy," Michelle told me. "They knew exactly what they were doing and the risks thereof. And I think that Hilaree certainly lived her life by example and wanted her kids to see that they could follow something with such passion."

Throughout your career you led by example, for your children, but also an entire generation of women.

"The more you see people like you doing these things, the more likely you are to believe that you can also do them," Emily said.

The power of visibility surely resonates with anyone who has felt confined to a narrow identity, as many women in the outdoor recreation space are. Michelle told me how you strived to bring others up with you, going beyond just showing the world what's possible by also supporting the women around you to succeed in their own pursuits.

Michelle explained that she met you through her close friendship with Jim and was immediately blown away by how curious and supportive you were about what she was working on. Before even mentioning any adventures you two had together in the mountains, she told me about your swimming club, a casual daily group swim in Lake Tahoe you used as training for your first Ironman Triathlon.

"It was hilarious," Michelle said. "Completely stripped back of any mountain knowledge, any of those things that make [people like Hilaree] really great and big, we're just going for a swim with five friends every single morning. It was such a pleasure and an honor to get to know her just in that way before we entered into the mountains together."

I often forget that all of you seemingly superhuman athletes accomplishing dangerous objectives are, at your core, real people like me. Although you were, to many, a mountaineering giant, you were also just another woman trying to support her community.

"I don't think she would ever think of herself as being better at anything than one other person, even though she was—she was our guiding light," Michelle said. "She continuously was driven by purpose and passion, but also opening up the doors for women who came behind her to accomplish great things and not enough can be said for the importance of that role."

Being a woman in the outdoors has always been challenging. I've never been the fastest or the strongest, and despite a hard-earned base of knowledge, I've seldom felt confident while adventuring with men. In college, I felt too outdoorsy; at home, sometimes not enough.

Soon after watching the *Lhotse* film, I joined my university's climbing team. I was a complete beginner but found joy in a new hobby and the community it brought to me. Through climbing, I've come to accept that I don't have to be the best—or even good—to enjoy something. My enjoyment in the outdoors, as in life, is whatever I make of it. In a lot of ways, that bridged the gap between the life I was living and the outdoor passion that was missing. I feel the need to credit you for some part of that.

The memory of you, your light and your perseverance, will



Julia Barton climbs with friends in Reimer's Ranch near Austin, Texas in February, 2022. PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIA BARTON

not soon fade. Your story isn't over; it's the bedrock of the stage you built in the outdoors for me and so many others. Thank you for showing me what is possible, and inspiring me to challenge what is not.

With love,

Julia Barton

Julia Barton 🏔️

Julia Barton was born and raised in Big Sky, Montana, and enjoys spending time in the Rocky Mountains skiing, hiking, backpacking and climbing. She studied journalism at the University of Southern California and believes storytelling is one of the most powerful tools in enacting change. Barton is the Digital Producer for Outlaw Partners.