

Friends Talk About Avalanche Victims

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rescue effort.

"After about 15 minutes, one of Jake's supervisors told me they had found him."

His younger brother was in a gully near his snowmobile, suffocated in snow, wearing his "Skaty," a beeping transmitter device designed to make it easier for rescue teams to locate people buried in snow.

"He died in the line of duty, trying to make the mountain safe for people," said Denny. "He was a beautiful guy."

Jake grew up in the East Bay and moved up to the mountains in 1973 after graduating from Del Valle High School in Lafayette. He worked with his brother at the Stanford Alpine Chalet, about 100 yards from where he died Wednesday. After that, he never lived outside the mountains again.

His father, Russell E. Smith, moved up to the Sierra from Lafayette to be near his two sons after his retirement as a state bank examiner.

Jake lived a healthy, hardworking, athletic "ski bum" life. In summer, he worked as a carpenter and cement worker, and lazed around Lake Tahoe, fishing for trout with his brother and friends, and joking about "Sid Vicious," their pet name for the mysterious fish they claimed to be hunting.

A kind, popular, bushy-bearded mountain man, he lived with a beautiful blue-eyed girlfriend and his black Labrador, Zack, in Tahoma, a little community south of Tahoe City.

During the winters he worked on the Alpine Meadows trail crew, removing debris from trails and blasting "cornices" of snow loose before daybreak on stormy days, shaking down snowbanks before they could build into avalanches.

When there was avalanche danger — as there was Wednesday — he was part of the avalanche control crew, doing whatever was necessary to make the mountain safe.

On his days off, he skied — on the longest, fastest skis available — and invented new ways of enjoying the snow.

"We'd take old water skis and hike up the mountain on snowshoes and then sort of surf down on water skis. That's the kind of thing Jake used to come up with," his brother said yesterday.

"Jake loved his job very much and was dedicated to the safety of the skiing public. He loved life of the Sierra; he loved the lake. One of his pet peeves was people who come to the mountains and throw



By Gary Fong

Snow from the avalanche cascaded down the stairs inside the main lodge at Alpine Meadows

garbage around, don't respect the beauty. My father and I hope that in his memory everyone who visits the Sierra may respect their beauty and power."

"It was a big loss. Some pretty unique people were taken away in that avalanche."

The man who had a hunch that the mountain might come down and asked Jake to stay was his boss, Bernie Kingery, 40, of Tahoe City. Kingery was Alpine Meadow's mountain manager and an avalanche expert who had spent more than 15 years regularly risking his life to make the snowy Sierra slopes safe for skiers.

When it happened, Kingery, a short, blond athletic man who loved to dance, was in the ski patrol cabin where Denny last saw his brother. He was directing the young men who risked — and, in Jake's case, lost — their own lives trying to clear people from the danger area.

The A-frame structure was "blown apart" by the force of the slide, one rescuer said. Kingery is officially listed as "missing," but experts have said it is unlikely anybody could have survived more than half an hour buried in the snow.

Wednesday morning he had directed the trail crews in the pre-dawn work of throwing explosives into the packed mountain snow.

Kingery once described an avalanche as snow moving much like books stacked on an angled surface: at some point one will slide, either because of weight or an outside impulse — like the hand-thrown charges or howitzers he and his avalanche fighters used.

The resulting explosion, he said, sends tons of snow downhill and ends for the moment the likelihood of a crushing, uncontrolled avalanche.

But Wednesday, the accumulations of snow had apparently been too heavy to be safely released this way.

Kingery had once described his hazardous occupation as finding and removing mountains of snow that were "like a stack of marbles ready to go."

But Kingery also said the job is "still like flying by the seat of your pants. You have to get the feel of the hill."

Among those whom Kingery and Smith died trying unsuccessfully to protect was David L. Hahn, 46, an engineer from Los Altos. Hahn, who had been staying in a rented Alpine Meadows condominium with his wife, was found buried in the snow in the parking lot.

The father of two daughters, Hahn left his job at Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corp. in Mountain View to strike out on his

The business was in the process of closing down.

Friends believe that Mrs. Hahn was at the condominium when the avalanche occurred.

Dr. Leroy Nelson, a blond, 39-year-old orthopedic surgeon, took time off last week from his busy practice in Eureka for a rare four-day family ski vacation. On Wednesday afternoon, after the mountain came down, he was found dead — buried in snow in the parking lot. His blond, freckled daughter Laura, 11, was among the missing.

The Nelson family — the doctor, Laura, his wife Carolyn (Katie) and his young son Eric — left Eureka on Thursday March 25. "Wish me luck!" he said to his bookkeeper, Teresa Lee, on his way out of town.

Nelson was a practicing Catholic, devoted to his family, an athlete who nearly made the Olympic team while in college, and who would run up to 15 miles at a time.

Born in Marion, Ohio, and educated at Purdue University in Indiana and at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Nelson had served as a Navy doctor in Guam and had begun to build a thriving practice since moving to Eureka two years ago.

On Tuesday night, he called Lee to tell her the family was snowed in and wouldn't return as scheduled Wednesday.

Forest Service Hunts Cause Of Avalanche

Carson City

The U.S. Forest Service launched a probe yesterday to pinpoint the cause of the killer avalanche that swept down steep Alpine Meadows ski slopes Wednesday.

Forest Service spokesman Harley Grieman said a five-member team has been assigned to investigate the worst avalanche disaster in Alpine Meadows' 20-season history. He said a report should be completed within a week or so.

"We want to pick up the pieces of the puzzle," he said. "Maybe we can find some lessons to be learned."

So far, Grieman said investigators have determined that Wednesday's death-dealing slide was "extremely large" — up to three-quarters of a mile wide and 10 feet or more deep.

Associated Press

Rescue workers found him shortly after the snow came down.

"A lot of patients have been calling and crying," said Lee from Eureka yesterday. "Dr. Nelson was a great person — one of the most honest people I know."

His daughter, Laura, was a gymnast and enthusiastic Girl Scout. "She was a wonderful bright-eyed outgoing child — one of those children who loves life," said Kate Cooper, a friend from Eureka.

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