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OCTOBER 2019

THE AVALANCHE REVIEW

A NOTABLE WINTER

After a storm, photographer Charley Nish captured this shot of sunrise over the Cabinet Mountains, ID, a central part of the Idaho Panhandle Avalanche Center's northern forecast zone.

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BOOK REVIEW

BY CHRISTINE HENSLEIGH

When **Susan Purvis** decided to train an avalanche puppy, Tasha, she did it in a big way. First, learn all she could about working in avalanche terrain. Next, learn puppies and dog training. As a first-time dog owner of a black Labrador, this was no small feat. Finally, navigate the macho world of patrol, search and rescue and ski town politics.

It was a goal that started in the wake of a tragedy during avalanche season—the burial of three toddlers and the inability to recover the last body with a trained avalanche dog. Purvis was between expeditions and looking for something more. Back then she was splitting time between hunting for gold in the Dominican Republic and skiing in Crested Butte, Colo. That story put her in mission mode and defined the next two decades of her life, fueling a simple desire that anyone active in search and rescue can appreciate: saving lives.

She and Tasha became the first female dog team in her avalanche-prone county to certify in wilderness, water and avalanche rescue, receiving Congressional Recognition for her work in avalanche search and rescue. That quest is also the subject of her memoir, *Go Find: My Journey to Find the Lost—And Myself*.

“Six years into our tenure Tasha and I were the team to call in central Colorado,” she chuckled. “We were the clean-up crew. When search and rescue teams couldn’t find the missing, Sheriff’s departments called us.”

The quest also buried her in the process. In the wake of success, Purvis also discovered she was sit-

ting in a tremendous personal void, as devastating as any avalanche.

“My husband left, my dog died, and I thought I was going to suffocate. I was so lost...buried so deep and unable to move, it was like an avalanche. I discovered in the writing process that I was as lost as any victim I’d ever found.”

The only way to escape, she would find, was to write herself out of it. After a move to Whitefish, Montana and a 10-year commitment to learning the art and craft of storytelling, Purvis emerged with a book and a book deal. What started as a story of a woman, a dog, and an avalanche turned into much more.

But before Purvis and Tasha made it, she had to learn about avalanches. She learned that from a savvy set of instructors and mentors at AIARE. Like all things serendipitous, her introduction to AIARE and its educational programs, started with a conversation with AIARE’s Tom Murphy near an avalanche zone over—what else—dogs. Specifically, black Labradors. Tasha was still a puppy and Tom had two older labs. He knew that getting Labs to do something was a challenge; he’s had three.

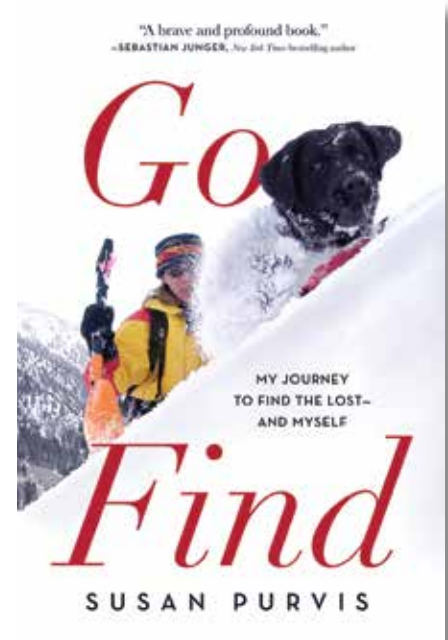
Her passion for learning about avalanches got his notice, his started in Alaska decades before. He took her wilderness medicine course and was impressed. She attended one of the first AIARE courses on avalanches and kept taking them.

In life, as in books, there are good guys and bad guys. And for Purvis, those AIARE mentors and backcountry experts who helped were the good guys of her world and the backbone of all of the avalanche knowledge she now shares. A cadre of men who gave her the security to go with them into the backcountry and learn from life’s most seasoned instructor: experience.

“Their attitude was ‘whatever you need we are here for you. It was so different than the ski world I was in. They trusted and believed in me. It was the first time someone said ‘we’d love to have you,’” Purvis noted, admitting, “They carried me through the first few years. I didn’t know anything about avalanches.”

Her non-fiction adventure has all the avalanche missions you could want, a helpful guide of sorts.

“I thought dog training was pretty simplistic until I read the book. The way scent moved. I wouldn’t have



known that. There is a complexity to it. Sue mastered that,” Murphy observed

It is also much more. As anyone in the book business will tell you, if you’re writing memoir, you have to give the nitty gritty details. Saving someone from an avalanche—that’s great non-fiction, it’s not a memoir. Memoir is personal.

“After I thought I had submitted a completed manuscript, my agent made me go back tell more of the story, reflecting back from different people’s perspective and the lessons I learned,” Purvis explained.

It took four more months of writing before Purvis got the right amount of detail. Her hard cover published last fall and the paperback comes out this fall. Her year was a whirlwind of book stores, mountaineering shops, film festivals, and speaking at author’s conferences.

Taking those last few months paid off in emotional connection with her audience. Mostly men and a few women stay late, tears in their eyes, to talk to her about their own feelings of being one of the lost.

Through the 10 years of writing, and rewriting, Purvis continued to teach and still teaches Wilderness Medicine and AIARE Avalanche courses through her outdoor education company, Crested Butte Outdoors.

She is still, at heart, like everyone in search and rescue—just trying to help out in tough situations. Even when it comes down to being an author.

“I’m here to share my story so other people won’t get lost or buried in their own metaphorical avalanche. I want to help so that people don’t get buried like I did.” Purvis explained. ●

Christine Hensleigh is an outdoors writer in Northwest Montana. Her online publication about the lore and history of Glacier Park and the surrounding towns is glaciergazette.com



PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 108TH CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

House of Representatives

PAYING TRIBUTE TO SUE PURVIS AND TASHA THE SEARCH DOG – HON. SCOTT McINNIS
(Extensions of Remarks - June 19, 2003)

HON. SCOTT McINNIS
OF COLORADO
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
June 19, 2003

Mr. Speaker, I would like to pay tribute today to a woman and her dog who willingly give their time to provide assistance to others. Sue Purvis and her search dog Tasha of Crested Butte, Colorado volunteer to help locate victims of avalanches. In doing so, they help bring closure to victims' families and perform a public service to their community.

During one week in March of this year, Sue and Tasha were called to the scene of two avalanches. The first trapped a 33-year-old man who had been caught in a slide while snowmobiling. Some 30 rescuers searched unsuccessfully for several hours before calling in Sue and Tasha. Together, working with another canine search team, they found the man's body within half an hour.

A few days later, the pair received a call involving another snowmobiler. This time, the victim triggered a massive slide 10-feet deep and several hundred feet wide. The slide packed so much power that the debris field was 20 feet deep and contained chunks of snow and ice the size of a van. Despite working by themselves, Sue and Tasha found the man's body buried in six feet of snow about an hour later.

Mr. Speaker, when Sue and Tasha venture off into the Colorado backcountry to search for victims, they often enter very unstable and dangerous snow conditions. Still, they do so willingly to help bring closure to the victim's families as quickly as possible. That unselfish spirit of neighbor-helping-neighbor is what helped make this country great, and I am truly honored to have the opportunity to honor Sue and her amazing search dog Tasha here before this body of Congress today.