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## Author Susan Purvis Finds Herself With a Dog, Writing and *Go Find*

Teague Bohlen | October 21, 2019

Susan Purvis, author and owner of Crested Butte Outdoors International, might live in Montana these days, but she has what might be the quintessential Colorado story: a life in the mountains, a love of dogs, some survivalist training, and a devotion to the outdoors. That's Mile High living. And Purvis talks about all of it — plus the art of motivation and inspiration — in her new memoir, *Go Find: My Journey to Find the Lost - and Myself*.

We spoke with Purvis on the occasion of her return to Colorado — specifically to read and sign her book at the Boulder Book Store on Wednesday, October 23 — about her experiences at altitude, about her black Lab, Tasha, about life on skis, and how serving the public good can be one of life's greatest gifts.

**Westword:** *You're coming to the Boulder Book Store to discuss your book Go Find. What's your favorite thing about doing readings like these and telling your stories?*

**Purvis:** I love connecting with people in the audience with the goal to motivate and inspire. My story is about me, a 33-year-old outsider trying to break into the macho mountain ski community with the sole purpose of training my rebellious black Lab pup, Tasha, to save lives in the high country of Colorado. I didn't know shit about avalanches, search and rescue, training a dog or navigating the world of small-town politics.

With over eighty book events under my belt now, I've had both men and women stick around after my presentations with tears in their eyes. "Why are you crying?" I'd ask. They express their deepest feelings to me. One of the biggest gifts of my life is to touch the hearts of others.

*Tell us a little about Tasha. Everyone in Denver loves a good dog story.*

Something was missing in my life. I had just gotten married, but I still had a void in my heart. Instead of having babies, I got a puppy. One Sunday when I lived in Gunnison, I got out of bed, jumped on my bicycle, grabbed the *Denver Post* and riffled through the "Pets for Sale" section. I was between shifts from work in the Dominican Republic, and I knew if I didn't get a dog on that day, life would pass me by and I'd never have the chance to save lives. I found the only litter available for adoption. I hopped in my truck, drove six hours to Denver and bought Tasha on the spot.

I called her "black dog" most of the time. Tasha was a stubborn, independent thinking, overeating black lab who frequently found herself in trouble. In her adolescent years, Tasha lacked discipline, was easily distracted, and shared her owner's free spirit, which held back her progress. She rebelled against me and

the rigorous training regime and strict diet I placed on her. But she was exactly what I needed and, surprisingly, a lot like me. I call Tasha my mini-me.

*So what made Tasha a good partner in mountain rescues?*

Tasha, although naughty, was a free-roaming pup, which made her a great searcher. Her work ethic was impeccable as I gave her freedom to discover her way. When I gave her the command "GO FIND," she found her prey. She never left anyone behind. She proved herself over and over working missions in avalanche, water and wilderness search. She dabbled in human remains detection and solved crimes for law enforcement. She sought out a woman who was shot, chopped, burned and buried.

Besides humans, she found unexpected successes: she brought home a \$2,000 revolver in a leather case, sunglasses, wads of money...and ate piles of poo left behind by hikers in the woods.

*Talk a little about how you got your start in survival work here in Colorado. How did that initial event lead to a full career?*

My survival work started after college. I thought I'd challenge myself and learn how to live off the land, so I went to work for a survival school that ran 21-day trips in southern Idaho and Arizona. I'd work 21 days, then travel around the world until my money ran out, then I'd go back and work another survival trip. I did this for two years. Looking back, this was one of the most rewarding times of my life. Living off the land and traveling with a bed roll on my back gave me confidence and competence to do just about anything. I traveled the world on bike, by plane, dug-out canoe, on foot to the highest, coldest and hottest places on Earth.

Eventually, I decided to work as a geologist and make some real money. That's when I met my husband and we decided to run an international gold exploration company in the Dominican Republic. In a way, it was a lot like working survival trips: some boss person gives us a map, compass, some food. Our task was to go figure out where to go and find a pot of gold.

Once I bought Tasha, I transitioned into ski patrolling, working at an urgent-care ski clinic and volunteering for search and rescue. I would spend eleven winters working at the ski clinic. That's where I learned about wilderness medicine, and after my first year in Crested Butte, I started my outdoor educational company, Crested Butte Outdoors International. I teach everyone from the secret service, to the FBI, to sherpas, to elite mountain search-and-rescue teams. Even housewives.

*What have been some of the most rewarding experiences you've had in terms of rescue?*

Tasha rescued me from my own avalanche. My metaphorical avalanche, of course.

But rewards? I would say it's been the mentors and people I met along my journey to find the lost. Tasha was unforgettable. I took her everywhere: to class at the college, the supermarket (she sat in the cart), to the clinic, to restaurants, on airplanes. (We got upgraded often.) Everyone remembers her because she had personality and was a nice, cool dog.

*And what are some of the stories people have told about you training them, and how they've been able to help people as a result of your lessons?*

Full-circle moment happened last month while on book tour in Colorado. Danuru Sherpa lives in Golden, Colorado, with his three kids and wife. He invited me over for tea after I spoke at [Barnes and Noble] book-signing event. I hadn't seen him since the last Sherpa high-altitude medical courses I taught, in 2007 in Phortse, Nepal. Danuru is memorable and my all-time favorite Sherpa. He is strong, tall and someone you'd want on your trip if you are climbing Everest. I sat with him and his brother in his Golden apartment. Between the two of them, they've climbed Everest forty-plus times. Luckily, I had my computer with me and a Nepal PowerPoint presentation. I pulled it out, and the two brothers and his family reminisced together in Sherpa, then told me which students had been killed and what the survivors are doing. I even had a photo of his parents hiking up the mountainside with supplies balanced on their heads. Their summer home sat at 15,000 feet. Danuru had attended three of my five courses, is a lead guide, demands competitive wages, lives in America and has saved many lives. He is one of a select few Sherpas who are on the Mt. Everest Rescue Team.

*It's such a Colorado story—the outdoors, skiing, the mountains, the backcountry, the love of dogs and how important dogs can be to us. Can you talk a little bit about what Colorado has meant to you throughout the years?*

I am grateful and blessed that I lived in Colorado from 1991-2007. I lived in Genesee, on the hill by the spaceship house, worked at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal and at the 24th floor of the Arco building in downtown Denver. I moved to Gunnison, Crested Butte and then Boulder.

With my K-9 search-and-rescue work, I traveled the state to train Tasha and then I deployed to many mountain ranges to look for the lost. Initially, Colorado gave me an opportunity to work as a professional geologist, something I couldn't do in Montana. Colorado gave me courage and confidence to pursue my purpose and passion to training Tasha. I saw a need that had to be filled. I had found my town, my ski mountain, and people who are creative, life-affirming and share the same gusto for life as I had. Outdoor pursuits were just as important that having a full-time job. This mattered to me.

*Any thoughts to moving back to Colorado sometime?*

Part of me lives in northern Michigan on the shores of Lake Superior, part of me lives in the high alpine in Crested Butte, and now, some of me resides in the cedar-hemlock forests where grizzly bears, giant mountain lions and wolves are free. I am considering moving back. But where? Monthly, I pull out the pros versus cons of moving back to Colorado. What wins? At the moment, the convenience of Glacier International Airport and the lack of people in Montana. Only time will tell.