

# **“Mountain” Mike McKay Tribute:**

## **Hundreds Attend Service for Avalanche Victim**

*By Eileen Marek, correspondent*

It was an incredible outpouring of love for an unusual young man. The Serrano High School gymnasium was packed—the bleachers were full, and every chair on the main floor was taken. Emergency personnel, fire fighters from all over Southern California, Forest Service units, Mountain High Ski Patrollers, life guards from Southern California’s beach cities, leaders of the local soccer organization, educators, family and friends were gathered to share their most precious memories of a short life well-lived, one filled with accomplishments and excitement.

There were two huge screens set up near the stage, showing slide presentations of Mike’s life. Long tables around the room were filled with photos, from the time Mike was a baby to his most recent exploits on the slopes, and including his years of playing soccer, his bike races, surfing, and of course, his amazing performances on skis and snowboarding. On the rear of the stage were his favorite skis and snowboard, and his racing colors had been sewn into a colorful quilt that hung from the wall. Flowers lined the front of the platform, another testament to the respect the community had for a young man too soon gone from our midst.

Among those paying tribute was Deputy Superintendent of Schools Eric Johnston, a retired ski patrol supervisor who has been an educator for 30 years, 20 of them at Snowline. “Mike was the ‘poster boy’ for what we wanted our young people to be like,” he said. “His strong work ethic for each of his employers was an inspiration. We’ll always be proud of what Mike accomplished.” Then Johnston added a word of advice: “When you go home, say ‘I love you’ to those you hold dear.” Obviously he referred to the fact that none of us knows just how much time we have left.

The invocation was given by Mike Fell, who then read a portion of Scripture from Ecclesiastes 3, requested by Mike’s mother Laura: “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . .”

“Those are the words of King Solomon,” Fell noted, “the wisest man who ever lived. There was a popular song in the 60s, ‘Turn, turn, turn,’ that referred to these words.” He also quoted from the book of John, chapter 14:1-3: “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God; believe also in Me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”

Mike’s dad Vincent then spoke of his son and how he lived life to the fullest. Rather than allowing the service to cause everyone to weep (though many were dabbing their eyes), McKay stressed: “The intent here is to express joy . . .” Joy for a life filled with success and happiness.

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Jeff Berg, who introduced the various speakers, is a battalion chief with the Vista Fire Department in San Diego County. He had his own tribute: “Mike was my friend. He embodied what we think of—what we hope for—when we think of a friend. He had a gift for making the people around him feel loved. He was a loving son, a dedicated brother, and he lives on through us. His influence lives on through us. He wanted to help people. It’s not that we just admired Mike. We all wanted to be Mike! We hoped our daughters would marry Mike!” (Crowd laughter.)

Mike Tenove then spoke about the need to let children fulfill their destiny. Mike was an adventurous kid who had to try everything, even the sometimes reckless stunts he pulled off in sports. “You have to let your children go,” Tenove said. “Look around you at the number of people Mike affected.” Then Tenove thanked Mike’s parents for having such a wonderful son.

Another friend, Pat Gabler, spoke next. “As a firefighter you tend to see a lot of the bad things in life, but you look at Mike and you see the good. There’s no way he’s going to disappear from our lives.”

Charlie Johnson of the American Youth Soccer Organization praised Mike’s example for others to emulate. “I enjoyed watching Mike develop into a young man,” (Mike played the game for 12 years, and then played for Serrano High.) “We’re not rich because of what we have or who we are or where we’re going. We’re rich because of who is beside us,” he concluded.

Madison Kendrick of National University of San Diego, where Mike was pursuing a Master’s Degree in psychology, with the goal of helping children as a school psychologist, then spoke of Mike’s dedication and determination to make a difference. He was followed by Mike’s cycling buddy Greg Nelson and his friends from the Ski Patrol, Ramon Baugio and Eric Zakar.

“Anyone who knows Mike knows he absorbed life like a sponge,” one of them said.

Three poems that illustrated what Mike was all about were read by Ramon, Eric and Mike’s sister Hannah. Even one of the tough ski patrolmen was wiping his eyes. Another one said, “Mike came into a room and infected that room with his smile.”

His friend “Bub,” another member of the Ski Patrol who was with Mike the morning he died, described Mike’s last day and their excited preparations for going skiing on the new powder on the mountain. He couldn’t quite finish. It was too emotional.

Twenty of Mike’s friends from the State Ocean Lifeguard Academy, where he graduated in May of 2007 and subsequently was named Rookie of the Year for the Solana Beach Lifeguards last summer, then took the stage. Their spokesman, Jason Shook, praised Mike’s coolness in any situation. “Mike didn’t crack under pressure. He was rock solid. Mike, you’ve set the bar high, and your legacy will continue.” The solemn group—with at least one wiping away a few tears during the presentation—brightened as others spoke of their memories of Mike.

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A Mercy Air spokesman named Mike described McKay: “He was an ‘old soul,’ older than his years.” As he described all that Mike was able to accomplish in his brief turn at life, it seems that he must truly have been older in certain ways.

Seven of Mike’s friends, including Tommy Imsand, then took turns describing the Mike they knew so well. “He loved the outdoors,” one said. “So anytime you’re out there, think of him.” Mike Fell then spoke of Mike’s legacy—a scholarship fund established at Desert Community Bank will help perpetuate Mike’s life as a vital member of the community, dedicated to helping students and rescuing swimmers and skiers in trouble. Rose Burcher at the Wrightwood branch of the bank will be happy to help those who wish to contribute to the scholarship fund. Further, Mike continues to give to others through the organ transplant programs.

The loss of Mike in an avalanche is tragic, not only for his family, but to a large number of people in the local community and also in the areas where he worked and studied.

Mike was born in Apple Valley on October 30, 1984, and moved with his family to the mountains when he was three. It wasn’t long before he was on skis. He developed into an acrobatic alpine and telemark skier, a daredevil who enjoyed performing trick maneuvers in the air. Though he was gifted in almost every sport—cycling, soccer, surfing, rock climbing—skiing and snowboarding proved to be his forte.

He became a member of Wrightwood’s Ski Patrol while still in high school, and eventually, at the age of 22, became Ski Patrol Director at Mountain High, the youngest at that post of any major ski resort in the United States. Last year he tried the slopes at ski resorts in Japan, and recently completed a trip to ski resorts in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia with a group of his roommates from his earlier college days.

Mike is survived by his mother and father, Vince and Laura McKay of Wrightwood, sister Hannah McKay of Santa Barbara, grandparents David and Sheryl Ogilvie of Gig Harbor, Washington, Uncle and Aunt Paul and Sue Ogilvie and family of Poulsbo, Washington, girlfriend Tiffanie Fink of Pacific Beach, CA, Aunt and Uncle Linda and Bob Kelly of Vancouver, Washington, Uncle David McKay of Bremerton, Washington, Uncle and Aunt Gary and Connie Andrews of Glendora, CA, cousins and extended family members.

Mike’s dog Daisy, a gentle, golden-colored friend to everybody (just like her master), behaved beautifully during the service, going to various people in the audience (as far as her leash would reach) to get a pat on the head.

Mike’s life was too brief a candle, extinguished too soon. But the light he gave so freely to everyone he met will continue to guide those he touched, in this, his own special corner of the world.