



Grieving dad takes aim at Calif. ski safety

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Jessica Gregorie probably had no sense of real danger when she set out to snowboard on advanced terrain at Alpine Meadows ski resort during the winter of 2006.

After all, she'd been snowboarding or skiing since she was a small child, was not a risk-taker and had previously visited the resort, family members said.

But danger found her that February day as she and her boyfriend hiked across the High Beaver Traverse on their way to ride some powder bowls at one of Alpine's "adventure zones."



Jessica Gregorie at Alpine Meadows.

Gregorie, 24, slipped on some ice, shot down a precipitous slope and slid over a cliff, rebounding off jagged rocks.

"The trauma surgeon told me her injuries were similar to what he would see in a high-speed automobile accident," said her father, Dan Gregorie.

Gregorie, a Maine physician, was flying to California to join his only child for a skiing visit when he learned she was in a Reno trauma ward with critical injuries.

She died.

"It really was a profound, profound loss for us," said Gregorie, 58. "It's a feeling you can't describe and it never goes away."

Grief morphed into purpose. In November, Gregorie announced the formation of a nonprofit group, the California Ski and Snowboard Safety Organization, with the purpose of improving

safety at the state's 23 ski resorts.

He sees problems. He sees them at Alpine, where he said there was inadequate signage to warn his daughter the High Beaver Traverse would take her to an extremely hazardous area just outside the resort's boundaries.

"She had no sense of the kind of danger she was being subjected to," Gregorie said. "She and her boyfriend and the vast majority of people that ski up there have no idea they are being subjected to these kind of risks."

Gregorie contends similar problems exist at other ski resorts across California, where he said there is a "high degree of variability" regarding signage and other safety standards.

"Everybody does it their own way," he said.

Unlike most skiing states, including Nevada, California has no skiing safety statute. It lacks uniform safety standards and the industry enjoys unusually strong legal liability protections, Gregorie said.

"It's virtually impossible for people injured in ski accidents in California to successfully sue," Gregorie said.

Through his organization, Gregorie said he hopes to work with California's ski industry to adopt uniform safety standards, either through voluntary changes or legislation.

Representatives at Alpine Meadows, which has changed ownership since the accident that killed Jessica Gregorie, had no comment on the Feb. 5, 2006 event.

Bob Roberts, executive director of the California Ski Industry Association, said safety is and has always been a top priority for the state's ski industry. He has met with Gregorie and discussed his concerns with him.

"We work very hard on safety. It's a big deal," Roberts said.

Eighty percent of skiers and snowboarders, Roberts said, stick to easy and intermediate terrain where accidents like the one that claimed Jessica Gregorie seldom occur.

"It's the (expert runs) and extreme regions where the critical issues come into play," Roberts said.

Those areas are also characterized by high winds and other conditions that could make maintenance of signs and barriers and similar safety measures advocated by Gregorie's group problematic, Roberts said.

Still, he said, the industry is willing to consider some changes.

“We’re going to talk with him about what we could do better,” he said.

Another factor in the issue is the increasing desire by outdoor enthusiasts for an on-the-edge experience.

“It’s amazing the excitement risk has generated, particularly with young people,” Roberts said. “There are risks and they are inherent risks.”

Gregorie said he understands that reality.

“Skiing is inherently a dangerous sport, no question about it,” Gregorie said. “But there’s no question we can do a substantial amount more in terms of protecting skiers.”

It’s all part of an effort to have the tragedy of his daughter’s death make a difference in the safety of others, he said.

“This led me to recognize there are real opportunities to improve safety in the ski industry, particularly the ski industry in California,” Gregorie said. “Hopefully we can prevent other young people from losing their lives.”