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Unthinkable Tragedy from One Unthinkable Moment

On a bright, crisp winter day in February 2005, my decision to snowboard too fast tragically killed Heather Donahue. In an instant, my actions left a husband without his wife, parents without their daughter and a sister without her soul mate. Heather Donahue's death irrevocably changed the lives of the people who loved her as well as my life and the lives of the people who care for me. Everyday I struggle to cope with overwhelming remorse. Once I reveled in the joy of a fast ride, but I now realize the razor-thin line that separates pure exhilaration from tragedy. I have learned the importance of snowboarding responsibly *every second of every ride*.

All deaths are tragic, but Heather Donahue's was particularly heartbreaking because her life had been one of purpose and meaning. She was just 29 years old and had grown up in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. Heather had chosen to become a veterinarian because of her love of animals. She received her undergraduate degree from Colgate University and completed her graduate studies at Colorado State University-College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences. In 2004, she returned to Massachusetts for an internship in Emergency Medicine at Tufts University. Heather was a leader of several organizations devoted to the care of animals. She was in Jackson, Wyoming with her husband and family on a ski vacation when, tragically, my irresponsibility in straight lining in Laramie Bowl destroyed the life of this benevolent woman.

When I dropped into Laramie Bowl that day I started making turns at the top, speed checking to test the snow just as any reasonable rider would do. I moved to the side of Laramie and started to open it up, gaining speed at an astonishing rate. I had ridden in similar conditions and felt confident about being in control, but my judgment this day was very wrong. As I sped down the run, I was going much too fast. Based on simulation results, a reconstruction specialist determined that I was likely traveling about 65 mph and that there was a 95 percent probability that I was going at least 49 mph at the time of the collision¹. (Other skiers and riders on the slope were traveling at an average speed of about 18 mph based on the study.¹) At this speed, I posed a hazard to everyone on the slope including myself.

I tried to turn to avoid crashing into Heather but lost my edge to the variable surface and started to slide uncontrollably. I slammed into Heather with devastating force. She suffered fatal injuries and died after being airlifted to Idaho Falls from injuries that I caused when I collided with her.

After a thorough investigation of the day's events, I was charged with Criminally Negligent Homicide, punishable by up to a year in jail and heavy fines. I was prosecuted, fined heavily, and

served time in jail in Jackson, Wyoming. Because I was 16 at the time of the accident, my parents were involved in significant civil litigation; however, no penalty imposed on my parents or on me matches the price paid by Heather and her family.

The consequence of my poor judgment and immature behavior has affected every aspect of my life. When I was informed that Heather had died, I started to tremble. I could find no words to express my anguish. The guilt that is now my constant companion is a most unrelenting emotion.

Snowboarding fast is a dangerous choice on any slope, whether crowded or not. According to National Ski Areas Association (NSAA) statistics for the past ten years, about 37 people have died skiing/snowboarding per year on average². A closer look at NSAA statistics on fatalities for the past five years beginning with the 2002/2003 ski season and ending with 2006/2007 shows a high of 45 fatalities in 2004/2005, and a low of 22 for 2006/2007². (The 45 fatalities in 2004/2005 coincide with the timeframe when my irresponsible actions caused Heather's death.) An alarming number of the reported fatalities involved males in their late teens to late 30s, who were above-average skiers/snowboarders traveling at high rates of speed on the margins of well-groomed intermediate trails³. Their deaths were considered "self-inflicted," which means losing control and hitting an immovable object, most commonly a tree. In other cases such as mine, innocent bystanders became victims in these tragedies. A large-scale study in France indicates that not only are collisions between people on the slopes increasing but also 10 percent of the overall injuries on the slopes are caused by collisions between people⁴. Most importantly, as my horrifying experience shows, riding fast and out of control can either kill or cause serious injuries (paraplegics, serious head and other serious injuries). According to the NSAA, serious injuries have occurred at the rate of about 43.7 per year for the past 10 years with 40 occurring during the 2006-2007 ski season.² Regarding lesser injuries, research shows that an estimated 100,000 to 140,000 injuries require treatment in an emergency room each year⁵. Excluded from this number are up to 40 percent of injuries that occur on the mountain and go unreported⁶.

To assume something like this could never happen to you is making the same bad judgment call that I made. Reckless speed on the slopes creates not only a personal risk, but a risk to others trying to enjoy the sport we all adore. The mountain is a place of beauty and peace to be shared by everyone. Recklessness when skiing and snowboarding cannot be tolerated as it jeopardizes the lives of so many others. I put my search for excitement above my value for safety causing the death of Heather Donahue. It was truly a selfish decision for me to make.

Sitting on the lift, watching others ski fast and out of control, now brews a storm of pain and anger inside me. I know the risks and the price that must be paid when mistakes happen. Each year skiers and snowboarders die or suffer tragic injuries on the slopes due to high-speed collisions. What are we thinking when we take risks for a thrill? Was the excitement of speed worth the life of

Heather Donahue? *Absolutely not!* Is reckless riding worth risking human lives? Would you want to serve time in jail because you chose to ski or snowboard too fast, lost control, and injured or even killed someone?

Jail is the easy part. But even in jail you cannot put down the guilt or quiet the voice in your head that tells you relentlessly: “This is your fault! You created all of this devastation!” The overwhelming remorse is a mind-numbing endless cycle that I cannot escape. I am resigned to live with this remorse for the rest of my life.

The allure of the mountains drew me in, winter after winter since the age of five. If you are like me, you fancy wide open bowls, perfectly pitched corduroy, and massive terrain parks. You know the deep rumble of an early morning avalanche bombing and the jet-like roar of a snow machine. We tend to take for granted life’s miracles, the blessing to ski all day, walk off the hill, sit down to a hot meal, and do the same thing again the next day. If I could have you remember one thing, then I would beg you to remember the tragic death of Heather Donahue. Remember her when you are getting off the chair, take a moment to reflect when strapping in or while snapping a quick picture of nature’s magnificence. But, please, *remember*.

Remember to always ski and ride in control, setting the example for others. Never forget that you are responsible for those around you, give them space and keep them safe. I speak from my heart when I say, bad things do happen out on the snow if you make poor decisions. You could end up like me: a 19-year old haunted by a death that did not have to occur. Everyday I live with the fact that my life goes on, but Heather Donahue’s life is over. There are no time outs from guilt, any breaks or simple fixes. Next time you are on the snow, revel in the glory of the sport, but remember the consequences, remember Heather Donahue and remember me. Ride smart, stay in control, respect others, and do not ever think this cannot happen to you!

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