



Bonded by Miles

When tragedy strikes, a running group discovers what it's made of

→ BY LISA MARSHALL

Four miles into a rugged, 10-mile trail run in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, I noticed our footfalls had fallen perfectly in sync. The rhythmic drumming of soles on wet gravel served as our soundtrack as David Laurienti and I lay bare our life stories, the way runners often do when coursing adrenaline combines with weary muscles, and there are miles and miles to go.

He was eyeing his second marathon. He was so proud of his daughter, Emma, a 13-year-old cross-country star, and loved watching

his 7-year-old-son, Marlon, at swim practice. He was also plotting an anniversary getaway—maybe to Catalina Island—with his wife, Liesl, whom he met in college and married young and was still crazy about.

I had just qualified for the New York City Marathon. I was agonizing over whether to put my dad into an Alzheimer's care facility. I was glad my daughter was becoming friends with David's through cross country. Maybe our families could get together some time for dinner.

I stepped off the trail to tie my shoe and watched his blue shirt and red bandana disappear along the aspen-framed singletrack ahead. When I breathlessly caught up, we picked up where we had left off, strengthening our bond as each switchback rolled by. Half our group had ventured ahead, and a cluster of others trailed behind—all immersed in their own intimate, moving dialogues.

As Shelley, a founding member of our Sunday morning running group, The Asylum, would later put it: "We share lots of short, interrupted stories as we ebb and flow along the trails, but we end up knowing each other deeper and faster than we would through any dinner conversation."

David had first joined our crew about 10 months earlier. For more than a decade, roughly a dozen of us, from early 30s to early 60s, had been meeting at mountain trailheads near our hometown of Estes Park, Colorado, at 8 a.m. every Sunday morning—rain, wind, snow or shine. Occasionally, a newcomer would drop in. But few came back. David was different.

He showed up on a sweltering June morning in 2012 to join us for one of the hardest runs we do all year—a 13-mile, backwoods slog with roughly 2,000 feet of elevation gain. He was short and stocky, with the tan, slightly weathered face of a mountaineer and the chiseled limbs of a runner. His neatly cropped, jet black hair framed dark eyes etched with creases from a smile so wide it seemed almost like a caricature. He was not shy, or arrogant, just genuinely, disarmingly

Estes Park, Colorado's The Asylum running group. David Laurienti is in the blue shirt at far left.

COURTESY JENNIFER TAYLOR

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friendly. He seemed too good to be true.

As we climbed the dusty trail, the sun beating down on us, I could hear an impossibly high-pitched guffaw echoing through the treetops from somewhere out ahead. It was the first time I heard David's laugh. I couldn't help but laugh, too. In the coming months, he showed up for most runs, skipping only those that would conflict with one of the kids' meets, or a family backpacking trip with Liesl.

On one Sunday morning in December, when the temperatures dipped to nine below zero, he was one of only six of us to brave the cold. As we ran an ice-coated trail shrouded in shadows, frost crystals clung to his stubble and coated his

long eyelashes. "Gawd, I love this," he beamed, his breath visible, as he set a brisk pace.

On our last run together that March morning in 2013, the sky was the kind of Technicolor blue that hurts your eyes. Melting snow dampened the trail. The smell of charred aspen engulfed us as we climbed through a towering grove of black sticks on a white blanket—remnants of a recent forest fire. David stopped to behold the stark beauty, looking back to make sure I was still close behind.

When we rallied with the group at a frozen lake coated in snow, he playfully slid along the surface, then lay down flat on his back, arms above his head, to take in the towering cirque. I looked on with gratitude, wondering why he hadn't joined us years earlier. As we turned to head down the trail I looked back. The snow angel he had made was already melting.

I learned of David's death eight days later, in an email from a fellow Asylum member. The subject line read simply: "We have lost one of us."

He'd been pursuing his other passion, mountaineering, when a late-spring storm rolled in, blanketing the remote ridge he and his climbing partner were ascending in snow.

As they tried to descend, an avalanche ripped them off the mountain. They built a makeshift snow shelter and huddled together through the night. His climbing partner survived, with serious injuries. David did not. He was 43.

I closed my laptop with a trembling hand and did what I always do when faced with a problem I can't solve. I went for a run. But the usually clarifying movement yielded only a raw, visceral ache. I had never had a friend die before.

I made a lasagna for his grieving family. I donated to a college fund for his children. I cried, and then wondered if I was crying too much. After all, I'd really only known him a few months.

On the Sunday after his death, I drove to our running group's meeting place early. I sat in the car, a light snow falling. I wondered if I'd be the only one to show.

But soon they began to arrive, one by one, clad in running tights and clutching water bottles. I silently embraced each one, holding on tighter and longer than ever before. Then off we went, keeping it slow and sticking close together, our footfalls perfectly in sync. **TR**

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CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: MARKUS BERGER, COURTESY JENNY JUREK, FRANK JANSEN



Elevation in feet of the Matterhorn, one of the iconic European mountains—along with Mont Blanc and Mount Elbrus—featured in the second film of Kilian Jornet's *Summits of My Life Project, Déjame Vivir (Let Me Live)*, which premiered on May 19 in Barcelona, Spain. The Basque runner and mountaineer broke Bruno Brunod's 1995 speed record on the Matterhorn, climbing the 8,111 vertical feet to the summit and then back down in 2 hours 52 minutes 2 seconds. Jornet also plans record attempts on Aconcagua in Argentina and Mount Everest in Nepal, among others.

6



Number of days Scott Jurek, 40, of Boulder, Colorado, spent hiking his latest section of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). Jurek traveled to Warner Springs, California, on May 1 with his wife, Jenny, to complete another 100 miles (in addition to the 110 miles the pair bagged last year) of the 2,660-mile trail. Jurek became interested in the PCT when he helped crew the Washington portion during David Horton's 2005 PCT record attempt. "I've tried to become less rigid with my training recently," says Jurek, who won the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run seven consecutive times from 1999 to 2005. He currently holds the United States 24-hour distance record (on all surfaces) of 165.7 miles.

43



Age of David Johnston who, in February, set the record for the 350-mile Iditarod Trail Invitational footrace in a time of 4 days 1 hour 38 minutes. He bested the previous record—which had been untouched for nine years—by over 13 hours. Johnston of Willow, Alaska, who ran 80 or more miles a week in preparation for the race, hauled a sled with 26 pounds of gear and food (including a down sleeping bag and several Budweisers) during his record performance. "It's going to hurt regardless, so you either push through it or don't do the race in the first place," says Johnston.



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