

MICHAEL ANTHONY BEARZI

Profile of a climber. 1953–2002

DIETER KLOSE



Mike Bearzi during his last expedition, with Ngozumpa Kang II (right), and Gyachung Kang (left). Bruce Miller

Mike died in the mountains and is buried by the snows. It seems so sadly appropriate, doing what he loved, ending there. The odd thing is that he had stood on a glorious summit shortly beforehand, something he hadn't done for 22 years.

A couple of months before he left on his last Himalayan trip, I asked Mike if I could write a profile on him. The take would be about a world-class alpinist who just doesn't get to summits. Being a writer, he appreciated the unique angle and agreed. I was too late in getting the article out; now it's an obituary. Yet, somehow that same take fairly describes my closest friend.

Mike and I mentored each other in the late 1970s, suffering on Colorado winter climbs mostly. We soon took our faith northward, opening routes in the Arrigetch region of the Brooks Range. Later we climbed new routes on Devil's Thumb and Mt. Burkett in the Coast Range of Alaska. Mike continued his annual pilgrimages to the great ranges of the world with a passion. Yet, although he virtually devoted his life to climbing, it was there in Alaska, in 1980, that he would stand on his last major summit until the day of his death. It surely wasn't a lack of ability or commitment on his part. Fate simply didn't have summits in Mike's book, which is what

makes him an anomaly among the world's best climbers: a true "great," but not one you'd see in the headlines. He would even joke about it, which to me underlined his complete acceptance of how life dishes it out on its own terms.

Most folks, after hearing Mike's climbing vitae, would say he had bad luck. Not so: he had no luck at all—it simply didn't exist. Describing his youth, he told me, "If there were a dog turd on a crowded sidewalk, I'd be the one to step in it." At a young age he learned to take what fate dealt him, without chagrin, yet with a vast sense of humor and great integrity. This applied to his alpinism acutely.

Climbing wasn't everything for Mike, but his continual pursuit of the perfect climb dictated how he would live his life. He kept things simple, not buying anything he didn't absolutely need, living a Spartan life. Almost every expedition he undertook would squeeze the last bills from his wallet. Afterward he'd work just long enough to pay for the next one, and come back penniless again. I'm not talking about a youth searching; Mike was 49 and knew exactly what he wanted.

A big part of his summitless thing was that his goals were so high and his ethics so pure. He'd never choose the easy way up, claiming, "That's like kissing your sister." In 1980, while perusing his photos of Devils Thumb, Mike spied a wild direttissima on its heinous 6,500-foot northwest wall. Recognizing it as a futuristic route, he threw himself at it on four expeditions, virtually possessed. I shared one of those trips with him, and watching him comfortably free-solo hard technical terrain 3,000 feet up convinced me he was a master with great promise. Yet the weather or conditions on that fickle face eluded him every time. Although nine other parties have tried as well, it remains unclimbed.

In 1985 Mike almost pulled a summit from fate's grasp. Darkness and an ailing partner stopped them two pitches shy of the top on what would have been the first alpine-style ascent of the Desmason Route on the south face of Chacaraju, in Peru.

On Cerro Torre, Mike and Eric Winkelman made the first free ascent by its remote west face. While belaying on the final pitch, Mike made the decision to retreat in the stormy tempest just as Eric was pulling onto the top; again, Mike got no summit. Two years later they went back, in the Patagonian winter, to try a new route on the west side, but vicious storms hammered them. Numerous climbs before and afterward simply would not see him on a summit; it eventually became weird.

During those first dozen expeditions his purist standards dictated having no radio, no support—just him and his partner, going boldly. He figured having a radio would give a false sense of security, and wanted instead to rely simply on his own chops. As an intellectual he would scrutinize every aspect of the task at hand and dissect it scientifically, then launch at the thing with a calm confidence.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, he and Bill Meyers developed several bold and boltless, from-the-ground-up, mixed climbs in Rocky Mountain National Park, Mike's favorite winter playground. To join Mike on those wintry forays, Eric Winkelman warned, "You better bring your goggles. He doesn't let the weather spoil the day." His fascination with mixed climbing as a pursuit in itself had him inventing the M-rating system, saying jokingly that the "M" stood for Mike.

On his three trips to the north face of Everest he went with just a tiny group, going alpine style and without oxygen. Mike wanted it by fair means, or not at all. He spent many days and nights at great altitudes. Finding that he performed quite well at such extremes, he described

feeling a profound sense of peace and contentment there. But bad weather followed him on all his Himalayan endeavors of the 1990s: Shisha Pangma, Gyachung Kang, K2, Everest. He climbed for the love of it, or more specifically, it was his calling and he answered it with quiet devotion, eschewing the often arrogant dogma of the modern-day commercial alpinist. He lived for the love of pure ascent, of being there, summit or not.

So too was his carpentry, going about it as a mathematician in alpine style: with a scant set of tools he would create masterpieces relying simply on his own finesse and intellect. Colorado is graced with hundreds, if not thousands, of wooden testimonies to this man of superb talent. All of his creations, be they in hidden alpine valleys or tucked away in private homes, are quiet and enduring legacies that speak for themselves.

But it isn't his climbing or career that make the remarkable man I remember. He was a success as a purists' purist, with a life-focus like no one I've ever known. Mike knew what mattered and was true to himself. After dropping out of high school and studying in an ashram in India, he would read no further philosophy, being firm within his own. And yet he had the intellect of a scholar, and could muse on any subject. He always seemed to know what to say, no matter the dilemma, having an uncanny savvy of the core of things.

His purity extended into his kind of friendship: when I wrecked my back working in Alaska, he just happened to be getting out from another expedition. He eventually escorted me to a hospital in Denver, and drove two hours every day after work for three weeks just to visit and offer solace. Then he nursed me at his home for the next two months, asking nothing in return. He was so hilarious, it seems we laughed about everything under the sun. My pain notwithstanding, those were the funniest months of my life, having Mike and his great sense of humor all to myself.

On May 9, 2002, Mike actually summited a mountain for a change: 25,061-foot Ngozumpa Kang II in the Tibetan Himalaya. On a micro-expedition, he and Bruce Miller had quickly dispatched a new route in alpine style and without oxygen, on a peak above 7,600 meters, a first for Americans. Strangely, while descending on the kind of moderate terrain he was most comfortable on, Mike apparently slipped and fell to his death. This was just a warm-up climb for a new line on Gyachung Kang, the world's fifteenth highest peak according to Mike's detailed studies. Mike was doing what he loved, true to himself as usual: going simply, boldly, and by fair means. But now I often wonder: if he hadn't summited, might he still be around?