



Karen McNeill (left) and Sue Nott

Karen McNeill: A Glitter Girl Retrospective

Written for Grippd Magazine's August 2006 Issue

Several years ago Karen and I helped organize the Canmore Ice Climbing Festival in our home town of Canmore, Alberta. We decided that we needed our own logo to plaster all over the posters and leaflets, and it was out of this that The Glitter Girls were born. Who could have known at the time to what heights this farm girl from rural New Zealand would take this nomenclature.

Born in 1969 in Taihape, Karen showed early on a strong connection to nature, indigenous people, and the empowerment of women. Never a stranger to athletic endeavours, she turned her attention to mountaineering at the age of eighteen, at the same time she began her studies for a teaching degree at the University of Christchurch. Unsatisfied with the lack of waterfall ice and steep alpine terrain in her home country, Karen moved to Canada in 1994 in search of these.

I met Karen shortly after her arrival in Canmore. There were not many women climbing ice at that time and I happened to be one of them. I was struck by Karen's mixture of naivete combined with her driven determination. It was Karen who pointed out to me that I needed to climb with other women in order to find out what I was capable of. At that time she was climbing with other women as much as possible, and all of her later expeditions reflected this choice in gender partners. Karen believed that women were as strong as men and could climb as hard as men. She felt that the ideal environment for females was to learn from, and to climb with, other women. All of her female friends agree that she was the most supportive and encouraging of climbing partners, whether climbing with peers or teaching clinics for Mountain Hardwear and Chicks with Picks.

It is interesting to look back on the seemingly haphazard choices that in retrospect form a lucid and comprehensible pathway. Karen spent several years focusing on her technical skills on rock and ice, but the whole while she planned to take these back into the big mountains that were her first love. After this decision, our relationship with Karen was one of watching her plan expedition after expedition, leaving us for months at a time, and then being greeted by her kiwi accent and a beautiful thoughtful gift upon her return. She would tell you about her most recent foray into the hills, and in the same conversation let you know what her next trip was going to be.

In the midst of all of this, Karen lived in a small cabin several streets from the downtown core with her partner Brad Bennett. Brad did not climb and lived totally separate from Karen's glitter-filled social life. This was good for Karen as it allowed her the freedom she needed with a background stability to return to. In the same pursuit of freedom she became a substitute teacher, at first preferring to work on the Morley reserve, and eventually exclusively teaching the indigenous people that she so closely related to. Once Karen got a taste of expedition life she was terminally smitten. Between the years of 1995 and 2005 she went on 13 of these, 12 of which were organized by her. These expeditions took her all over the world where she reveled in the natural beauty of the planet as well as its divergent cultures.

When Karen left for her last expedition her life had evolved much from her humble beginnings on a sheep farm. She had met the man with whom she would spend the rest of her life, was dearly loved by the children of her school, had accumulated much sparkle jewelry and faux fur garments, and moved to a spacious condo overlooking the limestone face of Chinaman's Peak. She had attained the level of sponsorship needed to pursue her dream of climbing the world's big mountains, and found the perfect partners with which to pursue these dreams.

Karen never returned from this trip. She and Sue Nott disappeared on the Infinite Spur on Alaska's Mount Foraker. She is dearly missed by her partner, family, and many friends who watched this shy, curly-haired woman turn into the outrageously determined Glitter Girl.

Margo Talbot

www.glitter-girls.ca