

Mt. Everest memorial honors US physician assistant

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Eve Girawong, PA-C, died April 25, 2015, when a magnitude 7.9 earthquake in Nepal triggered an avalanche on Mt. Everest. She was above the base camp at about 21,000 ft, supporting a team of climbers from Seattle, Wash.-based Madison Mountaineering when the wall of ice and stone crashed down. "Eve's dead" were the tearful words from Garrett Madison, expedition leader, to team member Randal Ercanbrack near Camp II. Eve, with specialized experience in wilderness and outdoor medicine, was acting as team doctor for the expedition. From those we had the opportunity to speak with, she was a passionate, caring, competent clinician who mothered the group of mountaineers, checking on their condition repeatedly while they were acclimatizing to the altitude over the preceding weeks. We did not know Eve personally, but she was part of our PA professional family (Figure 1).

Two weeks after the 2015 Nepal earthquake, while volunteering with Project Hope at the Manmohan Memorial Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu, we learned that a PA had died on Everest as a result of the earthquake. They began the discussion about how the PA profession should honor her memory. For the month of April 2015, Don and his wife, Kathy, a PA and associate professor at the University of Utah School of Medicine, and another faculty member, Scott Brown, PA-C, were in Nepal with six PA students (Figure 2). This magical elective student clinical rotation incorporated 2 weeks at the Manmohan Memorial Teaching Hospital for inpatient experiences and 2 weeks in the rural Annapurna region to the northwest of the capital of Kathmandu. The rural experience involved trekking to the villages of Kimchee, Ghandruk, and Chhomrong, where students worked with Nepali health assistants, an analogue to the US PA. The students worked in the health post and help conduct health camps arranged by the health assistants'

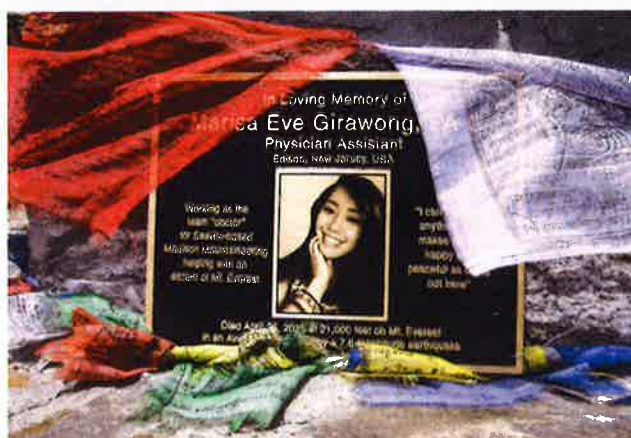


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FIGURE 1. Memorial plaque from the PA profession for Eve Girawong.

team, which included midwives and nurses. These camps were an ongoing part of routine outreach efforts of the health post in Ghandruk, which covers a catchment area of about 10,000 people.

After the month of the inaugural 2015 rotation in Nepal, the Pedersens left on April 24, the night before the devastating earthquake. The six PA students and Scott Brown were still on the ground the next morning when the earthquake struck at 11:56 a.m. The students were at the Kathmandu airport; Scott was in the center of Kathmandu and had a flight scheduled later that same day. The students would have been in the air had their incoming flight not been delayed. The Pedersens were not aware of the tragedy until they landed in Philadelphia and received a frantic call from their youngest son about the massive earthquake. After some additional frantic calls to the Utah PA program and to Scott on the ground in Nepal, they were reassured of the safety of the team, who made it on to China, where they met up with Scott before eventually returning to the United States. The students were shook up at the airport, but were delayed only about 4 hours. In Kathmandu, Scott joined in the search for survivors and pulled many to safety before flying to China.

We went back to Nepal 2 weeks after the earthquake, feeling that there was unfinished business. Ted was connected with Project Hope through previous relief missions to disaster areas. He arranged for himself and Don to join

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FIGURE 2. PA students and faculty in Nepal before the 2015 earthquake.

a group of six nurses and an ED physician from Massachusetts General Hospital. Through Don's connections at the University of Utah with Manmohan Memorial Teaching Hospital, including a memorandum of understanding and affiliation agreement, the Project Hope team was able to go right to work at the hospital, caring for the many people recovering from crush injuries and amputations. The hospital staff was exhausted, having provided continual care since the tragedy.

The Project Hope nursing contingent worked side-by-side with the Nepali nurses providing wound care. The doctor and Don helped staff the ED, which wasn't that busy until the second quake hit on May 12—a magnitude 7.4 that shook the second-floor meeting room Don was in with Ram Prasad Shrestha, MD, hospital director and chief of surgery. The shaking seemed to go on much beyond the reported 30 seconds. They made their way out and the hospital sustained little damage, but all the inpatients wanted to be out of the building. So after much effort, about 80 beds were placed in front of the hospital, where the patients stayed for a few days. Aftershocks were frequent and quite sizable for the next few weeks.

The team was busy in the ED with a number of casualties, mostly minor contusions and lacerations in the 40 to 50 mostly scared and mentally traumatized patients. As things quieted down, Don discovered a community of individuals at Swayambhu Nath, commonly referred to as the Monkey Temple, about a 30-minute walk up on the hill near the hospital. About 200 people at the temple had lost their homes and shops and were living under tarps around the stupa. For 5 days, Don saw patients, returned to Manmohan Memorial Teaching Hospital to pack up medications, and headed back up next morning to distribute the needed medications and supplies and see more patients. For the most part, after the initial traumas of the earthquakes, patients were presenting with routine primary care complaints. Ted provided photojournalistic expertise and supported the relief effort at the hospital and at Swayambhu Nath (Figure 3).



PHOTO BY TED WENDEL

FIGURE 3. Don Pedersen providing care at Swayambhu Nath.

The plan to have the PA profession honor Eve began coming together. Ted was to make contact with the family and Don was to fashion a plaque including an image of Eve along with mention of her profession. The plaque would be placed at the site of the monuments that honor climbers who died on the mountain. This hallowed site is at Thukla Pass, at 16,000 ft on the trail to Everest Base Camp. We wanted to recognize Eve as one of our colleagues and part of our professional family. Don would be returning to Nepal in April 2016 for the second Nepal PA student rotation, this time with four PA students, four PA graduates, and four faculty members. While the students were working at Manmohan Memorial Teaching Hospital for the first 2 weeks of the rotation, Don would trek to Everest Base Camp and place the plaque in a cairn at the memorial site on the way. Kathy Pedersen would stay with the students at the hospital as the trip leader, along with the PA program's medical director, Richard Backman, MD.

Don enlisted his son, Nick, a freelance photographer, to join him on the mission. They covered about 40 miles in 9 days at altitudes that reached well over 18,000 ft. With the help of their guide, Mingma Sherpa, they transported the cast-iron plaque, which weighed nearly 12 lb (5.4 kg). They had a loose plan to build a cairn and place the plaque along with prayer flags, say a few words on behalf of the collective PA organizations, and then continue on to Everest Base Camp.

As with many things in life that happen without rhyme or reason and perhaps with divine intervention, they had a remarkable coincidence on the trail. While trekking on the second day, Don saw a fellow traveler wearing a Brigham Young University cap. Being from the rival university in Utah, Don couldn't resist engaging him. As they talked, it turned out that Kevin Pinder was from Utah, was trekking with Madison Mountaineering, and knew the story of Eve and her passing. He had not been on the 2015 trip but said that Garrett Madison, the company's leader,

who was with Eve when she died, was further ahead on the trail. Don gave his card to Kevin, knowing that they would be able to meet up again in the small villages along the trekking route.

Don and Nick made it to Namche Bazar on day 2 of their trek and stayed for 2 days to acclimatize at 12,000 ft. During their rest day, they trekked 2 hours up to 14,000 ft to see the Khumjung monastery and were rewarded with a view of the mountains that defies description. They then returned to Namche.

On this trip, Madison Mountaineering had two groups—the trekkers, who would go to Everest Base Camp, and the climbers, who would summit Everest. The climbers, including Garrett, were farther ahead on the trail. Don and Nick met up with the trekker group in Namche and began to work out the logistics of honoring Eve together at the monument site. They spent a night in Tengboche after walking through a most amazing rhododendron forest and spending time at the Tengboche monastery. In this stroke of serendipity, they met up with Garrett in the next village of Dingboche. This quiet, gentle, thoughtful, towering, modern mountain man seemed genuinely pleased that Eve's profession would honor her. They discussed their loose plan to build a cairn and the good fortune that Don and Nick, along with their guide Mingma, would pass by the monuments at the same time as Garrett and some of his team the next day.

They found Garrett at lunch at the Dhukla + Thukla small teahouse. As it turned out, Eve's family and friends had commissioned a monument to be built to honor her. Don and Nick decided to find her monument and attach the plaque to it. After an hour trek up to 16,000 ft, they found the stone monument among about 40 stone reminders of fallen mountaineers. Eve's monument is on a ridge with a backdrop of the world's highest mountains. The front faces Everest and the trail to base camp. This is a magnificent memorial to Eve, with a single granite inset with the following inscription:

EVE GIRAWONG

LOVE IS PATIENT

LOVE IS KIND

LOVE NEVER FAILS

DEC. 24, 1986 – APR. 25, 2015
NEPAL EARTHQUAKE

Eve's monument (Figures 4 and 5) was truly awe-inspiring in its powerful simplicity. Standing against the wind, Garrett and fellow climber Ankur Bahl, who also was on last year's climb with Eve, placed prayer flags, had a quiet reflection, circled the monument, and then helped with our small remembrance from the PA profession. With the help of Mingma Sherpa and a guide from Madison Mountaineering, we fixed the plaque on the backside of Eve's monument, so as not to disturb the magnificence of what had been erected. The plaque faces the majesty of the mountains that sit opposite Everest—in particular Ama Dablam, a distinctively formed favorite mountain of many hikers. The reverence of our simple event was a remarkable experience that brought tears and filled us with humility—for life and for unpredictable circumstances. As Garrett and his team began to depart, Don took time to recite a poem about Mt. Everest that had affected him as a young man mountain-climbing in Idaho.

*The stone grows old
eternity is not for stones
Yet I shall come down from this airy space
this swift white piece
this stinging exhalation
and
time will close about me and
my soul stir to the rhythm of the daily round
but having known
life will not press so close
and
always I shall feel time ravel thin about me
For once I stood in the white windy presence of eternity.*



FIGURE 4. Garrett Madison of Madison Mountaineering and Don Pedersen placing the plaque at Eve's monument.



FIGURE 5. Eve's monument at Thukla Pass, elevation 16,000 ft.



PHOTO BY NICK PEDERSEN

FIGURE 6. Mingma Sherpa and Don Pedersen at Kala Patthar, overlooking Everest Base Camp at 18,300 ft.

The partnership between Madison Mountaineering and the PA profession began with a chance encounter on the trail to the Everest Base Camp. BYU versus Utah sparked a conversation that resulted in the best possible outcome. How do such things occur? Divine involvement? Good karma? Chance?

Don and Nick moved on with their journey, both changed by what had transpired over the past week. They pressed on to Everest Base Camp and to Kala Patthar, which overlooks the base camp at more than 18,000 ft, for an unparalleled view of the world's tallest peaks, with Mt. Everest taking center stage (Figure 6). After accomplishing the goal of honoring Eve, with help from a force beyond their understanding, they headed back to Kathmandu to link up with the PA student group. While Don and Nick were away, Nepal registered a 4.6-magnitude aftershock, a faint reminder of the previous year's tragedy.

We were all grateful for this chance to help honor Eve on behalf of the PA profession. From those who knew her from her time on Everest over her two expeditions, she was described as a warm, caring, compassionate, competent clinician. By all accounts, Eve did herself and the PA profession proud performing her job as the team provider looking after those who would attempt to summit. The anguish of the family and those who grew to love Eve must be unbearable. The monument erected by family and friends is a magnificent tribute to Eve, her life, and passion for the peace she found in the mountains. Our PA profession has lost a true gem, and collectively our hearts go out to her family, friends, and Madison Mountaineering. **JAAPA**

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