

## Robert Hammel



A modern renaissance man and champion of the Alaskan dream, Robert Warren Hammel, longtime resident of Girdwood and Denali Park, died on November 24, 2012. Rob lost his life heroically assisting at a motor vehicle accident south of Girdwood while working for the State of Alaska Department of Transportation. Rob died as he lived, with sincere dedication to helping others and a commitment to humanity and justice. He was 60 years old.

Rob was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on June 30, 1952, to Dr. Robert Warren Hammel, Sr. and Barbara "Bobbie" Bowen Hammel. Rob grew up in Wisconsin with his older sister Mary Jo, his little brother Dave, and his cousins Ross and Katie, splitting their time between Madison, Prairie du Chien, and their summer cottage at Avoca. Rob was a precocious, adventurous, and loving boy, who delighted in his early adventures as a Scout and who always had a special black cat by his side. After graduating from Madison West High School in 1970, Rob matriculated at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point. He met the love of his life, Rorie, at the orientation dance on the first day of school.

Rob graduated with a bachelors degree in political science and then attended law school at Marquette University. Not finding the justice that he sought in the law, Rob left Marquette to obtain his teaching certificate. In college, Rob had discovered the joy of skiing at nearby Rib Mountain, where he joined the National Ski Patrol and began the trajectory that would inform the remainder of his life.

In 1975, Rob realized his dream of moving north to the Last Frontier. He packed up "Harvey," his three-on-the-tree Rambler with an extra radiator, AM radio, two extra headlights, and four extra rimmed tires. Rob reinforced Harvey's undercarriage with sheet metal and, with an "Alaska or Bust" signed mounted on this trailer, set out for the AlCan. At the Canadian border, Rob was denied entry because he lacked the requisite \$300 cash to proceed. In the face of his father's reticence, Rob's mom wired him the money in secret.

Rob arrived in Girdwood where he quickly began working his way up the ranks at Alyeska Resort. Starting as a "liftie" bumping chairs for \$3.50/hour, Rob soon got a job driving snowcats and took pride in grooming perfect corduroy. His attention to detail and unparalleled work ethic were noticed and it was not long before Rob was offered a position on the Professional Ski Patrol at Alyeska. Rob remained a proud member of the Alyeska Ski Patrol for nearly 40 years, attending refresher training only days before his death. As a patroller, Rob learned the skill of avalanche control through the tactical use of explosives, becoming a recognized expert in the field.

Rob leveraged the experience that he gained driving snowcats in the winter into a summer job operating heavy equipment in Denali National Park. Rob took pride in his precise work driving a road grader with nimble skill along the 90 mile dirt road from the east end of the park to Wonder Lake in the Kantishna district. After completing her licensure as a registered nurse, Rorie visited Rob in Alaska for the first time in 1976. Rob gave Rorie her first glimpse of Mt. McKinley and the Alaska Range from the back of his Yamaha motorcycle as they drove out to Wonder Lake together. Rorie moved to Alaska the following year.

Rob and Rorie were married in Wisconsin on October 23, 1982, after eleven years of courtship. They spent every summer from 1976 to 2000 together in a twelve by sixteen foot single-room government-issued cabin at Wonder Lake in Denali, joined by their daughter Raina (born in 1985) and son Ryan (born in 1987).

Rob and Rorie built their home in Girdwood with the help of friends, initially starting with a two-room cabin and making additions as their family grew. For over twenty years, they lived without running water, rigging a pump to water jugs hauled from the local fire station. Though the practical challenges associated with their humble way of life were significant, Rob knew that the compromises that he and Rorie made to live their unique and extraordinary lifestyle deeply enriched their own lives and those of their children.

Rob's significant experience with avalanche safety and control earned him great respect among snow safety professionals throughout the world. In order to focus on this passion and to spend more time with his family, Rob left his summer position in Denali for a full-time job with the DOT in 2000. Since that time, Rob has been instrumental in avalanche control on the Seward Highway in the winter months. In the summer, he worked on a specialized bridge crew that traveled the state.

Rob was a man who believed fervently in the nobility of hard work and his actions mirrored his ideals. Rob worked more than he played, but he delighted in his time at Alyeska while patrolling and free-skiing with his kids. Rob never numbed to his surroundings, constantly photographing and appreciating the Alaskan beauty. He received great joy spending time in the outdoors hiking, canoeing, fishing, and camping with his family around south-central Alaska and in his most special place, Denali. Rob cherished the opportunity to share the beauty of his state with family and friends.

Rob was an avid reader and his love of learning inspired his self-initiated education about diverse matters of the world. He passionately shared his interests and curiosities with family and friends from all stages and locales of his life, to whom he mailed countless newspaper clippings, photographs, and hand-written letters. Rob had savant-like recall of American political and historical events, which he would share when prodded, rarely spontaneously and never boastfully.

Above all, Rob was a family man whose greatest pride was watching his children, Raina and Ryan, and his son-in-law Rich, grow into strong, smart, and empathetic adults. Rob was a compassionate, thoughtful, and decent man who will be forever missed and timelessly admired by all who knew him. Rob is survived by his wife of thirty years, Rorie Rettler Hammel; his children, Raina Hammel (Richard Segal) and Ryan Hammel; siblings Mary Jo Tierney (Tom) and David Hammel (Donna); cousins Ross Pinard and Katie Pinard Emerson; nieces and nephews Chris Tierney (Stacie), Katy Sands (Jim), and Mike Hammel (Heather).

A memorial service for Rob will be held at 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, December 1 at the United Methodist Church in Girdwood, which will be immediately followed by a celebration of his life at Challenge Alaska. All who were touched by Rob are welcome. In lieu of flowers, the Hammel family requests that donations be sent in Rob's honor to the Friends of the Chugach Avalanche Center ([www.cnfaic.org/friends/friends.php](http://www.cnfaic.org/friends/friends.php)) or the Denali Education Center ([www.denali.org](http://www.denali.org)), causes that Rob passionately supported.

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