

Episode 109: Evan was buried in an avalanche

These days, snowboarding is really popular in the colder climates, and of course everyone knows what it is. But it's actually a relatively new sport, especially when compared to traditional snow skiing.

The very first snow skis are dated all the way back to around 8000 BCE, and were found in northern China. They were basically long pieces of wood, like 6 feet, which is about 2 meters, and were covered with horsehair.

Snowboards, on the other hand, have come about much more recently.

Jake Burton is known as the "father of snowboarding", and he recalls back when he discovered there was this new, unconventional way to move on snow.

Jake Burton

I was 13 or 14 when I got my first snurfer, which was simply, like, a skateboard for snow and was nothing more than a piece of wood that was curved on the end. It had a rope on the front - that's how you would, sort of, maintain your balance and not lose it. I bought a snurfer and I just fell in love with this sensation of surfing and snow.

The first ski resort to even allow snowboarders to share the mountain with skiers was in Vermont, and that was just in 1983. Snowboarding has continued to grow in popularity, and it just became an Olympic sport in 1998.

My guest today is Evan, and he loves to snowboard. He and his wife Kahlynn lived in northern California, they're young and athletic, and they would go several times a year. It was pretty much their favorite way to spend a weekend outdoors.

But there was this one Friday morning on the mountain that Evan remembers in detail, because he almost didn't come home.

Scott

When this happened, you were with your wife, Kahlynn. Are you both pretty experienced snowboarders?

Evan

I would say that we're both pretty skilled snowboarders. We lived in San Francisco at that time. Like a lot of people in San Francisco, we just go up to Tahoe on the weekends and we probably snowboard 7-10 days a year, at most. We're good snowboarders but not experienced mountaineers or anything like that.

Scott

This happened in Squaw Valley, which is in Northern California. Is this a place where you lived near? Have you been there before?

Evan

Yeah, we've definitely been there before. We lived in San Francisco. Squaw is now called Palisades. It's one of the biggest mountains in the Tahoe Basin area. Tahoe is the nearest big ski destination for anyone in the Bay area. So, we had been in Squaw 8-9 times, so we're pretty familiar with it as well as other mountains in the Tahoe Basin area.

Scott

Do you usually snowboard rather than ski? Is that just your preference?

Evan

Yeah. I ski when I was little, so for the last 20 years or so. I've always been a snowboarder. The same is true of my wife Kahlynn. We're proficient and just doing our normal snowboarding thing that day.

Scott

When you say 'normal snowboarding', was an avalanche always, kind of, in the back of your mind?

Evan

No, I don't think it is. I mean, as most people that just go to resorts for a week or two a year, you're aware conceptually of what an avalanche is. At some hotel, you probably watched the weather channel when freak accidents happen. Maybe, you've seen it in the movies. So, you're aware of the concept of what it is, but I don't think it's something you would normally think about in the bounds of a resort. You would think about it when watching pro skiers in the backcountry doing crazy lines in Alaska but, under the chair airlift at your day-to-day resort, it's probably something that you wouldn't think about as just a kind of a weekend warrior.

Scott

What kind of safety gear or equipment is normally recommended for what you were doing for snowboarding?

Evan

Most of the time, resorts don't do a whole lot around education or safety for just the general population - the weekend-type folks that come to their resort. I mean, they do a ton of work normally around avalanche mitigation and blasting and bombing to make sure that that stuff never happens and in bounds. As such, they don't really put much effort into educating people about safety equipment when they're in bounds. Obviously, it can happen. There probably should be a better effort put into education but, in theory, to answer your question about what kind of safety equipment should people have when it snowed a lot - like, multiple feet - in the course of a small amount of time...

It's not unreasonable to have a beacon - which is essentially a device that just lets other people know where you are, almost like a radio. Then, a probe, which is a big long stick, essentially, so that if someone is under the snow, you can definitely poke them and find them. Then, a shovel for when you do find them, you can actually uncover them, get the snow off of them, and get them out of there.

Scott

What activates the beacon? Is it going off all the time?

Evan

The way beacons work is they're completely useless unless other people have them. It's a communication device and the way it works is you always ride with it turned on, so it's always transmitting. Then, if an avalanche does happen, the people that are above ground would turn their beacons from 'transmit' to 'search or receive'. The only person that didn't is the person that's underground and or under the snow. Then, if everyone has that person's signal, they can be guided to them, like radar, essentially.

Scott

You mentioned the pole that people can stick into the snow. I'm always picturing that they might poke somebody in the eye with that.

Evan

That would be fine. When the alternative is not living, you would take an eye-poke. I've thought about that as well. You're pretty happy if you strike any part of the person. The same thing is true with a shovel. You're always a little bit hesitant to, like, jam a shovel on someone's face but, again, the alternative is much worse. So, that is a totally acceptable cost.

Scott

Especially when time is such a critical factor...

Evan

Yeah.

Scott

Wasn't there a separate avalanche the day before yours happened?

Evan

Yeah, not at Squaw, but in the kind of broader region. Yeah, it had snowed 6 feet over 2 days - that's a lot of snow. Someone had gotten lost the day before in a storm and perished. So, there were a few events that were tragic as a result of this big, huge storm. Our day was a Friday. It started snowing on Wednesday. The person passed in the storm on a Thursday. So, there was some other stuff going on around that time.

Scott

So, this kind of thing was in the news at that time.

Evan

Yeah. I mean, people love to ski and powder because it's fun, right? Anytime they get snow, all their Instagrams and social accounts are saying, "Hey, we have 2 -3 feet." That's when these incidents do happen. So, it's delicate. Snow is good for everyone. It's fun and it's good for the resort's business, but it has dangers associated with it as well.

Scott

Take us through what happened that day. What time did you get started?

Evan

Yeah. We got there at 8:30 AM. The mountain opens at 9 or something like that. However, on this particular day, there was what's called a delayed opening. Squaw was doing a bunch of avalanche mitigation control, meaning they're setting off bombs in areas that are likely to slide an avalanche so that it doesn't. So, they do that when the mountain's closed. They go and

bomb everything so that when they do open the mountain, everyone's safe and ready to go. They didn't open the mountain until 11.00-11.30 AM. They were probably bombing for three or four hours because, again, it's 3-4 feet that day. So, everyone knew - not everyone - that the avalanche risk was very high, which is why they did a pretty serious amount of mitigation in the morning. Then, 11.00 or 11.30 was when they decided that the mountain had been sufficiently cleared out and that it was safe for everyone to go up there. So, they started spinning the chairs at 11.30. At that point, everyone's been, kind of, sitting there super excited for 2 hours in a lodge ready to get out there/

Scott

So, there were probably a lot of people waiting.

Evan

Yeah, definitely. On days like that, especially when it's a delayed opening, there are a lot of anticipation and big lines because no one can go anywhere - they all kind of queue up at the bottom of the mountain and get ready to kind of take on the mountain. So, when they opened the lift, there was a huge line. It took us 30 minutes to get through that initial line onto the first chair. This was our first run. We waited half an hour in the lift line. It's an advanced lift - it serves only Black Diamonds - but it's also one of the most popular lifts. So, at the chair in front of us was a 9-year-old girl. Had that been her, it might have been a totally different outcome. The chair takes 5 minutes or so to get to the top. We kind of strapped on our boards. We could tell that it was deep - like, there was a ton of snow, which we were excited about. Again, coming from the city as a weekend warrior, it's rare that you get powder days, so you're pretty excited when you do. We strapped on our boards and started snowboarding. It was deep - like, at least, thigh-high and, at points, waist-high powder, which is pretty insane and fun.

Scott

When you said 'waist-high', are you snowboarding on top of that, or are you, kind of, cutting a path through the snow?

Evan

A little bit of both. When you're moving quickly, think about how boat goes on the water - you'll plane up on top of it. When you're not, you kind of sink down into it. So, when you say 'thigh-high' or 'waist-high' powder, that means there's that much loose and dry snow that you can spray around really easily. So, it's fun because it feels like surfing on pillows, if you will. It's a really kind of flying-like feeling. You can also get stuck in it, which we did. Obviously, there's a lot of material just to be moved around.

Scott

I can imagine. If you happen to just stop, how do you get started again?

Evan

If you're on a steeper slope, it's a lot easier to get started because you have gravity on your side. But if you get stopped on a more flat section in that kind of snow, it is a lot of effort to kind of even stand up, dig yourself out a little bit, and then get enough momentum to actually, kind of, power through some of that stuff. So, we did the first part of the steep slope. As you know, again, that part is really fun. Then, we kind of stopped to take a rest on a flatter part. At that point, once you make that stop on the flatter part, you can't get out of that situation really quickly. It takes a while to manually get some momentum back and get out of those flat spots. That was actually where the avalanche occurred - it was actually from above us. We were in the

flat spot and kind of stuck there. Someone triggered the avalanche from above us on the steep part and then it swept down into us in that flat part. It's extremely fast. We were just stuck and, kind of, playing around, like, "Wow, this is so much snow! This is crazy!" Then, I heard someone yell. I just, kind of, heard a crack, looked back, and saw a 10-foot wall of snow coming - that was only half a second from the time I heard that person yell. I barely had time to get my head around and see it before it hits me. That wall of snow moves really fast. It was less than a second from when I heard the yell to when it actually hit me.

Scott

What was it like to be hit by a 10-foot wall of snow?

Evan

It's wild. It probably feels like getting hit by an NFL linebacker, although there's not, like, a single point - the whole wall just overtakes you. There's a good amount of force. After the initial contact, it feels almost more analogous to, like, being held underwater by a wave, if anyone ever experienced that, where you're moving and it's moving. It's got a fluid dynamic to it. One of the challenges was after this thing hit me, it started taking my head, kind of, down. So, I was kind of swimming or paddling like a dog to try to stay upright and above the snow while it was trying to somersault you in all different directions. So, it's a wild experience. There's not a whole lot I can compare it to. It does feel more like water in a river or really big waves in the ocean. My snowboard was still attached, which is another kind of big object that the snow river would move around and, kind of, captures. You're trying to use your arms to stay above but you have this kind of sail that's catching a ton of snow underneath and pulling you downwards - that made it tough.

Scott

Yeah, it seems like it would limit your mobility.

Evan

Yeah, definitely.

Scott

Was Kahlynn next to you? How far away was she when you were hit?

Evan

Yes. She was maybe 20 feet away from me, like, down the hill and off to the side a little bit, so I caught the majority of it. I mean, she got it too, but I got all 10 feet of it - it was way above my head. By the time it was done, I was fully buried, like, 6 feet under completely in random snow. Kahlynn came to a rest. Basically, it was snow up to her chest, so her head was above the snow in the air, which was good. So, she was pretty close, but definitely caught a slightly different piece of the avalanche.

Scott

I wanted to hear from Kahlynn what it felt like to get hit by all that snow.

Kahlynn

I didn't hear anything. I didn't see anything. I was very much in my own world having a good time. I felt snow hit my back first, pretty high on my shoulders. I thought Evan was being playful and sprang up some snow, but then the snow underneath my snowboard went out and I knew immediately that this was some sort of a slide that I was in. Being swept up in an avalanche

feels exactly the way you can imagine. It's heavy. It's forceful. It's loud. Everything went completely white. It's disorienting - you don't know what is up and down. You're really encased in it and praying the whole time, "Let me land on top of this." You won't know until it stops. I came to a stop where the avalanche met a cat track and ripped off my goggles because they had been filled up with snow. I had my two arms and chest down. I was buried. I knew I was alive, but I don't know where's my husband. I saw a guy actually on the cat track upright on his skis - because it hadn't quite reached him - looking at me. I looked back at him and said, "Are you effing kidding me?!" I was in such disbelief at what had just happened. I was looking almost for this stranger to tell me that it did just happen and it wasn't a dream - I asked him twice. Then, I just started digging myself out. One of the miracles in all of this was that it was the first run of the day and we weren't even supposed to stop. We were actually driving through Tahoe to get to Colorado from San Francisco. It had been dumping and we said, "Should we? Let's do it." So, I never tightened my boots, so I realized that I could shimmy my feet and my calves out of my boots. So, as I was digging out, I left my boots attached to my snowboard under the snow and, kind of, crawled my way out. So, there I was with no helmet and no goggles on. My gloves had gone missing. I was standing in my socks and just frantically screaming for Evan.

Scott

Back to Evan...

Evan

That much snow on that kind of slope - when I think about where it started, it was a good 100 yards up the hill - got to me in less than a second. So, that thing is moving 100 yards a second - it's going quickly. Again, it did kind of go from the steeper part where it has a ton of force and momentum, and then it dissipates in the flatter part. It has a lot of power to carry through that flatter spot, so it took me after a good 80 yards. I was just getting wiped, whitewashed, somersaulted, and washing machined all over the place. I was trying to hopefully stay upright, which ended up not happening. Yeah, it's probably about 80 to 100 yards of travel over the course of, maybe, 6 seconds or so.

Scott

So, when the forward motion stopped, what did you feel then? Was it relief because it finally stopped or was it panic because "Okay, what now?"

Evan

Yeah, that was the scariest part - it is more panic. While you're in the washing machine, you have a fighting chance - you're actively trying to help your situation. When I came to a rest, I tried to move my limbs. I could physically move them. I wasn't injured, but I was just encased in this cement-like snow - there's just nowhere for my limbs to go. I was trying to move but I realized that I couldn't move. That was an incredibly scary and foreign feeling, first of all. You don't have a whole lot of options or things that you can do. So, that's what kind of puts you into this pretty intense mental situation where, first, you're trying to reconcile and figure out like, "What is this thing?" because, again, coming from the city as a weekend warrior, you're not that familiar and experienced with avalanches. So, it took a little bit of recall just to be like, "Oh, is this is an avalanche like one of those things that you hear about on TV and in movies? Damn, it is. Oh, this is bad. Is this how it ends? This is not good. I'm in trouble. I can't do anything." So, it is a panic situation, for sure.

Scott

Definitely. If you were 6 feet below the surface, the snow has a lot of weight. I mean, people might be hearing this and picturing that fresh powder - the dry powder - is not wet snow, which would have made things even worse, probably.

Evan

Oh, it is kind of wet, particularly in Tahoe, California, when it gets this much snow - it does carry a lot of water because it comes in from the ocean. Then, it's not super, super cold. Relative to some other areas like Wyoming, it's heavier and it does carry a lot of water, especially once it moves and kind of consolidates. It's compacting and, kind of, settling. So, by the time it's on top, it's pretty dense. People have described it as cement, often, where it's heavy. There's not much you can do to move it.

Scott

You realize that you're stuck and can't do anything... What's going through your head, then? How long were you consciously aware of that?

Evan

Yeah. I was totally conscious when I came to a rest. I kind of went from, maybe, a few seconds of trying to figure out, like, "What can I do to get out of this?" Maybe, after 10-15 seconds, that's when you realize, "Oh, crap, I'm buried in an avalanche. There's not much I can do." It's a weird and foreign feeling of despair, and it's really scary. I thought about, like, "Shit. Is this how it ends?" I thought about my wife and I eventually just, kind of, resigned, I was like, "Well, let's see what happens. Hopefully, people up top are around."

Scott

But as far as you knew, they could have been buried too, right?

Evan

Yeah, you have no idea what's going on. You're intensely removed from the scenario. The snow is so dampening. It's like being in a soundproof room. You can't hear anything. It's completely dark. You can't move. There's a sensory deprivation, where you're essentially in a different world. So, you would feel incredibly disconnected from what's going on outside, which is just an interesting place to be. Eventually, I just tried to kind of push out some of those more panic thoughts in place of just some calm. At that time, we're 15-20 seconds into it. The reality is that your body starts to lose oxygen at that point and that transition is subtle. Maybe, after 30-40 seconds, I kind of subtly lost consciousness or blacked out or went to sleep or whatever you want to call it. It is a transition from intense panic and scariness to trying to, like, just calm down, slow down my breathing, and conserve oxygen. It's rare to be in that "Is this the end?" type of process and not something I would wish on anyone, obviously.

Scott

It's such a contrast. You're 6 feet under the snow - total darkness, can't hear anything, can't move - but yet, there was a lot of activity above the snow as people were looking for you. One of the people who desperately wanted to know where Evan was was his wife, Kahlynn.

Kahlynn

At that point, I was standing in my socks in the avalanche debris. My goggles have been full of snow so I ripped those off along with my helmet. My gloves had come off along the way. I was frantically searching for Evan. I was looking back up at the avalanche debris field - it was huge and there were no people. I know very quickly that he's under there somewhere. So, I tried

running up the hill to go find or search for Evan. I was yelling his name. Because I was in my socks and this was a big debris field, I was just post-holing through - I couldn't make any progress. I got more and more frantic. I was screaming louder and louder for my husband, "EVAN, PLEASE! WHERE IS HE?!?!" Then, a woman in a green coat came and swallowed me up. She bear-hugged me and sat me down. At that point, a few minutes had passed. It seemed like I was this lone person who still hadn't found their loved one. So, she grabbed me, sat me down, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Does he have a beacon?" I said, "No." At that point, they yelled that they had found someone. So, I knew that if that was him, hopefully, he was okay. If that wasn't him, he wasn't going to be okay. So, this woman sat with me and helped pass the time and asked me some questions. We sat there for a few minutes and waited until they yelled down that they had found someone "He had tan snow pants and a gray jacket!" So, I knew that that was Evan. I remember yelling up, "IS HE ALIVE?"

Evan

The whole thing took, probably, a total of 6 minutes. I was probably without oxygen for 4 minutes and 30 seconds or something like that. Then, Kahlynn was somehow able to hoist herself out of her boots and our board, which is an incredible feat of strength. So, she got above the snow. She was in her socks trying to just make noise and draw some attention to the area. Obviously, as you said, it's a total contrast between being under the water - quiet, nothing going on, super dark - and total chaos above where people were screaming, looking for people, and trying to figure out what's going on. People started coming to the area. Luckily, I had just a tiny tip of my snowboard sticking out which someone saw. Again, I was not wearing any safety equipment like beacons, probes, or shovels. Beacons only work if two people have them, so there's nothing to find me with other than a visual cue. If there wasn't that, it would have been just random striking and digging around in the snow. Someone did see just the tiny tip of my snowboard which brought them over to my area. I think it also helped that it was a Friday because you probably had a slightly more skilled and experienced crowd than, like, the weekday. So, there were several people that did have shovels, beacons, and probes. The shovels were the most helpful, obviously, for uncovering me quickly. It probably took them 4.5 minutes to go from finding me to uncovering my face.

Scott

Of course, they don't know how deep you are either. They see your snowboard or the tip of it. Honestly, that sticking out of the snow was literally what made you survive this.

Evan

Yeah, definitely that. Yes, absolutely. If my snowboard had not been sticking out - I didn't have a beacon - it probably would be very unlikely that I would live because again. They would just randomly be striking in a huge area.

Scott

We should have a beacon manufacturer sponsor this episode. (Laughter) Who was it that spotted your snowboard?

Evan

Yeah. A woman spotted it. Then, she was able to get 2-3 other people over there to start helping her dig. Some people had shovels, some didn't. They were actively scratching away and trying to uncover me. 4.5 minutes is a reasonably long time. Someone could have passed out by then and would need to be resuscitated. Luckily, I did not need to be resuscitated - I just,

kind of, woke up on my own which was an interesting experience that I'll tell you about too. I came back on my own which was nice.

Scott

Yeah. We've got the video of that. Someone took a video when they finally uncovered your face. Of course, you were kind of unconscious for a while. That's the other thing I'm thinking of - 4-5 minutes without oxygen. I mean, you were getting to the point where there could be damage to your brain due to lack of oxygen.

Evan

Yes, it was certainly on the borderline - you don't want to go much further than that.

Scott

We'll have that video on the website and the show notes for this episode so that people can see that. When you actually got dug out, what was the first thing you thought of when you saw daylight?

Evan

If you ever come back from Novocaine or whatever they use at the dentist, it felt a lot like the opposite of going into the light. It's like going back through the tunnel back towards the light. I almost felt kind of a euphoric drug-like experience because of the lack of oxygen. So. I had almost like an ethereal, almost heavenly feel at first where you're really lightheaded and, like, loopy. My lips were blue - I could feel that there was no sensation in them. It felt like euphoric at first. Then, eventually, consciousness kind of crept back, and your rational brain started to take over a little bit and, like, try to assess what the heck just happened and where we've been for the last little bit. My first thought was, like, "Where's my wife?" because I had no idea at that point. I knew I had just been in something terrible, so I assumed that was the case for her.

Scott

When the woman that dug you out finally got to your face and you were somewhat conscious, she said that your first words were "Where's my wife?"

Evan

Yeah, that was scary and a horrible feeling. I didn't know. Obviously, you want to know. It took 10 seconds or so for someone to say, like, "Is your wife wearing a jacket or something like that? She's looking for you." Then, I heard her voice from down the hill. Luckily, I didn't have to spend that long wondering, but it was scary. It was a very different experience than my wife had where she had to spend 5-6 minutes wondering what was going to happen, which I don't envy and must have been pretty awful. It was intense, for sure.

Scott

She was probably just looking around for you and then she saw the commotion up above where they were digging you out. Is that how she realized that you were discovered?

Evan

Yeah. I mean, she was 20 feet away from me when the avalanche hit. Then, she was now 80-100 feet down the mountain from where I came to rest afterward, so she wasn't in a great spot to search. She's also in her socks in really deep snow, so she couldn't move for all intents and purposes. There was a lady named Heather that came down to try to comfort her, keep her calm, and keep her in place until they figured out what was going on with me. They knew,

obviously, that they were digging out a body at that point. They didn't know whether that body was alive, so they wanted to kind of keep her there until they confirm that it was actually me and alive and all that.

Scott

How long before it really sunk in that you could have died that day?

Evan

That's a tough question. I mean, it immediately sunk in as soon as 5-6 seconds after I came to rest. When I was encased in snow, that was the first time I thought about, like, "Crap, is this it? This is how I could go is - in an avalanche - which is random because I don't ski that much." So, it sunk in immediately afterward. Of course, you were in a state of shock at that point. So, you're not necessarily processing everything. You're just trying to still, kind of, get out of the situation. We still felt like we were kind of on the mountain and we need to still get out of here. It's a process that last days, weeks, months, years. There were definitely conflicting and weird emotions where we were like, "Oh, my god. We're alive! Let's get a steak, some champagne, and stuff." Then, you were, like, "Wait a second, we actually almost died. It's crazy!" There's no playbook on how to react appropriately to that stuff. I think you'd expect, like, some sort of life-changing kind of viewpoint dawned upon you, but it's a subtle thing that evolves over time, and you learn to kind of grapple with it in different ways. In a lot of ways, it's positive - like, you're incredibly thankful and grateful for what you have. There's a little bit of a new lease on life element to it. But at the same time, there's also the trauma that you have to deal with that manifests itself in other ways. For example, I've developed, like, some claustrophobia, particularly on planes for some reason that I did not have before this incident. Interestingly, it hasn't shown up in snowboarding too much, so I can still do that, but it has shown up in other areas.

Scott

What did you do right after? I mean, you didn't take the chair and go take another run, I assume?

Evan

No, we snowboarded down ourselves, which was kind of weird. Again, there was kind of a chaotic moment. Ski patrols were looking for other people and stuff like that. They're like, "Are you guys good?" We're like, "I guess..." So, we snowboarded down to this bar called the Rocker. Kahlynn, again, has been in her socks for half an hour, so she got, like, frostbite on her feet. We asked for a glass of warm water. It's trippy too because, at that point, they closed the mountain after this happened. So, everyone was at the Rocker drinking and having fun. No one knew who we are. They don't know that we just survived the avalanche. Everyone was drinking and having a good time. We asked for glasses of, like, warm water. The waiter forgets about it and we were just, like, "We just gotta get out of here." So, we left, went and picked up our puppy from the puppy school there, and just went to our hotel just to enjoy being alive. I mean, again, there was part of that, for sure, but there was also just a lot of shock and other feelings. It wasn't as hard to make sense of how it felt. It'd be easy to say, like, "Oh, yeah. We had a new lease on life and everything was great." There's some of that, but there's an intense range of conflicting emotions that you don't normally have to figure out how to deal with.

Scott

Yeah. It's hard to predict what the effects are going to be, mentally, in the long run. In that avalanche, 5 people were buried and rescued and only one had serious injuries - you weren't injured at all.

Evan

No, I was not. One guy broke his leg. Other than being deprived of oxygen, I believe I was the only one who was fully buried physically. I don't think I'm dumber today, but I could be even worse than that. Yeah, no physical injuries, which is kind of crazy and impressive because, usually, an avalanche of that magnitude - an 8-foot crown, as they call it, which is the size of the release - has a lot of power and can cause injuries, but I was very lucky.

Scott

How long before you went snowboarding again?

Evan

I think, 3 or 4 days, actually. That was the first day of, like, a 16-day, kind of, trip to the West. We were starting in Tahoe and going out to Aspen and Colorado - Jackson Hole, Wyoming was our last stop, which is where we live now. Three days later, we did a very sunny, like, shell day in Aspen and Colorado, just doing groomers, which felt fine and totally safe. Yeah, we were back on the hill pretty quickly.

Scott

Kahlynn's takeaway from this experience - have fun, but be safe.

Kahlynn

Ski patrol at every mountain works incredibly hard in tough situations with a lot of bravery, most days, to clear the snow, bomb it, and make sure that it's safe for skiers to recreationally get out there without a lot of worries. The reality is that it's still a mountain and it's still Mother Nature. Ultimately, you are at Her mercy - we learned that the hard way. We got another chance. So, our hope is that people can learn from our story and realize that it can be you, a weekend skier, out there having fun. Trust ski patrol. By all means, they're doing a great job. Take an educational class. Take an avalanche class. Do some reading. Educate yourself. Stop every few minutes and check on your friends. Make sure no one fell into a tree or there wasn't a slide. Look around. Just be more aware. Consider buying a beacon and a probe and learning how to use those devices. Hopefully, this doesn't happen to us again, but if we're ever in this situation where we can be one of those first responders, we will have our shovel ready, we will have our probes and beacon ready to help save someone else's life. It's really hard to talk about those 5-6 minutes without knowing if I would see Evan again. We were newlyweds. This was the first ski day of a 3-week ski trip for us. We were on cloud nine and it just turned on us so quickly. I'm so thankful to the woman who was able to get the frantically screaming wife to just sit down and calm down so that the first responders could do their work. I'm so thankful to the bystanders, the other skiers, such as Joe Breault, who were able to find Evan and who were brave enough to ski across this avalanche debris to ultimately save his life. Since the avalanche, we haven't shied away from the snow at all. We actually moved to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Now, we do backcountry skiing. We ski at the resort 25-plus days a year. We have a 1.5-year-old but we can't wait to get on a snowboard next year. This is very much a part of our life. We're appreciative and grateful and indebted to the ski community and to everyone. We got a second chance. We hope to continue to ski and help educate people on in-bound avalanches.

Evan

Now, we're very much aware that, when it does snow a lot even in-bounds in a resort, you need to be thinking about that. You have to be aware of where you are and be prepared that that's a real risk that you're undertaking when going out into that sort of environment. We ended up taking what's called an Avy 1 or avalanche course in Jackson here where we ended up moving, which was cool. We got to learn all about snow science - how these avalanches happen, what are the risk factors, and how to identify that. Equipment is one part of it. We did buy beacons, probes, and shovels. Then, we also bought these kinds of avalanche airbag vests that you can pull - it inflates a big balloon when you get pulled in an avalanche. Probably, more important is the education of being able to understand, like, where do avalanches happen so that you can stay out of those risky areas or stay out from underneath them as well. That was a really good experience for us. It just helped us feel like we have a lot more control over the risks that we're taking. Again, back when this happened in Squaw, we didn't know any better. We were just weekend warriors from the city. When you're in bounds, you don't think about this stuff. So, we had no idea of the risks that we were taking, which were actually fairly significant. Now, we have a much better understanding of that and we make those calculations accordingly.

Scott

I can imagine when you were taking the avalanche safety course, you must have been like the celebrity in that class. "Oh, you're the guy that was buried!"

Evan

Yeah, it was some helpful first-party knowledge. We did use that example of the avalanche lock in class just to have someone talk about it - we got to analyze that day. It was interesting.

Scott

For sure. Have you met up with any of the people that helped rescue you that day?

Evan

We did. Yeah. A couple - Marjan and Joe Breault - was one of the ones that came down to help start digging me out, so we connected with them. We spoke on the phone, maybe, a couple of weeks after it happened. Then, we actually got to meet Joe, Marjan, and their whole family out in Jackson Hole, maybe, 2 years after it happened - which was fun - particularly just to thank them. I mean, I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for them and a few others like them that were involved in that rescue. It's interesting to hear their experience, but great to just show gratitude to them, which was fun.

Scott

She's the one that spotted your snowboard - is that right?

Evan

She was actually up on the hill filming. It was a different lady that spotted the snowboard. Maybe, it might have been Joe - I'm not entirely sure. But yeah, they were involved at least in some capacity in getting us out of there which was huge.

Scott

As long as somebody saw it - that's the important thing.

Evan

Exactly. The craziest part was definitely that first initial instance when I came to rest after the kind of initial wave. It was just just a wild range of emotions from confusion, panic, and resignation to trying to do the best to stay alive. That part was just really interesting and scary.

Scott

There's a reason why snowboarding falls into the category of Extreme Sports, and why it's probably not going to be on my bucket list. If you want to see the video that was shot as Evan was actually being dug out of the snow, I have that in the show notes at WhatWasThatLike.com/109. And I want to thank my booker, Fernanda, for helping make this episode possible by getting in touch with Evan to set up our conversation.

All right, now here's a little something I want to tell you. Just between you and me.

You're listening to me at the moment, but I know you listen to other podcasts. I know I sure do. Sometimes I can hardly keep up with the new episodes that are coming out for all the shows I subscribe to. And that's a good thing! We're all lucky to have such a big supply of content to listen to.

Well, I want to let you in on a little secret. For all those podcasts you listen to, the hosts of those shows would really love to hear from you. You might think that podcast hosts get buried in tons of emails and voice mails, but you'd probably be surprised. This is something that podcast hosts know, but now I'm letting you in on it. Because if you listen to an episode and it really sticks with you because it was so good, or it really made you think, or maybe because it made you cry – you can really make that host's day by letting them know.

And I'm saying that because it recently happened to me.

A lot of the time, when someone discovers this podcast for the first time, they'll listen to the current episode, then new listeners will often go and download all the past episodes. I see that all the time.

Well, one of the past episodes is called "Travis lost his son". Travis of course was the guest, and his 16 year old son Brandon had just recently lost his life to an asthma attack. Here's a brief clip, and this exchange is only about 5 minutes after the episode starts:

Scott

Can you tell us a little bit about Brandon? Who was he as a person? Can you, kind of, just describe him?

Travis

He was a very caring young man. He loved to smile and was always happy. He loved hanging out with other kids. His mom had a daycare where kids would just flock down.

Scott

So, you get to interact with those kids a lot, then?

Travis
Right.

Scott

If you haven't heard that one, I highly recommend it. It's one of the most memorable conversations I've had for this show. It's one you'll remember, especially if you're a parent.

Well. Chad, in Minnesota, is a parent. He recently discovered the podcast, and he listened to that episode with Travis. And he called the Podcast Voicemail Line, and he left me this message:

Chad

Hey, Scott. This is Chad from Minnesota. I'm gonna try not to cry. I recently listened to your episode of Travis losing his son. I was listening to it while I was sitting in line at my son's school to pick him up. Man, that really killed me. I sat there ultimately weeping and hoping other people wouldn't see me. My son got in the car and noticed my red eyes and tears. He asked me what's the problem. I pulled over my car, got out, and hugged him for about 30 seconds. He was really confused. I didn't say anything to him other than "I just love you." He said, "Dad, you're being weird." All I said was "That's okay." That really got me in the field. I appreciate your show. I love it. I've been bingeing every episode since I found you a couple of weeks ago and it's fantastic. Just keep doing what you're doing.

Scott

So I want to say thank you to Chad, for that really heartfelt voicemail message, and to Travis as well for being willing and vulnerable to share the story of how he lost Brandon.

You know, sometimes when I get interviewed by other podcasters or YouTubers about this show, one of the questions that I often get asked is, "Why do you do this podcast?" and my biggest reason is that voice mail you just heard. I've never met Chad in person; maybe we will meet someday, who knows. But we have a connection, because of this story that was so raw and real and it just touched a nerve with him and with me, and I know it had that effect on a lot of other people as well. And not just this episode, but lots of other ones too.

So when I hear from someone that my show has had that kind of effect... yeah, that's why I do this podcast.

If you ever have a comment about an episode, you're always welcome to call the Podcast Voicemail line. It's available 24/7 and it's always voice mail. The number is 727-386-9468.

Okay, that was just between me and you.

And before we get to the Listener Story, I wanted to let you know that the newest Raw Audio episode just went live. This is episode 24. These are real 911 calls and the story that goes with them. You can binge all 24 episodes, AND you can get all the new regular podcast episodes ad-free by being a patron of the show for just \$5 a month. You can sign up at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support).

In this new Raw Audio episode, an armed man with a long criminal record breaks into a family's home, and instructs the homeowner to call 911 –

(Raw Audio clip 1)

911 Operator

Where is he at right now?

Man

He's standing right next to me in my hallway.

911 Operator

Okay, are we still on speakerphone?

Man

We still are. He's right here.

Scott

Police confront an older woman with dementia, who is holding two knives –

(Raw Audio clip 2)

Police

*DROP THE FUCKING KNIFE!! DROP THE KNIFE!! DO IT NOW!! HANDS ON THE GROUND!
PUT 'EM ON THE GROUND! PUT IT DOWN NOW!*

Scott

And a visitor at a theme park falls off a ride –

(Raw Audio clip 3)

911 Operator

Is the patient awake?

Woman

We don't know. He's facedown. He has blood on his feet. We don't know. Someone said he was breathing, but I'm not sure.

911 Operator

Alright. I have help on the way. Are you with him now?

Woman

Thank you. Yeah, we're all here.

Scott

So you can get all of those stories and all the other benefits at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support).

And now, here we are at this week's Listener Story. If you're new to the show, we end every episode with a short story, like 3-5 minutes long, from a listener. If you have a story like that, you can call the Podcast Voicemail Line at 727-386-9468 anytime 24/7 or just contact me through the website, [WhatWasThatLike.com](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com).

This week's Listener Story involves another extreme sport – rock climbing! Yeah, I'm not planning to do that anytime soon either.

Stay safe, and I'll see you in two weeks.

(Listener Story)

Last year, I went out climbing with a friend - just her and I. I was going climbing with her and another friend - never just the 2 of us. She's been spacey. She warned me that she wanted to do a climb that had this hard part that I will potentially have to extend my rope to get through, especially if I fall away from the wall, dangling mid-air, and unable to reach the wall again. Well, that happened. I found myself with some gear on my harness 200 feet off the ground. I tried to figure it out. This was right in the middle of COVID quarantine, so I was about 20 pounds heavier than I usually am, hence why I fell off the climb. It was August, so I was in direct sunlight well above the tree line baking in the sun. I had no idea how to ascend my rope. I didn't have my phone on me because I didn't have pockets, naturally, but I did have my watch on. So, I paid attention to the passage of time and how long I was in my harness. I couldn't hear my belayer and she couldn't hear me. We were screaming each other's names the entire time but we couldn't hear each other because there was a sound barrier.

So, I was dangling for a long time before that was addressed. Until then, I was trying to set up a self-rescue system and I was, like, most of the way there, but I didn't have a way to capture my progress. So, when I took slack out of the climbing rope, I would just stand up and there was slack. I wasn't actually, like, making the rope tight where my new position on the climb was. I didn't know what I was doing. I was really just flying by the seat of my hands and making up a way to self-rescue myself out of this. A climber came up the route next to me. I was able to get his attention. He was trying to help me set up my rescue system. At that point, I've been dangling for over an hour in direct sunlight. My hip flexors were definitely starting to get damaged at that point. There's something called harness trauma that can kill you after 20 minutes of dangling on a harness. I had made it this far an hour and a half still trying to rescue myself.

I ultimately couldn't get myself to ascend the rope because I was just so busted from dangling in the sun. We had some other friends that were at the cliff that day that did have their phones on them. So, my belayer called them over and I was yelling to them. They were on the phone with my belayer, so they were able to communicate to lower me to the belay ledge where those other climbers were - which was only about 10 feet away from me - and I repelled down with that party.

So, I got to the ground safely after about 2 hours. My hip flexors were really, really messed up for 2 weeks after that. I couldn't climb. I couldn't work out. I was walking kind of funny. I could have died in a fraction of the time when I was dangling there. The weird part about this whole

story is that it ends with sirens. There were sirens that we heard when we got to the base of the cliff. My friend eerily said, "We don't like to hear that around here because that usually means a climber died, which unfortunately happens at the Gunks a lot because of its proximity to New York City - there's just a lot of climbers that go up there. Like myself, a lot of them don't know what they were doing, but they'll go on and climb. I was just following someone. I was on the top rope, which is generally much safer and less scary, generally.

So, we heard sirens when we got to the ground. You don't like to hear that around here. It turned out to be another climber - a female climber my age - whose gear had ripped out of the wall. She fell while trying to set an anchor. She was guiding the group. She was a well-known member of the community. She fell to her death on a day that I almost died as well. So, I have a lot of survivor's guilt after that. It definitely got me in the mindset to improve myself as a climber to learn rescue, get my strength back, and lose that quarantine weight. Now, I go back to the Gunks myself and do the routes that I want to do and won't get my followers stuck on. So, if you ever go out climbing, make sure you cover everything that could go wrong with your partner - wasps, snakes, falling rocks, dangling in midair, you name it. Cover that, please.