

Episode 55: Michael survived an avalanche

Katmandu, the capital city of Nepal. April 25, 2015. A 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck without warning.

News Reporter

A quake so big that it shocked Mount Everest. Now, the United States is sending a disaster response team and \$1 million in aid. There are already reports of more than 1,000 people dead and that figure is expected to rise. The quake struck just outside Nepal's capital of Katmandu earlier today, around noon, local time, with tremors felt across the region in India, Bangladesh and Tibet.

Scott

In the end, nearly 9,000 people lost their lives, and close to 22,000 were injured. Entire villages were destroyed, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless.

And not far from the epicenter was Mt Everest. There were a lot of people on the mountain that day, and 19 climbers were killed.

Michael Churton is an adventure filmmaker based out of New York City. He's done work for National Geographic, NBC, ABC, Discovery, and the Science Channel. He's been doing this for more than 20 years.

Michael was at Mt Everest Base Camp when the earthquake happened. And he was right in the path of the deadly avalanche that was triggered immediately after. And even though he survived, not all of his teammates came back.

Michael was on the mountain to document an adventure. But what happened that morning has turned that project into a documentary that he's currently working on, to tell what happened on Mt Everest's deadliest day on record. This film is called Bound To Everest, and you can see the trailer on his website, which is BoundToEverest.com. I'll have links to everything in the show notes for this episode.

And if you want to support this podcast, and get exclusive access to bonus episodes, you can do that at WhatWasThatLike.com/support.

And now, please enjoy my conversation with Michael.

Scott

If you had to describe Mount Everest in one word, what would that word be?

Michael

Gigantic.

Scott

Okay. I guess that makes sense. It's got to be almost overwhelming when you're standing there looking at it.

Michael

You can't really see much of that particular mountain itself from base camp because it has a mountain in front of it that's part of it. However, as you trek up towards base camp and as you watch the different mountains such as Ama Dablam, you just feel like there are these giants that are around you. You're at 14,000 feet and they're at 22,000 or 23,000 feet. Then, as you ease your way up, you'll notice these mountains are just bigger and bigger. So, though it doesn't seem that wide, things like the base camp are almost 4 miles across - just a really large section - because they just kind of dwarf anything for me that I had seen on the planet before.

Scott

I've never been to Everest and I would guess most of the people listening to this have not been there. I'd like to have you explain the logistics of getting from somewhere in the US to base camp, and what's involved with actually getting through multiple sections and sectors of the trip, and, then, from there, getting up to the summit. Can you just describe that for someone that has no idea?

Michael

Sure. Say you're leaving from New York - which is where I live - you would fly in the eastern direction. You'll land in Abu Dhabi, Turkey, or somewhere halfway. Then, from there, you would connect to Nepal. So, it's about a 27-35 hour flight depending on what flight you get. Once you're in Katmandu - it's a pretty high elevation, it's about 5,000 feet or so - you kind of land in the middle of the city, which is where you will usually meet your team. A lot of times, for these big expeditions, you would sign up to join a big group. So, you're not just arriving and finding a team. You would've been talking and training for months. Usually, there's someone at the airport to help you get to the hotel. Then, you'll be at the hotel for 2-3 days depending on your group's schedule - each will vary between expeditions.

Scott

So you're there for 2 or 3 days in Kathmandu because you're waiting for other people to—

Michael

Usually, yeah because— for example, for the expedition I went in 2015, we had someone from every continent except Antarctica. So, we would get all those people in - usually, it's 1 person a day in case the bags were late. There's a day to go out to dinner, meet everybody, do some gear checks, and see if anybody's missing something. You can get things much easier and much cheaper in Katmandu than up north or up in the mountains. So, you'll do that and just enjoy some sites and things. You could go to the monkey temple and other types of sites there. After that, basically, you'll be ready to go. Everyone gets up around 3 AM, and we'd meet in the lobby at 4 AM. Then, your goal would be to take a Twin Otter plane there. It's like a turboprop plane that takes about 20 people. That would take about 45 minutes to fly you into the mountains. That's kind of where your trek begins. You would land and you go from 4,000 to 9,000 feet. So, it's a big elevation to, kind of, just jump right in.

Scott

Do you notice that elevation changes as soon as you get off the plane?

Michael

Yeah, the air is much cleaner - that's usually the first thing you notice - but it's also a bit thinner. As you get up, there's less oxygen in the air for your body to use, so it just takes a while for your body to climatize to the different elevations.

Scott

So, now you've flown into Lukla, and from there—

Michael

Basically, over the next 9-10 days - again, depending on what expedition you're on - you will stop in these small towns along the way. So it'll be Phakding, Namche, Tengboche, Dingboche, Lobuche at Gorakshep, and then Everest base camp. At each of these, you'll stay a night. For some of them, they'll stay 2 nights and do a climatization hike during the day. For anyone coming from sea level or not at a great elevation, it's really about getting your body acclimatized to the air. It's hard to describe. On my first trip - we were at about 15,000 feet - I felt bad for a few days, but then I was feeling good. We had some super athletes on our team, so I thought I'd try to impress them by running across a quick valley and then sprinting up a hill to the top. When I got up to the top, it felt like my chest was just being pressed on and I couldn't get any oxygen in there. I had to strip my jacket off and was just barely gasping for air. It felt like I was suffocating although I was completely out in the open air. It was this weird situation that just gave me an idea of what it's like, especially as you get higher as you get to base camp. About half the air was at sea level, and if you went all the way to Everest's top, it's 1/3 the air that was at sea level.

Scott

So, from Lukla to base camp - obviously, you're on foot - you were trekking the whole time with all your gears. Were you carrying it or did you have Sherpas carrying it for you?

Michael

I mean, you can if you're superhuman. Most of the time, you'll carry a 20-something-pound bag. The expedition will take care of hiring either porters or Yaks. So at the beginning of the day, you give them a big duffel bag. Either a guy will carry it or they'll put it on a Yak, depending on how they're doing their logistics. Then, you just have, kind of, a day pack just to get you by until you get to the lodge or the tea house that night.

Scott

What's the overall distance?

Michael

It's about 36 miles. From Lukla, you go from just under 9,000 feet up to 17,005. So, that's about 8,500 feet of elevation change. For a lot of people - including myself - it was the first time being above 12,000 or 13,000 feet. So, you find out - especially with climatization - how your body reacts only when you are physically there. You could be a super athlete on sea level but, for some reason, your body just won't adjust that well. That can easily be remedied by going down to 1 village and just waiting a couple of nights for your body to process and make more red blood cells.

Scott

So, you just don't know till you get there...

Michael

Yeah. You just don't know. I mean, the first time I went, I didn't use— there's a drug that you can use that can help you climatize better. I didn't use it that time and noticed that, at around 11,000 feet, I got really tired and had to basically - everybody went for the hike - lay down for about 24 hours. However, I felt fine the next day. The same thing would happen again at 17,500 feet. But,

at the levels in between, I felt fine - I gradually climatized. Anyway, that's kind of the mystery of things up there that's a wildcard for a lot of people.

Scott

So there's a lot of stuff you can plan for but not everything, though.

Michael

Yeah. People get in trouble as they try to push it too fast. If you go down 2,000 feet, then you're safe. The mountain climbing saying is, "Climb high and sleep low". So, you're constantly trying to push up an elevation to get your lungs used to it but bringing it back down.

Scott

Then, once you get to base camp, that's like, "Okay. Now, you've gotten to the base of where everybody's starting". For a lot of people, there would be a trek in itself just to get to base camp. I know a couple of people that have done that, actually. They had no intention of summiting - just getting to base camp was the adventure.

Michael

Absolutely. During normal years, hundreds of thousands of people will visit the base camp just to trek. So, there's constant trekking both in the spring and the fall season. They make up the largest number of people coming through and leaving. The climbers who live at base camp - as they start their ascent of the mountain - make up a minority of the actual people that visit. So, there's just a constant flood of people when the seasons are nice. If it's nicer for longer, then the mountain is climbable. So, it's a very popular destination. The last time I was there was in the fall. There wasn't a big base camp set up. However, people still get up there, celebrate, and take team pictures. Once you land in Lukla, it's a 9-day journey. Just getting there takes 3 to 5 days, so it's quite a commitment, not a day trip.

Scott

The earthquake and the avalanche that we're talking about happened on 25 April 2015. However, your story really starts with a previous trip to Mount Everest in 2014. What was that about and what happened on that trip?

Michael

Yes. In 2014, I was working for NBC News and a group within them. They were assigned this project where this guy, Joby Ogywn, was going to jump off the top of Mount Everest and wingsuit to the bottom. So, we were hired to produce this live show. We broadcasted it all live. So, it was kind of this incredible undertaking. A live show from Mount Everest had massive logistical challenges. We had 440 cases that needed to get up there. Since there are no roads, everything goes up on yaks - they can only take it so far on a helicopter. The back of yaks is what took most of everything up there. For me, it was my first experience in the mountains at that level. I was into the outdoors when I was younger but, after living in New York City for 15 years, I kind of lost touch with that side of me. So, it was exciting for me to, all of a sudden, be working on a project that I felt I would do in my free time. I was living this adventure of "Oh. This is my job". So, I just felt very lucky and very fortunate. I had a great group of people. I trekked in with a team of 18 people from NBC, some of whom I'm still really good friends with today. So, that was pretty incredible.

We made our way to base camp and we were there for 3 days. Then on the morning of the fourth day - which would have been 18 April 2014 - I woke up and just heard a lot of commotion

from the base camp. I unzipped my sleeping bag and got up. I saw one of my co-workers and asked, "What's going on?" "There's been a big avalanche. It's not looking good" they said. They said, "Let's film it. We're news. We have to cover this". So, we kind of just jumped into this news role and covered what would be one of the deadliest days in Everest history back in 2014. What had happened was, in the Khumbu Icefall - which is the first stage of climbing Everest where more people die, so it's a very dangerous area - some ice had fallen from above on the mountain. We're talking, like, a school bus block size of ice collapsing down thousands of feet. Unfortunately, there were Sherpas underneath it, so 16 Sherpas lost their lives that day. So we were down with the NBC crew. We had really long lenses so we'd be able to film all this. It was kind of a rescue that ended up becoming just a recovery. So, it changed from this incredible stunt about pushing yourself to the max to this very sad somber moment of how deadly the mountain can be.

Scott

So then, a year later, how did you get involved with the trip for 2015?

Michael

So when I came back from Everest, there was just a part of me that really wanted to go back. I just felt like, "If I could picture myself anywhere in the world, it would be there." I wanted to be back there, so I made it a goal that I would do everything I could to try and get on a crew, or find some production filming there. Hopefully, because I was there the year before, that would give me the advantage to be on a team. As January approached, I realized nothing really filtered out. Then, I met with Garrett Madison, who I had met the year before on 2014 as he was kind of the main guide for Joby's team. We had stayed in touch. He would come to New York from time to time. We grabbed a beer and he was like, "Well, why don't you just grab a camera and come with me?" I was like, "That's exactly what I want to do."

Scott

That's what you've been waiting to hear.

Michael

Yes. Fortunately, I had paid off my musician debts from years before and saved up a little bit of money. Then, basically, I put that into camera gear, put the camera gear on credit cards, and gave my 2 weeks to work. Three weeks later, I was on a plane flying to do the first project of my life which would be filming a team going to Mount Everest. It was a big group of people. The Discovery Channel had pre-talked to people because they were talking about maybe doing a show but they canceled it. So, most people were prepped that there might be a show happening. I think they were excited at the fact that someone would be coming and documenting it. For the most part, people were very open to being filmed and very gracious with letting me be there because it does change the environment a little bit if there's a camera around.

Scott

Can you talk about a few of the people that were in your group?

Michael

Yeah. Well, the head guide was Garrett Madison. He's a very accomplished mountain climber and guide. So, he's been doing this for a very long time. We met in 2014 as part of the expedition that we were on in the show and we stayed in contact. He's a very accomplished climber. After I met him, he had just gone to K2 and led one of the first commercial groups to the

top, which was a really big deal. Some people say Mount Everest isn't that difficult to climb - those same people will let you know that K2 was very difficult to climb. So, he was there. There was also Eve Girawong. I had actually introduced her to Garrett in 2014 right after the tragedy. We were down at the hotel in Kathmandu. I met her in the lobby, and then I introduced her to Garrett. Then, they would connect over the next couple of months and whatnot. I found out that she would be the base camp doctor. So, they were on a down low. They were dating but he didn't really want it to get in the way of doing what he was doing because, ultimately, people were putting their lives in his hand. Along the way, they were very professional about that. I didn't see them holding hands. A lot of people didn't even know that they were dating. So, that's how incognito their relationship was.

We had another one named Vibeki Sefland and she was a Norwegian Army officer. I think she's acting as a captain now. She had an incredible story of how she goes and works in combat zones so that she can earn extra money for hazard pay and go climb mountains. There was Haley and Randall Ercanbrack - they were a daughter-father team. She was in her early 30s. He was around 55. They were going to do this together. They both trained and it's kind of fun to have that dynamic of a father-daughter team - though, they were more like friends and buddies. We had Ron Nissen who was an Australian and 70 years old, so that was pretty incredible in itself. He felt this would be the ultimate challenge. He wanted to give it a go. He was a Vietnam veteran and just had a very militaristic mind. He was like, "My main goal is to come back alive". He promised his wife that his main goal was to come back alive, to come back with all his fingers, and to come back from summiting - those were the priorities that she had assigned. Another one was Andrea Cardona and Karl Nessler. So, they were boyfriend and girlfriend at that time. She was the first woman from Central America to climb Mount Everest. Anyway, it's a great cast of characters. There were another 10 or so expedition people along the way as well, plus staff, which was about 50. There were 3 western guides. Then, the main Sherpa guy was named Phurba.

Scott

So, the group arrived at base camp around the 13th of April. Can you take us what was a typical day like from the time you got to base camp? Take us right up to what happened.

Michael

When we arrived at base camp, it was a bit of a celebration especially for me, since I hadn't trained. I think I had hiked enough but I hadn't trained and I brought a 40-pound bag. So, as we were about 6 days in, with all my camera stuff and my laptop - because I just wanted to keep it safe - I realized my arms and shoulders were starting to burn a bit. Getting to base camp would mean you no longer have to carry that backpack anymore as you can have a lighter load after keeping stuff in a tent. In one sense, it's such a benchmark to get there and you have a day or two where everybody just kind of relaxes. They give you the day off. Guides are getting the last finishing things together at the camp to make sure the solar panels work. There has been a team of Sherpa there probably a month earlier that would go to the overall base camp.

For everyone, base camp was about a mile long and about half a mile wide on a moving glacier - the Khumbu glacier. Every season that glacier is moving. If you put a wood structure or something on it, it would break down. So, you have to put tents on it but it's not flat. Usually, in early March, an early group of Sherpa will basically use chisels to make flat areas to put tents. We probably had 25 tents or so. Then, we had a big dining tent, a big communications tent, and a cooking tent. So, it's just kind of this incredible little city. We were 1 of maybe 40 other expeditions. So there were 40 other little base camps within the big base camp that was there.

So, that was kind of the first thing. Then, as people kind of got oriented, we did a Puja, which is a ceremony that's very important in the local Sherpa culture. It's basically a ceremony where you ask the God, Chomolungma - which is the name of Mount Everest for the local culture - if it's okay to step on Him. Basically, "Can I put my foot on you? Can you give me permission to do this? I will be respectful". So, they bring a Lama and, for about 4 hours, the Lama sings chants. Then at the end, it kind of turns into a little bit of a celebration with dancing, and they have a local brew that they make out of yaks milk - the name is escaping me now. So, it's a kind of a day for everybody to get together. No climbing really takes place until then.

Then after that, the guides would start setting up these courses on lower parts of the Khumbu Glacier that are steep. It's where you can practice your ladders and practice clicking in. We would do it in base camp too because it's really about getting everybody synced in as the range of experience of the climbers is anywhere from 5 to 10. Hopefully, nobody's a beginner at 0. There were people that had climbed one mountain or maybe they climbed one mountain but it was 8 months ago. Maybe this is your first time in crampons and bags, so it's just about making sure that you are all kind of in the same direction and rowing in the same direction. Anyway, they would then have a couple of days where they do some courses to just work on those skills. Then, you'd have another rest day. Then, maybe you do a climatization hike to one of the big mountains that you could get to without having to do mountaineering. It was more of a hike. We did do a quick 2-hour run into the Khumbu Icefall, so I did get to experience that for a little while. I got to put on crampons and had the whole thing.

We didn't go over the more dangerous parts. We turned back before. It was a pretty incredible experience, especially knowing how dangerous it is, but how beautiful it is is just such a dichotomy of just all the ice. At any moment, that ice could shift and that shifting ice could fall on you, on someone behind you, or on the rope. So at any point, you really are just trying to move through there as fast as possible although it is easy to kind of get lost in its allure and its beauty, for me.

Scott

I've seen some videos of people going through the Khumbu Icefall and I feel like my biggest fear would be how they set up ladders going across these big gaps. If you fell off the ladder or you slipped off and fell into that hole, who knows how far down it goes? There's no coming out of that, right?

Michael

Yes, exactly. One important thing is that there is a fixed line that they make from the start of the Khumbu Icefall. A group of Sherpa will get there early - they're called the icefall doctors. Then, another group of Sherpa will take it beyond the icefall. As a climber, you're always hooked to this rope. You can use a Jumanji that will give friction to the rope so that can help you climb. If you were on one of those ladders, you should be attached to that in two places, in theory. Anchors can always come out and worst-case scenarios can happen but, in theory, you are always attached to a line that is put in with an ice screw or something every 15 feet or so. When there are so many people going, you have to clip and unclip as someone passes you. There can be hundreds of people going up and coming down at the same time. You have to wait on the ladder for a line of people because there's a bottleneck on this.

Scott

So, there's a brief period of exposure or risk as you unclip while somebody goes by?

Michael

Yeah. I mean, those are certainly important. You don't know who these people are or their level - that's kind of the big question mark. I mean, there's an etiquette that everyone should have - I think a lot of people do - but there are also people who only cared about themselves climbing and getting you out of the way. I haven't spent that much time there but everybody's there for their own reason. A lot of people spent a lot of money to be there. Hopefully, everybody treats each other like human beings and stuff.

It is a business to get people up and down. Each expedition has its own schedule - that's how they're booked for next year. They got people up and down safely, so they have to really shepherd their expedition people first. The overall way that you climb Mount Everest has been that you usually would do it in a thing called "rotations". So again, it's the idea of climbing high and sleeping low. So, your first rotation, which is what the group would go on - we got there on 13 April. Around 22 April, they were there for just under 2 weeks, training, and climatizing. Then, they went to Camp 1. So, their goal is to go to Camp 1, stay there a night, go up to Camp 2, and then come back to Camp 1 - basically, push up a little bit but not all the way up the mountain.

Scott

We should tell people that from base camp to the summit, there are these 4 camps - that's what you're talking about, right?

Michael

Right. So, if you were to do it straight - say, you're already climatized and you got to the end of your rotation, for the second rotation, maybe you'd go to Camp 3 and come back. I've recently heard that groups are skipping that rotation and just going without it to make the trips shorter. Essentially, it would be about 5 days to get from the start of the Khumbu Icefall all the way to Camp 2, which was about 19,000 feet. Camp 2 was about 21,000 feet. Camp 3 was like 23,000 feet. Camp 4 - I don't know the exact elevation - is below 29,000 feet. So, you would kind of have to do all that. Then, you also have to get back down as soon as possible because you're likely to have used all your oxygen. Plus, the most dangerous part is the way down.

Scott

Was Camp 4 at the summit?

Michael

There's a mountain next to Everest called Lhotse, which is the third highest mountain in the world. So, it's kind of a saddle right there. Then, from there, generally, most groups would leave around 9 PM or 10 PM at night and then, hopefully, get to the summit by 4 or 5 AM. To give you an idea, you spend 20 minutes on the summit, turn around, come down, rest at camp for a little bit, and then continue down.

Scott

So much of your group was -

Michael

They were over on their very first rotation. They were at Camp 1. They were making their way to Camp 2. This would be April 25. At that time, right when they were leaving, I came down with the flu. There had been some type of bug going through camp and I had finally gotten it. I was just really dizzy and couldn't really stand for very long. I would get up and film if there was something going on. When they left for their rotation, I would get up and film them. Then, I was

pretty much just out of commission for several days. Finally, on 25 April, I woke up and I felt much better. I got up at about 5 AM. I was the only one around because things don't really get going until 6 or 7. The camp is much emptier because, normally, we have the entire climbing team and Sherpa there. Most of them are all up at Camp 1 or Camp 2, so it was kind of a skeleton crew of staff there. Then, left in base camp were me, Eve the doctor, and Davi who was the son of one of the climbers who came to support him. Climber Ron who hadn't been feeling well while they were hiking up for doing the first rotation was also there. So, he came back. He was just going to sit one out and see how he felt. So, that was kind of the start of the morning.

I woke up and was just feeling better and more energized. It's usually the first day after when you don't feel sick anymore when you're like, "Wow. I actually feel good. Standing up feels good". I just had a serendipitous moment to take in where I was. Thinking back to 4-5 months ago, I wanted to be at Mount Everest working on a documentary. Now, here I am, doing that. I felt very fortunate and very lucky. I was also writing some articles for some other adventure magazines on the side that I would be working on that day. So, I just felt it was like a serendipitous moment in the sense that it seemed like everything had kind of come together. It felt like all the struggles of the past and all the failures were all part of this, kind of, stepping stone to get to this moment. So, I just wanted to take a moment to say thank you because I know we all had failures in life and, sometimes, we need to pick ourselves back up and keep going. It's like, "What's the point?" Maybe that failure is to bring you to your next destination along your journey.

Then, around 11 or so, we were all sitting in the dining tent. I think Davi was in the tent next to us - which was the communication tent - and this is a tent that can fit about 25 people at a table. We just had 4 of us in the middle. I was working on one of these articles when we felt the earth move. I felt one earthquake in California a long time ago - it was kind of my only earthquake - so that gave me just a quick, "That's an earthquake!" in the first second that I felt it. So, I got up, ran, and got my camera. I turned it on as fast as I could. As the ground moved back and forth, it was very hard to stand. You could hear the puja. There's a giant wood pole that was kind of slapping back and forth making just crazy sounds.

As I got rolling, all the rumbling stuff stopped and we came out of the tent. So, Davi, Ron, and I were standing there. We were all looking up at Everest because that's where all our friends were. Of course, after the experience last year, I just had this sinking feeling of like, "This is happening again. This is horrible". I was filming. As I was filming, I was looking for different shots. Again, you're kind of now in your own world. I was like, "What can I capture? What tells the story". So, I filmed Eve and Davi and then Everest again. Then, I filmed some of the Sherpa to see what they were doing. Then, I saw just this massive wall of white coming at us with rock shooting out at an incredible speed that I can't judge how fast - I don't know when it was going to get to us, but it was not going to be long. It was literally like a building falling on top of us. So when that happened, I yelled, "GET DOWN!" Then, I put myself in a precarious place where I basically decided to post up against a small kind of wood stone structure near the puja altar. It was essentially a chimney if you thought about it. For those 12 seconds between the time that it hit and seeing it, in my mind, what made the most sense was to put myself between the avalanche and this rock structure. I felt if I put my shoulder against it, I would somehow be able to hold on. I didn't want to get blown away. So, those were kind of the thoughts going through my head at the time, "Just don't get blown away". So if I put my shoulder against that, I can hold on.

Scott

Also, you were on the side of the rock structure where the avalanche was coming from...

Michael

Yes. It's just weird. It's a decision that I would not make, normally. Obviously, you would want something to block the avalanche from you. It's just kind of one of those things that your mind just— my mind just went someplace. I mean, I was frozen. It just felt like there was no way that any of us were going to survive. So, Ron jumped immediately into a tent. He had the training from his Vietnam days that if you heard, "Get down" he doesn't ask where, they just get down. So, he jumped into one of the long tents. I think Eve jumped into the other tent. Davi kind of ran off. We had like a couple of seconds. Basically, I set my camera down, put my hands over my head, and had about 1 or 2 seconds. Then, this massive blast just hit me into the wall. Then, things got a little fuzzy but I never lost consciousness. It was just this blackness as you just listen to the wind blow. It went on for 5 or 6 minutes of just wind blowing across.

As it finally started to let up, I tried to stand up. There's this part of me that was just like, "I need to get my camera. Something happened. I need to film and I need to document this." As I stood up, I could just see blood come down onto the snow. Then I was like, "Okay. Maybe I need to take a beat". Ron came up and told us you need to go find warm clothes. You look up and all of the 30-40 tents that were around us were gone. Some of them just collapsed. Some of them were nowhere to be found. Ron - who had jumped in the tent in front of me - was 30 feet over to the left but he was okay except for just a couple of bruises. However, for the most part, he was fine. He just got pushed across the ice and rock. Davi had been pushed down in a perfectly good place. I found my tent. I found some warm clothes but then I realized I couldn't stand. Then, looking at the faces of the Sherpa that came over to help me, it looked like I must have been in a pretty bad condition. There were 1 or 2 tents that they had set up that were still okay, so they set us up in there. By then, I started vomiting a lot due to a concussion. Then, we were asking, "So, where's Eve?" No one had seen Eve. At that time, I didn't really have any extra capacity to do much. I was just sitting there and just trying to stop vomiting. Within a few minutes, our base camp manager, Bola, was like, "You guys need to go to Gorakshep. We don't have anything to take care of you here. We have no shelter, no food, and no heat. It's -30 degrees, it's going to be -20 in 6 hours". So, through that, we got up and started this march down to Gorakshep, which was about 3 miles away.

Scott

So, Gorakshep is the last village that you stay in before you get to base camp...

Michael

Yeah. There were still structures there. They were able to radio down and get us a room. So, we just started making our way, although just getting up and standing was kind of a big effort for me. As I was walking, I looked over to where my camera was because I thought I should get my camera. I was just so weak that I couldn't carry anything else. So, I just started marching forward. We kind of did the best we could. It was a very slow march but I think, because Ron was with us, I partially felt a certain amount of wanting to appear tough to just keep going. Then, as I thought we were getting closer, it was like, "I think that's the last bend". Then, you get to that bend and there's another bend that looks exactly like it. By the time I got to the 4th one, I realized that wasn't a good idea. We did finally get to the bends. Then, we could see Gorakshep about half a mile away - at least, you could see it so you know you're getting there. Then, an aftershock happened. It was about a 6.8 aftershock. The original earthquake was 7.8. At that time, I was so physically spent. I looked and there was a big overhang above us. I was just

waiting for the snow to rush over and take us out because there was nowhere to go. I didn't have any energy. I was just like, "Alright. Well, this is it. I guess you got me here". Fortunately, nothing came over. There was no snow up there to be shaken down. So, we made our way to Gorakshep. Someone outside asked if I needed medical help. I said, "Yes. We're gonna be up in this tea house". There was a medic randomly trekking to base camp and, basically, on their way up, kind of, went into full medical mode and help clean up my nose. It was broken. It looked like I had some broken bones in my face. From what they could tell from the vitals, I was okay. I was just really tired. I was still kind of vomiting for the next day or so. Eventually, I slept for a while.

Scott

So, you and Ron made it to Gorakshep along with some others?

Michael

Yeah. Davi was with us as well. Then, one Sherpa was our guide to get there.

Scott

Okay. How long were you there?

Michael

We were there for 2 nights. The next day, Ron met a climber who was from a different team. His company had instructed him that they were sending a helicopter for him. He was going to hike out but they wanted to get a helicopter to get him rescued. So, he was like, "I got extra seats". I was pretty banged up, especially in our lodge, so he offered to give me a ride and give Ron a ride. Davi wanted to go back to base camp to meet up with his father when they would come down because they had their own situation going on up there as well. So, we waited for it. It wouldn't be until the morning - I think it was the morning of the 27th - when it finally came and we were able to just chopper out. Then, just the change of elevation— I mean, we were at about 16,000 feet 17,000 feet at Gorakshep and we basically flew straight to Katmandu town of 5,000 feet. Just when you're that climatized, your body just gets so much more energy when the air gets full. So, from my Amblyopic coma sense - the coma type thing that I was in for the last days - I basically just laid there. I had Tylenol because it's the only drug they had. They only had ice to put on my face and then I just slept. Immediately, I felt better from getting down there. I mean, there was a great sense of relief that we were kind of out of this area because I was absolutely scared and terrified. You're just like, "What are we going to do?"

Scott

You got to be thinking too, "This earthquake was so massive. We just got to get to Katmandu. That's where I can get help and everything's gonna be okay", but that city had been destroyed as well.

Michael

Yeah. It had no power and no water. We saw thousands of people outside of the airport trying to get a flight out but there were no flights at that time because the runway had cracked. So, all of a sudden, there was kind of a realization of, "Well. We've just left one disaster zone and now we're in another". Fortunately, the hotel we were at still had a generator and water. Also, they had a courtyard. Back then, due to frequent aftershocks - we were a little bit removed - a lot of the local Nepalis were sleeping in parks and on the streets because nobody wanted to be in a building as these aftershocks came through.

Scott

So, how did you hear about the rest of your team? When did you get the news about what had happened with them?

Michael

We had a little bit of radio contact with Gorakshep. What we heard from them was that they were all fine. We thought they would have had the biggest problems being up on the mountain but they were all fine. One person was a little sick but it wasn't serious. No one had heard from Eve. We still had no report on where Eve was at. So, that was the news that we had. Then after we arrived in Katmandu, I walked around. I walked to the local Nepali guide service, which is the Western guide service hires who do all the logistics. When I walked there to talk to them to get some news, that's when I found out that Eve had passed away. She had died that day, essentially - that was a big moment. After not hearing anything about her, you certainly have a suspicion at that point. Then you're like, "Okay. So that is what it is". So, that was a very somber moment to just realize this person standing next to you who shared this incredible adventure with over 25 days. I mean, I really got to know her very well. I filmed with her a lot - probably more than anyone else - so it was very heartbreaking.

Scott

It's just so ironic that the people who were up on the mountain - stranded between Camp 1 and Camp 2 or somewhere in that area - were the ones that were pretty much safe. The people at base camp— you would think it would be safer but that's where all the disaster was.

Michael

Yeah. I mean, this was the first time that base camp - from what people know - has ever been hit by an avalanche like that. The years before, you'd see avalanches happening in the nearby mountains but, again, the width of the mountain is 2-3 miles across, so there's plenty of room. There was a gully for the snow to go, so that keeps the base camp removed. But this was the first time there was that big of an earthquake since people have been up there.

Scott

When you found out that Eve didn't make it— I'm thinking about if I were in that position, I'd need to sit and process that for a while, not really believing that it could have really happened. Did you kind of replay your last interactions with her?

Michael

Not on that particular day. I mean, what ended up happening for me was, because I used to work with NBC News, one of my friends from New York called to make sure I was okay. He was the first person to get a hold of me out of anyone. My hotel room phone rang and I was just like, "Who's calling me?" He was just making sure I was okay. Then, they asked if I'd be interested in working as a stringer. NBC News had a team there and he was like, "Would you want to work for them?" I was like, "Yeah!". The team itself was still up at the mountain and they were anywhere from 5-7 days to get down. I was gonna wait for everyone to come back. I knew I didn't want to just sit around, so I just tried to keep myself as busy as possible. I went over and met with the executive producer and he just kind of put me to work right away. All I wanted to do was, basically, work as much as I could and when the moment did come, I would finally get a day off.

Ron had been my roommate for several days. He had just left. So, it was kind of my first day just completely alone. Most of the group hadn't made it down yet. That was my big breakdown

day, which is hard to describe. I was just trying to keep myself busy. I really rearranged all the furniture in the hotel room so I could do yoga, stretch, and do some push-ups. I think I did all 10 minutes of that. Then, I kind of just sat there and that's when I was completely overwhelmed by what had happened. You don't know why you're crying, but you're just crying and crying. Someone had found my iPhone which was great because I hadn't had it until, literally, that day when they gave it to me in the lobby. So I was able to put music on. I hadn't really had any music. Music's very important for me to process stuff, and just generally. So, I kind of decided to just go into the bathtub, put on the water, and put on some music. I was there for about 4.5 hours. I think I just kind of just kept replaying it. The walls there were white. You feel a tremor from time to time and you're like, "What happens if there's another earthquake?" I was trying to figure out how am I getting out. It's just a very intense and somber time to let things come because you have the big questions like, "Why would she be the one taken out of four of us?" Basically, the last thing that I said was "Get down" and she said, "Where should we go?" Because I was just in this stuttery frozen sense, I was like "Get down! It doesn't matter where". Unfortunately, there's certainly something that stayed with me - like you wish you would have just grabbed her and pulled her by you though, granted, I wasn't putting myself in a very safe position as well. It was just those 12 seconds - because I filmed it, I'm able to literally count the time.

Scott

Your camera was going the whole time, right?

Michael

Yeah. So, it went for another 45 minutes after that avalanche hit, so it was just a really long clip. The microphone was working. So, you can just really count out like, "I see it here. I sat down. It was about 2 seconds. Then, there was a hit." So, I can hear that every time I go through it. I've looked at the footage thousands of times. Even now, I'm still working on some stuff - working on a trailer - and just cutting that stuff together. 5 years later, the emotions are still there and they are still kind of intense. Every once in a while, I just have to take a break and be like, "You know what? I can't do that right now". So, I would put it down for a few days and come back but I believe it's a really important story for me to tell for personal reasons. I think it's an overall important story for other people to watch and experience.

Scott

Yeah. You're taking that footage along with you that you had shot, previously, and creating a documentary - we'll talk about that. You went back to base camp in 2018, 3 years later. Why was that?

Michael

Basically, from the time I got back to New York, all I wanted to do was work on this documentary. I was just like, "I need to make this mean something. I had been given this gift. The fact that the hard drive survived—" I mean, the hard drives I got were in the snow - they got blown by 100-mile-per-hour wind. When they brought them back down and they worked, there was something powerful there that I felt like I was obligated to do something. I remember when I was finally leaving Kathmandu, there were some ministry workers, a lot of religious workers, and missionaries who had come to help out with the devastation. I kind of told them a little of my story. He was like, "Well. God must have a plan for you." At that time, I was like, "I'm not ready to start processing that yet. I didn't want to do that." So, the path I took to being okay was a very long period of time. I did feel like I've always been a storyteller. I was a musician for a long time trying to be a storyteller. As I got into this sense to be in video and documentaries as a

storyteller, all of a sudden, this story is difficult to tell. It's like, "This has been given to you. Either stop being a storyteller or you need to tell the story no matter what."

So, going back to 2018, basically, I had been working off and on the documentary. I've been making different cuts and then I'd go work for a couple of months. I'd get kind of too fried from it. Then, I'd take a step back and work on it for a couple of months again. It was in this limbo place. There was a part of me that always wanted to go back no matter what. Even when I came back, I want to go back. Then, some of my friends from the expedition - that I stay in touch with - were just like, "I think it would just be a good button for the movie to go back as well." So, as I was getting ready to go, I kind of went and saw *Free Solo*, which was a big hit and a great movie. When I first saw it, I actually got a lot of anxiety. It was because, as a filmmaker that wanted to make a movie, I was like, "How do we make a movie that good? How is that possible?" I think it was good to have that moment because it allowed me to identify that there are really 2 things that I'm trying to accomplish there and they're separate. One is way more important and is my personal reason to go back there - to feel okay and feel closure. The other is to shoot a film, but shooting the film isn't the reason to go there. The reason to go there is to, kind of, come to terms and go to that spot. So, I kind of gave myself permission to feel that closure if I went. Then, if I didn't want to do the movie anymore, that's okay. It was really about just moving on with life - that is a powerful reason as well. I would say that there was a change when I came back where I was just clear.

I was able to go to Eve's Memorial and just have a very emotional moment there and also got to go back up to base camp to just stand there and not feel like anything was gonna happen to me. The last 2 times I was there, bad things happened, and one of those times was to me. So, that was a big deal. I think it was just, from a psychological standpoint, to close those gaps. Actually, I'm supposed to be there right now to work on another project. Now, I feel kind of clear and I'm not going to have those demons or those kinds of things in the back. You want to be courageous as much as possible. So it feels like I'm in a much better space because I went back and revisited that place.

Scott

Where is Eve's Memorial, and who built that?

Michael

There's a group of memorials for the fallen climbers that is right below Lobuche, which is around 16,000 feet. There were people like Scott Fischer who disappeared into thin air. He was a guy that had passed away amongst many others. So, basically, I think if you have a loved one who died, you can pay to have a memorial put there. They're made out of stone. So they made sure they made one. By the next year, there was a memorial for Eve there, which was really beautiful.

Scott

I like the idea that you have incorporated so much in the little bit of footage that I've seen. Every time there was a scene with Eve, she was smiling and laughing. She seemed like the kind of person that, when you go into a room or when you see her come into a room, would just make you happy because she's there.

Michael

Yeah, she had that effect. She just was a very giving person, quick to smile, quick to laugh, and very helpful. Again, we ended up connecting because, personally, we got along very well. From

a story standpoint, the doctor is going to be the one checking in with everyone there, so I would check in with her on how people were doing. If someone was having a problem, maybe that might be something that we wanted to capture on film, if they were okay with it. So, I was constantly checking in with her and doing those things. She was just a very giving person. I think we all know those people that just seem to kind of give way more than they get back - she was one of those people and it was sad. It was hard to understand why someone like that would be taken. I'm sure there are plenty of people that are the opposite on the same mountain, but who knows how those things work? There are no real answers for that.

Scott

The randomness of it is what seems so cruel because she was right there with you. Ron was there and yet it's just what happened. This whole experience has spanned over a few years of your life. The first trip was in 2014. Now, we're at 2020. Now, you're working on making this documentary. How have you changed since that first trip?

Michael

Well, I think I'm a lot more focused. I think, in 2014 - even though I wasn't involved in the accident, it's not nearly as close as I was in 2015 - there was one shot I just remember as they started the recovery and a helicopter would come in with a line. They called it a long lining. It was a line hanging down about 100 feet below it that they needed to get out the bodies and the only way to get the bodies out is to use the helicopter. So, you'd have this guy attached to his harness and he's just a lifeless being, taken across base camp so that he can be prepared to be taken down to Kathmandu. Upon seeing that, it kind of just struck me that that man was alive 6 hours ago. Now, that guy is not alive. I think that image kind of stuck with me when I got back to New York. So, that really motivated me to be like, "I don't want to be working on things that I don't care about." We all have to do what we have to do but one of those things for me was to, at least, be working towards things that I really want to do, which was go back to Mount Everest - or go be in the mountains and film adventure. So, that kind of helped narrow the focus there. That's probably why I was pretty trigger-happy after talking with Garrett, and that worked out. It wasn't a good plan on my part if I didn't have all this money saved to come back.

If I went back in time, I certainly was not as prepared as I should have been when I watched some of my camera footage. I've had some camera DPs say, "Mike, I just wish you were a better camera guy when you were there" and I was like, "Sorry. I was doing the sound. I was asking the questions. I was doing the camera. It was my first time at 60,000 feet". I would say that. Then, coming back, I just had the singular focus on doing the documentary as it's gotten in the later stages. Now, there are other things, but the first 3.5 years have been about making the story, how to tell the story, journaling about it, writing scripts, editing together, showing it to people, getting their comments, journaling about it more, writing more scripts, and editing it. So, this is kind of the 3rd version of doing it. Then, going back in 2018 was just this just kind of massive month and a half long thing. We were busy every day, writing stuff out, even now, as I just kind of focused all my energy on it. I tried to work 40-50 hours a week on it. It felt like there was not enough time in the day to do all the things that were necessary, but I was trying as hard as I can to get them done.

At the age of 43, when I was a musician, if I was able to focus like this, maybe it would have been better. Now, I know how to get projects done and how to focus on them, and it has this gravitas behind it. It's not just some story that I don't care about. It's the story that I really need to show and I did have a couple of screenings. I did one in January and then also one in February. They were just local. One was at a local library with about 40 people aged 14 to 80. It

was kind of this cross-section of people. That's a lot of people to come out, especially in the small town that I'm living in now. So, I sat at the back and just kind of had this incredible experience. I mean, I sat there with a notebook ready to watch when people would shift in their chairs, start coughing, get up to get a glass of water, just to see when people kind of became disinterested because it's just been me.

I had done a couple of small screenings with friends. For the most part, they all know me, so they're going to like it no matter what. I needed to show people who didn't know my story and let them see it for the first time. It was a better response than I could imagine because, for the whole 90 minutes, 2 things happen. One is they paid attention and nobody went to the bathroom. One person started coughing because he had something in his throat and the wife didn't feel like she could get water because it would interrupt everybody. It was pretty funny. They were just frozen and it was good. In the end, people would cry. There were tears. Many people came up to me. I also noticed this was something special. Although it's my story, Eve's story, Garrett's story, Haley's story, and Randall's story, it's all of our stories, they were able to put their own story on top of it and, somehow, it became something else. Whether it's how everyone's lost someone - so maybe it triggers emotions like that - or whatever it is, there's something in there that was able to become theirs all of a sudden. That was kind of a magical moment that seemed to happen when I did the first one. Then, the one I did at The Explorers Club in New York was a similar type of feeling. All of a sudden, they became part of it - how and why they connected with it, they have their own reasons - and I think that's something that definitely inspires me now to do the rest of the work that it takes to deliver a final version of it.

Scott

Yeah. You've got the basis of a really good film here. So, you just got to tie it all together, tighten it up and, of course, that's where all the details—

Michael

The admin days - those are not different days. I'd rather be editing or shooting.

Scott

I know anyone that wants to, could go and watch the trailer for your documentary. How can they find that and how can they get in touch with you, if they want to?

Michael

Sure. Well, I have a website that's at boundtoeverest.com, or you can email me at michael.churton@gmail.com.

Scott

Well, I'm really looking forward to seeing the final product. So, when it comes out, the email, website, and everything, we'll have links to all that in the show notes for this episode as well. So, people can go there and find that stuff, and I'm looking forward to the documentary when it's done. Thanks for sharing your story.

Michael

Well, thank you for having me.

Scott

You know, even after hearing about what has happened to Michael on those trips to Everest, I would still love to make that trek up to Base Camp. It just seems like such an incredible place, and you're guaranteed to meet some amazing people there. Maybe someday, who knows.

Okay, a couple of things before we close the door on this episode.

First up, right now I'm working on the next episode of Raw Audio, which is the bonus content that's available exclusively to Patreon supporters at the \$5 level or higher. Every one of these includes some intense calls to 911, as well as the story that goes along with it to tell you what was happening, and how it turned out. If you'd like to get every one of those bonus episodes, you can join at WhatWasThatLike.com/support.

And finally, I got this message from a listener named April, and it was related to a previous episode title Spence is a Lighthouse Keeper. You can listen to it at WhatWasThatLike.com/40, since it was episode 40. This was actually a really popular episode, and part of it was how Spence was describing his work on this island, and the fact that the vast majority of his time is spent alone. So April had some thoughts about that, and here's the audio message she sent me:

April

Hi, Scott. I'm April. I'm a listener in London, England. I recently discovered your podcast and I've been working my way through the back catalogue. This has definitely become one of my favorite podcasts. I listened to the lighthouse episode and I thought I would just send you a message about it. I'm a lawyer in the City of London. On the face of it, you wouldn't have thought that Spencer and I had much in common. Probably, if you asked me a few months ago, I would have agreed with that. I was working long hours going 100 miles an hour - going to the gym, social life, networking, training, all sorts of things. So we're running around all the time. But since Coronavirus happened, my life has changed quite significantly and I have spent most of my time in my flat in central London. I'm mainly alone with my two cats. I know that, probably, a lot of people would be worried that I would be lonely, isolated or sad. I know a lot of people are feeling those emotions in these times. But the truth is, for me, it has actually been really nice. I sort of felt my body breathing a sigh of relief when I realized I don't have to see anyone. I think there's so much pressure to be a certain way and not just in jobs like mine. Generally, I think people expect that humans are social creatures. They want to be in groups. They want to be meeting with friends, family, and partners. If you are not like that, then maybe there's something wrong with you or there's something strange or you have some sort of illness. Actually, listening to that episode about how comfortable Spencer is about his joy in being alone was really wonderful. There was no, sort of, inkling of self consciousness about his choices and desires, and I found that really comforting and familiar. It made me feel like I wasn't alone in wanting to be alone, which is quite special. So thank you, and thanks to Spencer.

Scott

I love that perspective! Thank you very much, April, for sending that in. I'm actually kind of the same way, in the sense that I don't really mind being alone with my thoughts. I don't know, we're just all different. But I did really enjoy hearing April's perspective on that.

And right now, there's some editing that's waiting for me for the next episode, so I need to get back to work! See you next time.