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## DEADLY DESCENT

FORT COLLINS CLIMBER RELIVES DAY  
OF TRAGEDY AND SURVIVAL ON MT. RAINIER

# A tale of two fates

## When two climbing buddies from Fort Collins hiked Mount Rainier, only one made it out alive. A new TV program recalls the fateful day and the loss of a friend.

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Father's Day and tired but triumphant Fort Collins climbing partners Jim Davidson and Mike Price were gravitating toward their rental vehicle after spending the last four days successfully climbing Mount Rainier's 14,410-foot peak. All that separated them from their ride and flight home was a 45-minute walk off a glacier and two-hour hike through the forest.

It was spectacularly sunny on that June 21, 1992, morning on the beautiful mountain southeast of Seattle. Earlier that morning, about 8:30 a.m., the two stood atop the Northwest's most recognizable landmark and snapped a few photos to commemorate another great day climbing together.

They saw a dozen, maybe two dozen, climbers on the same trail coming and going that morning as the roped-together climbers made their way through the crevasse-laden minefield that was the glacier.

Following the footprints of other climbers, Davidson veered three steps off the trail to the right of the foot path upon seeing a crevasse to his left. He probed with his ice axe to feel and heard if the snow was safe. It felt solid, then he started sinking. At first he believed it to be nothing more than soft snow from the sun's warmth. He sunk to his knees when he yelled "falling", a warning for his partner to drop to the ground and start using his ice axe to self-arrest and stop the two from sinking.



Up to his waist in the quicksand-like snow, Davidson clawed feverishly with his ice axe at the slushy snow as Price dug in with all his strength to prevent the two from being swallowed up by the crevasse.

Flailing downward into the crevasse, Davidson swung his ice axe to try and stick it into the crevasse wall and help Price who now was the team's sole lifeline. But Davidson's ice axe fell from

his grip into the depths of the crevasse. Shortly thereafter, it was Davidson who was falling, dragging his partner who was tied in 50 feet up the rope with him over the lip of the crevasse.

Miraculously after falling 80 feet into the crevasse, the two were still alive. By sheer luck, instead of falling to the depths of the crevasse and certain death, the two were spared when Davidson's backpack wedged between

the crevasse wall and an ice slab. Still, the fall created an unappetizing sandwich of backpack, Davidson, snow, Price and more snow. Buried in that precarious avalanche, life was dangling in the balance.

Davidson dug deep into his physical and mental skills to muster the strength and will to dig himself out of the sandwich and for the next five hours scale sheer ice walls the likes of

which he'd never even attempted using makeshift gear to save himself. His climbing partner, Price, wasn't as lucky, perishing in the crevasse from the fall.

Fittingly, the story is currently being retold on Animal Planet's popular

show "I Shouldn't Be Alive. The segment is titled "Killer Crevasse." See breakout box for show times. Also, Davidson has co-authored a book with former Coloradoan and current Denver Post reporter Kevin Vaughan, a 2008 finalist for a Pulitzer Prize, titled "The Ledge," which is scheduled to be released by publisher Ballantine Books/Random House on July 26.

Price's parents now live in Oklahoma and his brother still lives in Fort Collins.

Here is a Q&A with Davidson about the tragedy and the Animal Planet show.

**Question:**  
What went through your mind as

you're falling into the unknown?

**Answer:** It's a cliché to say that everything slows down, but it does. I don't think time slows down but your brain is so alert and sucking in everything. I

had plenty of time to think.

**Q:**  
What were



< Jim Davidson on the summit of 26,906-foot Cho Oys in Tibet in September 2009.

your thoughts when you realized you had survived the fall but were buried?

A: I

had avalanche training and had made a volleyball-sized pocket in front of my face. I couldn't believe I had survived. I remember seeing some light then snow piling up then the impact of something (Mike). I didn't know where Mike was because I was completely buried. I thought this is it; I had a good life.

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### Show times

Here are the next scheduled airings of "Killer Crevasse" on Animal Planet's show "I Shouldn't Be Alive", which recounts the tragedy of Fort Collins climbers Jim Davidson and Mike Price:  
> 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. Jan. 26  
> 2 a.m. Jan. 27  
The show will appear periodically after that. Visit <http://animal.discovery.com/tv/i-shouldnt-be-alive/> for additional times and dates.

### About Davidson

> Visit his website: [www.speakingofadventure.com](http://www.speakingofadventure.com)

< At left, Jim Davidson hikes along The Narrows on Longs Peak.

> At right, Jim Davidson is pictured in June 1998 on 20,320-foot Imja Tse in Nepal.

Photos courtesy of Jim Davidson



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**Q: How were you able to escape from the burial?**

**A:** I first tried to push up with my entire body three or four times but couldn't. I had taken some martial arts classes and focused on putting all my mental and physical energy into pushing with one arm. I pushed really hard and an ice chunk the size of a cinder block rolled out of the way and I was able to reach my hand out and could feel I was buried about 6 to 8 inches. I dug down to one eye then was able to dig to my mouth and with my fingers clear the snowball out of my mouth from the fall. When I was part way out, I couldn't see Mike but I could hear him breathing, then more struggled breathing and then the breathing stopped. When I first saw Mike, his face was buried about 2 feet from mine. I did CPR to Mike while half buried then dug out completely and did more CPR.

**Q: What's it like lying in a crevasse knowing your partner is dead and that you could also be dead?**

**A:** First, it was all about the loss of my friend. I started choking up and put my head on his chest and tears started forming. I was kind of in a daze trying to fight off fear and sadness then survival instinct kicked in and I thought not now, later, but not now. It was like my survival instinct grabbed me by the collar and started shaking me.

**Q: After survival instinct grabbed you, how much chance did you give yourself getting out of the crevasse?**

**A:** I looked at the walls and they were 80 degrees then 90 degrees then more than 90 degrees and remember saying out loud, "Oh Mike, we're in trouble, big, big trouble." I had been climbing for 10 years but there was no way I was going to get up those walls. I was a solid intermediate climber but these walls were world class. Maybe the best guy on his best day could do it, but not me. It took my brain awhile to get around that.

**Q: How was your gear situation?**

**A:** I gathered my gear, and had to climb below our ledge to

retrieve my ice axe, had some ice screws and other gear then came up with a self-belay system that I had never used before but had read about in a climbing book. I had never used ice screws to gain an ascent before either. But I had a role model. I had read a book "Touching the Void" by Joe Simpson. It is a tremendous climbing book. I had this little argument in my head that if Joe Simpson could climb out of a crevasse by himself, then I could. But then I told myself yeah, but he's Joe Simpson and you're not that good. I didn't really believe myself that I could do it but was trying to talk myself into it and that technically it could be done.

**Q: What's the feeling when you finally reach the surface?**

**A:** I pull over the lip of the crevasse and damn near slipped back in because the snow was rotten on top because of the heat. I was pawing at that rotten snow, slithering to get out and wallowing on my belly before finally crawling about 3 feet from the crevasse. I had anchored Mike in the crevasse and used pretty much the last of my gear to set an anchor at the top so that if the ledge Mike was on collapsed he could still be retrieved.

**Q: Why didn't anyone help you if the crevasse was so close to a route where so many climbers were?**

**A:** The hole we fell through was only about 2 to 3 feet by 3 feet. When other climbers saw the opening, they went around it. There are thousands of crevasses on Rainier so they moved away from it. They were walking above my head on the snow bridge while I was climbing up. I had yelled earlier but the crevasse seemed to swallow it up. The only way they could have heard was to have their ear over the opening.

**Q: You're out but you still have to get off the glacier. How did you do that?**

**A:** I thought about walking out but had 1,000 vertical feet of glacier yet. I knew I would have to cross more glaciers. I saw footprints over the same snow bridge over the crevasse we were in but knew I couldn't walk over it, especially with no gear. I knew there was a ranger station about 1,000 feet below. I sat there huddled on my helmet with my hood pulled over when I saw some-

one with coffee. I waved my hands and jumped up. He went away but came back with someone else and an hour and half later they rescued me.

**Q: How did being featured on the show come about?**

**A:** Someone from Darlow Smithson Productions in London came across the series of articles that Kevin Vaughan had done on the accident in 2008 while at the Rocky Mountain News. They asked me if I would agree to do an interview for the show. I was reluctant until I saw that it was Darlow Smithson. They made the movie "Touching the Void" as well as doing "I Shouldn't Be Alive." As climbers, we see a lot of bad Hollywood climbing movies but "Touching the Void" was extremely accurate and well made. That gave me confidence that they would do a good job.

**Q: In the show, they use actors to recreate the event intertwined with an interview that you did. When, where and what was the interview process like?**

**A:** I did nine hours of interview in late June of last year in a dark room with bright lights shining on me at the Embassy Suites in Loveland. The cameraman told me this is not an interview, this is an interrogation. It was day of someone asking me very personal detailed questions about the worst day of my life when I lost my friend. I'm a professional speaker and have told the story hundreds of times and just finished co-writing the book so it surprised me how emotional it was for me. I went deeper and deeper and deeper into the memories.

**Q: What did you think about the show?**

**A:** I was nervous on how it was going to come out. I watched the premiere with my wife and kids and some climbing friends. I could see right away it was accurate and said it out loud that they really got it right. I felt I was back in the crevasse. When the show started, it was sort of surrealistic. I had this out-of-body experience while hearing them saying my name and Mike's name and I'm seeing in front of me what I've been remembering in my head for 18 1/2 years. It was outside of me now instead of inside of me. It felt very real to me and I was scared.