

IN MEMORY OF MIKE SIMPSON



Photo by Greg Shea

An Inspiration

by David Pinel

Mike “Homer” Simpson, owner of West Coast Expeditions (WCE), and a Level III Guide and Guide Trainer with the Sea Kayak Guides Alliance of BC (SKGABC), lived more than two lives in one. At the end of a fantastic season of guiding in Kyuquot, realizing many of his dreams, Mike suddenly collapsed from seizures related to a slow-growing and well-established brain tumour that not even he knew about. Chemotherapy treatment, inimitable positive energy, and loving support through the fall and winter made no impact on the tumour. Soon after his 53rd birthday, Mike died in his sleep on February 14, 2007. We’ve lost an outstanding human being, and one of our country’s most professional and energetic sea kayaking guides and instructors. His legacy will live on in West Coast Expeditions.

Mike put his full body, mind and soul into everything he did. If you had the privilege of being one of his kayaking guests or students, you knew that he was giving you at least 120% of himself. If he’d learned it, he would share it. If he didn’t know it, he would learn it, then share it. He enabled people to push their boundaries with ever-increasing challenges and real-life learning opportunities on trips and courses. His brain was an encyclopedia on whatever interested him. His kayaking passions ranged from coaching technical strokes and navigation skills, to detailed trip planning and weather observation, to sharing natural wonders and cultural history. He had more energy than a pack of excited children on an Easter egg hunt. His systems were dialled. He was always prepared. And no hour was complete without some side-splitting laughter from his full-body dramatized jokes and stories.

To me, Mike was more than a working colleague, more than just another guide, and even more than my friend—over the last six years, he’d become my wing-man for sharing the wonders of paddling in Kyuquot.

Born in Vancouver, the middle of seven siblings, Mike was easily distracted by all activities that smelled of fun, physical and mental challenge, precision, opportunity, high accountability, and full commitment. Mike served in the Canadian Forces for twenty years, the last thirteen of which he served as an elite Search and Rescue Technician (SAR Tech)—saving the bacon

of those in distress, and being awarded a Medal of Bravery. He was supremely competent in everything he put his mind to.

After retiring as a SAR Tech, Mike immersed himself with Mount Washington’s Ski Patrol on Vancouver Island, both patrolling and coordinating patrol training. Not one to sit idle for more than fifteen seconds, he started learning to sea kayak in the late 90s. Quickly hooked, he diligently prepared to become a guide. After years at the rescue end of the outdoor adventure recipe, he didn’t take any short-cuts in preparing to lead others on the water. Mike completed his SKGABC Guide Leadership Training and Assistant Guide certification in 2001, and began working as an apprentice guide with WCE on Spring Island in Kyuquot Sound toward the remote NW end of Vancouver Island. Mike honed his guiding skills over a couple of seasons to become a certified SKGABC Level 3 Guide and lead guide with WCE.

In May 2003, Mike solo-circumnavigated Vancouver Island before his season of work. And in July 2004, he paddled to work in Kyuquot—starting nine days away in Port Hardy!

Mike was still relatively new to the sea kayaking industry and community—just gaining his stride and momentum, and ready to make even bigger contributions.

He bought WCE in 2005 and, together with his wife and best friend, Kim Letson, and their two sons, Brian and Kyle, had been building on the company’s 32-year legacy in Kyuquot: continuing close relations with the local community, improving the comforts of the base camp on Spring Island, developing programs for family groups and novice to advanced paddlers, and maintaining trails and services on Spring Island for the use of all recreational visitors. True to the foundations of WCE, he was passionate about “educating, motivating, and inspiring” others. As testimony to Mike’s infectious and engaging spirit, many colleagues, friends, and family are working to ensure that WCE continues to move forward and thrive, this season and beyond.

When Mike collapsed at the end of August 2006, there was an overwhelming outpouring of support from 442 Squadron at CFB Comox, the community of Kyuquot, Voyager Water Taxi, Nootka Sound Service Ltd. (M.V. Uchuck III), Air Nootka, Mount Washington Resort and Ski Patrol, Comox Valley Kayaks, and innumerable friends and family, many of whom had themselves experienced Mike at his finest on Spring Island.

Mike was the quintessential “life-long learner” with a zest to live each day fully. He cheered for and helped facilitate the dreams of each person he met. We’ll miss his resounding, “let’s give it a try!” We’ll miss his untameable laughter and mischievous humour. We’ll miss his addiction to recycling. We’ll miss the unique pleasure of sharing time on the water and coast with him. I miss this one-of-a-kind Canadian and friend. ↴

David Pinel guides with West Coast Expeditions in Kyuquot (www.westcoastexpeditions.com), and coordinates North Island College’s Adventure Tourism Programs on Vancouver Island (www.nic.bc.ca/tourism).