

AVALANCHE:
Preparedness is key to survival

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in sight, Rudinsky felt the ground beneath her feet giving way; without warning she was suddenly being carried down the mountain in an avalanche.

Rudinsky was approximately 10-15 feet above Lowman when the avalanche was triggered. Suddenly she was caught up in the rush of dry and light snow four feet deep. An immediate attempt to anchor herself with her ice pick failed and she was suddenly “sucked under” and tumbling down the hourglass feature of the slope. Lowman reached out to try and grab her as she was carried by, but she was just out of reach.

This was a moment of overwhelming despair, yet Lowman knew he needed to stay focused on where Dani would end up so that he could dig her out. Seconds later a second avalanche was triggered. Lowman’s position by a rime ice ledge offered some protection but he was still carried downhill until he could self-arrest and free himself. Amazingly, he was able to turn on his beacon while still sliding, something he knew would be critical to their rescue.

Rudinsky was still being carried downhill when she felt herself suddenly somersaulting in the air after being launched off a rock band. After a hard landing back on the ice, she immediately realized she had sustained a debilitating injury. Despite the velocity of the slide, she had been able to use her arms to form a barrier around her head, creating an air pocket that would remain when she finally stopped at the bottom — something that she knew could keep her alive while being dug out.

In the first moments after the avalanche concluded,

Lowman searched for any sign of where Rudinsky could be buried, hoping he would see a glove or something else penetrating the surface. He soon spotted something 500 feet below that looked like a rocky formation — but he quickly realized it was actually his partner. And then he heard her voice calling.

Adrenaline and focus helped him safely scramble down the debris path to where she was, and after catching his breath, utilized his EMT training to begin assessing her condition. Thanks in part to a shallow snow depth, as the avalanche spread out, the extreme event had a very different ending than it might have had — a fact that both Rudinsky and Lowman are mindfully aware of.

At noon the call for help was made and initial responders were there within an hour.

Extensive training and preparation all played a part in both Rudinsky and Lowman knowing what to do while trying to survive what they hoped would never happen. They made the decision that day not to rope up to one another after assessing conditions and it was a decision that turned out to be potentially lifesaving. Had they been roped, both Rudinsky and Lowman would have been pulled under together and the outcome could have been very different. They also took their avalanche gear despite seasonal timing making it seem unnecessary. Their Garmin, cell phones and battery charges were all critical equipment as well and helped them call for help

as well as communicate an accurate location to the rescue teams.

Both Rudinsky and Lowman had previously spent time on mountain rescue teams so their respect and gratitude for all who provided aide came on multiple levels. After coming directly off of another critical mountain rescue, teams had no chance to recuperate before responding to this second call for help. There were five teams involved and first on scene was Portland Mountain Rescue, followed by American Medical Response (AMR), Timberline Ski Patrol (to ski Rudinsky down), Crag Rats (helping with the anchors to haul her up), and the Deputy assigned to that area.

Despite fatigue, team members offered expert care and communicated that this could have happened to anyone. Reassurance from those with a high level of technical expertise and experience on the mountain brought great comfort.

After an assessment from AMR, it was determined that Rudinsky could be safely taken down the mountain without their advanced medical involvement, however they stayed on scene in support. Preparations were made for stability in the descent, and 10 hours after the avalanche began, Rudinsky and Lowman were safely back to their vehicle.

Fortunately, Rudinsky’s ankle injury allowed them to drive back to Central Oregon on their own to seek medical intervention.



PHOTO BY SHELBY LOWMAN

Danielle Rudinsky, moments before the slope gave way.

After time recovering both physically and emotional from their ordeal, both Rudinsky and Lowman are mindful of several take-aways. They both have an even greater understanding of how important the choice of an experienced climbing partner is and are grateful to have had each other in those critical moments.

Thorough preparation is essential. Lowman shares this advice: “Prep for whatever objective you’re going through, and if you think you’ve prepped enough, go over it and do it again. Overprepare for any climb you are going on.”

Rudinsky’s broadened awareness is similar and speaks to many aspects of life: “Research, research, research... small and big.”

As Rudinsky considers

the life she now lives, she brings it back to her time in IEE and the impact teacher Rand Runco and other community supporters had in her life. From an early age, she was given the opportunity to explore, learn about and survive in natural spaces. Then, through Runco’s focus on community involvement, outdoor experiential learning objectives and building a solid, successful and experienced volunteer base, she was able to identify opportunities that may not have been realized otherwise.

IEE became a catalyst built upon community values, integrity and possibilities that empowered her to reach for her dreams and build a life of passion and purpose. Reflecting on the value of IEE, she said, “Some things we need to protect and keep alive.”

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