

# The Wright Story

When the avalanche struck, Ron and Lauren Konowitz thought they were going to die. One skier in their party did die. They still find it painful to talk about that day, but they agreed to do so in the hope others will learn from their experience. Here's what really happened on Wright Peak.

By PHIL BROWN  
EXPLORER STAFF

Soon after her first visit to the Adirondacks, Lauren Donald met the man she would marry, Ron Konowitz, a schoolteacher in Keene and one of the region's most talented and adventurous backcountry skiers. The following year, in August 1999, she and Ron were married on top of Algonquin Peak. Their dog, Otis, was the best man.

That winter the Konowitzes (and Otis) would be caught in the worst avalanche in the history of the Adirondacks. It killed one of their companions, Toma Vrcarich, 27, of Lake Placid. Lauren, then 29, suffered a skull fracture and broke four major bones, two in her left leg and two in her right arm. Ron, 45, escaped with minor injuries and bruises. A fourth skier, Russ Cook, 26, broke a leg. Otis was not hurt.

The disaster occurred on Wright Peak. In September, in the aftermath of Hurricane Floyd, heavy rains had caused landslides on several Adirondack peaks, leaving swaths of raw rock (called slides) that, when covered by snow, become natural ski slopes. There are many slides that predate Floyd. Two of the new ones occurred on Wright. Both slides—one narrow and one wide—are visible from Marcy Dam.

Lauren and Ron had skied the narrow slide several times that winter. They had not skied the wider one because it did not hold snow as well. The week before the avalanche, they did cross it, however, and Lauren remembers hearing “a weird, hollow sound” beneath their skis.

It snowed heavily in the days leading up to Feb. 19, 2000. That morning, Ron and Lauren rendezvoused with two friends, Rohan Roy and Christina Ford, at Adirondack Loj. They also ran into Vrcarich and Cook, who joined the expedition to Wright.

The day was gorgeous, blue sky, temperature in the 20s, ideal for skiing. Media accounts left the impression that the skiers had been cautioned against skiing Wright Peak. The *New York Times*, for instance, wrote that the slope “had been posted for months with warnings to hikers and skiers.” In fact, the sign in question, posted before winter, warned of the possibility of an avalanche along the Avalanche Pass trail, which skirts the base of a slide on Mount Colden. The warning was directed only at snowshoers and cross-country skiers using that trail.

Based on his experience, Ron Konowitz—the only person ever to ski all 46 High Peaks in the Adirondacks—had little reason to fear. “I skied with Pat Munn, with Mark Meschinelli and all those guys for

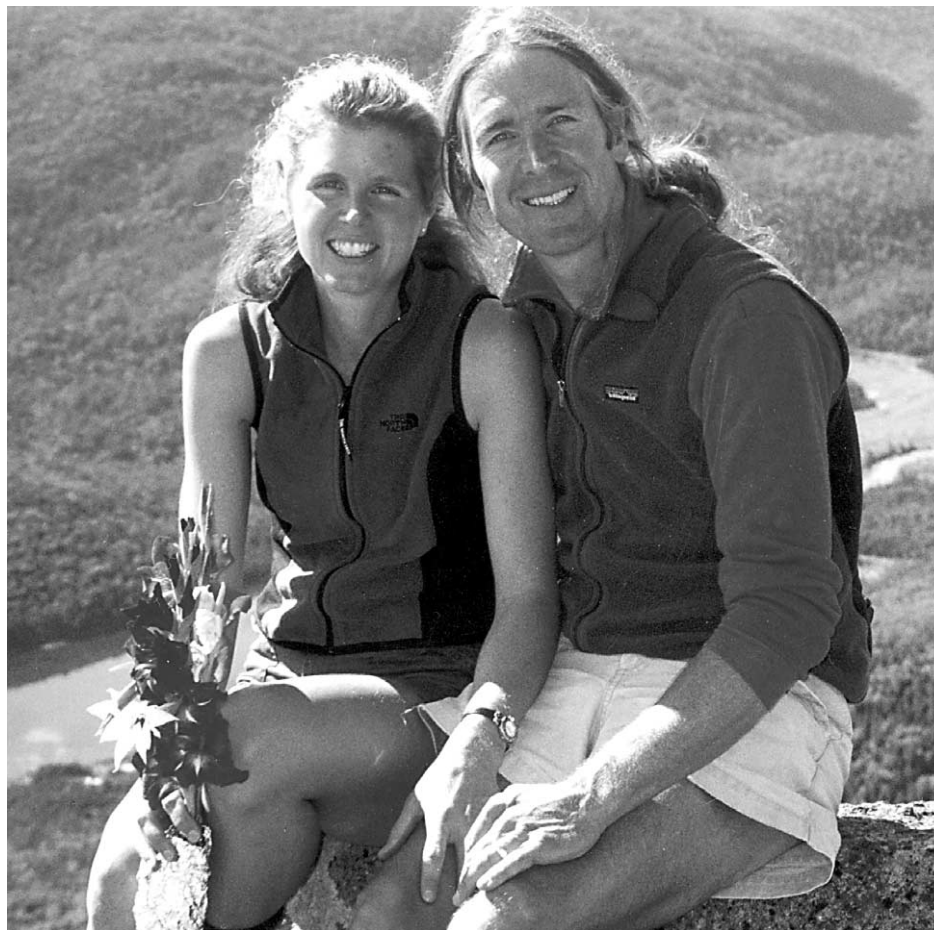


Photo courtesy of Ron Konowitz

Ron and Lauren Konowitz are the picture of bliss right after their marriage on Algonquin Peak in August 1999. Six months later, they were caught in an avalanche on nearby Wright Peak that killed Toma Vrcarich.

## Rare Avalanche Kills One On an Adirondack Slope

Snowslide Was in Area Posted as Dangerous

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN  
Six back-country skiers who ventured into a dangerous snowslide area were caught in a roaring avalanche and swept hundreds of yards down a mountainside in the Adirondack High Peaks of northern New York State on Saturday. Rescuers found one dead under the snow and his companions all injured, one critically.

While avalanches are not uncommon in Alaska and the Alps, they are unusual in New York, and state officials and forest rangers said they could not recall a similar death in Adirondack Park, the vast preserve of mountains, lakes and forests stretching from the Mohawk River to the Canadian border.

The weather was not stormy, although three to four inches of snow fell in the area Friday night, and the cause of the slide was unclear. But state officials said that Hurricane Floyd last September may have been a factor. Its rains caused a landslide that swept away vegetation and soil from the slope where the snow collapsed. It had been posted for months with warnings to hikers and skiers.

The avalanche—a shelf of snow 100 yards wide that broke loose and tumbled down 500 yards—struck shortly before 1 p.m. on the northeast slope of Wright Peak, a 4,580-foot mountain nine miles south of Lake Placid. In its path was a party of skiers who had been warned orally twice that the slope was unstable.

The skiers, far off the marked trails and more than halfway up the mountain, were carried away. “They rode it down,” said Lt. Gary Roberts, the state forest ranger who coordinated the search and rescue operation. “It must have been a couple of hundred yards, and it must have been terrifying.”



## SKIERS: Risky trip likely cause of tragedy

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The slope as authorities and volunteers dug through the snow for five hours before uncovering the dead man at about 6 p.m., Larow said.

The group, all of whom were

## Friends remember Toma

By MARTHA ALLEN  
Special to the LPN  
KEENE—More than 100 people, most of them members of the closely knit local ski community, crowded into Adirondack Rock & River Guide Service headquarters Tuesday evening to take part in a memorial service for Toma Vrcarich, 27, who died in an avalanche on Wright Peak on Feb. 19.

The service, coordinated by Stephen Doxzen and emotional, despite the number of participants. After a potluck dinner, people took turns speaking of Vrcarich and the part he played in their lives, drawing laughter and tears from a responsive audience. As one of his friends said, Toma should be remembered for himself, not just as “the person who died in the avalanche.”

Vrcarich's love of the outdoors and enthusiasm for kayaking and skiing were frequently reiterated. He was both adventurous — he went over Halls Falls, Keene, in a kayak — and thoughtful. One friend remembered a moment of silence he shared with Vrcarich, when they just concentrated on the beauty of the snow.

It was ironic, he said, yet fitting, that Toma's life was claimed by snow. An employer said that Vrcarich would have been angry had his life ended in an automobile rather than on a mountain slope.

Vrcarich was described more than once as a “gentle, beautiful person.” He “listened intently,” one friend said, and was more interested in what others were saying than in talking about himself. He was curious about a lot of things.



Toma Vrcarich

up together in Harrisburg, Pa., and Vrcarich came to Lake Placid to live, inspired by Smith's love of the Adirondacks.

One woman watched the stars at the farmhouse and talked about how they envisioned the afterlife: Vrcarich, she said, imagined joy, and beautiful singing.

## Skier killed in slide

Five others injured in an avalanche in High Peaks region

LAKE PLACID — One skier was killed and five others injured when they were caught in an avalanche in the Adirondack High Peaks Saturday afternoon while skiing in an off-trail area.

The avalanche occurred about 1 p.m. on the northeast side of Wright Peak, Department of Environmental

## Avalanche kills skier; 5 rescued

The skiers were on Wright Peak in the Adirondacks

By BOB GARDINIER  
Staff writer  
One off-trail cross-country skier was killed and three others were injured by an avalanche on Wright Peak in the Adirondacks Saturday, State Environmental Conservation officers, who

years and years and years,” he said, referring to two other backcountry veterans. “We never carried avalanche gear, never. We never dug a test pit, we never carried probes, we never carried shovels. And we skied everything. We skied all the slides. We were always looking for new places to go. We were always looking for the best snow conditions. There was never a concern about avalanches.”

We'll pick up the story after the group has made a run down the narrow slide and stopped for lunch at the bottom. Rohan Roy then decides to ski the wider slide.



**RON:** Rohan skied the wide one while we were having lunch. He was hootin' and hollerin'. So we went up. Going out onto the slide initially, I made a ski cut. There was no settling, no cracks, no sloughing of snow. It looked like a perfect slope with perfect powder. There was probably 2½ feet of fresh powder on top of it.

**LAUREN:** Ron went first and skied maybe a hundred feet down, and then I skied down next to him. And then Russ skied down about 50 feet, and his ski broke. Toma skied next, and he made maybe three turns, and on his third turn—I don't know if he fell or if it was the trigger of the avalanche—we saw him fall and at the same time we felt the settling and heard the whumph sound. Maybe it was for two or three seconds, it was kind of weird, it was like being in water, things were floating, and then it was as if a trap door opened and I got sucked into the snow, and then I was tumbling down the slope. It happened really fast.

## What did you do during the avalanche?

**LAUREN:** I had never read anything about being in avalanches, but since then I've read quite a bit. They say to take off your skis and to swim and to loosen your pole straps and to undo your backpack. There wasn't time to do anything. In two seconds I was underneath the snow. I liken it to the ocean. If you ever get crashed by a big breaker you get driven down and you tumble head over heels. That seemed to go on for maybe 10 or 15 seconds, and then everything stopped. I went under the snow, and I never resurfaced.

*The avalanche had pushed Lauren through a huge jumble of trees that had been washed off the slope in September and remained at the bottom of the slide. One ranger likened it to passing through a tea strainer. The Explorer asked if she remembered going through the debris.*

**LAUREN:** I was conscious the whole time, but the only thing I knew that happened under the snow was that I hit a rock, which is how I got the skull fracture. ▶▶

Many newspapers ran stories—not all of them accurate—about the fatal avalanche. Contrary to some accounts, the slope was not posted as risky.

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