



The Konowitzs' dog Otis also survived the avalanche. He is shown on the remote Moss Pond, the second-highest waterbody in the Adirondacks.

## From Page 7 **KONOWITZ**

down here." So I ran down there, and at that point just her head was out of the snow. There was a lot of blood. It looked awful. When I saw Lauren, I thought, "She's not going to live." I had to keep it together and not let her know that's what I thought. I was kind of on autopilot in my rescue mode. I was in shock myself from being thrashed in the avalanche, but I had to try to hold it together. Chrissy had gotten down to us, so Rohan and Chrissy took off looking for Toma, and I started digging Lauren out. The snow had set up like cement, it was hard as a rock, and there were all trees and branches mixed in, so it took 45 minutes for me to dig her out, using one arm, using a piece of stick.

*Several people at Marcy Dam had seen the avalanche, and someone called for help on a cell phone. About 45 minutes later, the first person arrived on the scene. It was Teresa Palen, a neighbor and friend of the Konowitzs. On her way from the dam to the slide she encountered Ron and Lauren's dog, Otis, who often accompanies the couple on their ski outings.*

**LAUREN:** Otis was in the avalanche with us. We don't know what happened to him, but afterward he ran down the trail towards the dam. Teresa said when she was climbing up she could hear this howling and crying and moaning. She came around the corner, and there was Otis. When she saw him, she knew we were involved. Otis then turned around and ran back with Teresa in tow. He came and sat by me until they took me away.

*Eventually, about 15 recreational skiers and several forest rangers joined the search for Toma. A State Police helicopter arrived at 2:30 p.m., about 90 minutes after the avalanche. The copter took out Russ, Rohan and Christina and then returned for Ron and Lauren.*

**RON:** I didn't want to leave because we hadn't found Toma. They're kind of dragging me up the hill to the helicopter. I was just frantic at that point: "I gotta find him, I gotta find him." When they finally put me in the helicopter I just totally broke down. I realized that we weren't going to find Toma. It had been three

hours, and the whole time I was in rescue mode, I had a job to do, and now I didn't have anything to do but sit in the helicopter and ride to the hospital. It was just awful. We weren't going to find him. We had all just been there skiing, having fun, laughing, and now he was gone.

### When was the next time you skied?

**LAUREN:** The next time we went skiing was that October. We went up the Whiteface toll road. We skied that winter. We didn't ski any slides, and the backcountry skiing we did was pretty mellow. We went up trails, to Marcy, to Avalanche Lake. We just did non-threatening stuff. We skied in the trees a lot.

**RON:** The first time I tried to ski was about three weeks after the avalanche. My leg was really hurting, my arm was so-so, but everybody said you should get back out there. So I went to Whiteface Ski Center. I could turn to one side, but I couldn't turn to the other. My friend Pat Munn went with me. I got about a third of the way down Mountain Run [an expert trail] and broke down and just started crying. It was total flashbacks. Being on the snow and smelling the snow brought everything back. I didn't ski again until the next winter. I remember that day we went up the toll road I had an awful day; I was just getting flashbacks. The first time we went together to Whiteface it happened to Lauren. We got part way down Mountain Run, and she just froze.

**LAUREN:** The pitch of Mountain Run is very similar to how the slide looked. I was skiing and then all of a sudden I was looking at the avalanche again. It just kept happening over and over. I was terrified. I couldn't ski anymore because I thought Mountain Run was going to avalanche. That happened a lot that winter. It happened again the next year a little bit less.



Ron and Lauren Konowitz on top of Whiteface Mountain.

And it happened again this past year. It happens less and less and less.

### Will you ever ski backcountry slides again?

**LAUREN:** We have to work up to it. I think both of us have every intention of doing it, but I don't know if we'll ever be able to ski a slide without having some trepidation.

### In retrospect, should you have done anything differently?

**RON:** We didn't see anything that day that indicated anything was going to happen. I keep thinking there must have been something that we missed. Like the week before we were up there, and there was that funky stuff [that made the hollow sounds]. Looking back on it, that must have been underneath all this fresh snow. That's where the weak layers were, way down there. If we had shovels and probes and dug a pit maybe we would have found them. We might not have.

**LAUREN:** Nobody that we knew in the ski community was doing that. It wasn't felt that you needed to be that cautious in

the Adirondacks. I think that's our mistake. We were all too lax, the whole ski community. It was really a wakeup for everybody. People in this area had been lulled into a false sense of security, including all of us. I think people are much smarter about skiing now.

### What advice do you have for people who ski slides?

**LAUREN:** Have some avalanche training. If you're going to be a backcountry skier you need to educate yourself and to carry the proper tools, beacons, shovels and probes. And make sure it's not just you that has that knowledge but everybody in your party. Be smart. Treat it like you're skiing out West, where avalanches happen all the time.

**RON:** If we had beacons we probably could have found Toma pretty fast. Whether we would have been able to save him, I don't know. His injuries were significant.

**LAUREN:** He still would have died. He died on impact.

### Did you suffer survivor's guilt?

**LAUREN:** I had a tremendous amount of guilt that I lived and Toma died, because afterward we met his family and all of his good friends, and there was a memorial service. I learned a lot more about Toma after he died, and he was a wonderful person. And for a long time I had a lot of guilt. Why did he have to die and I survived?

## Note of gratitude

We once again would like to give our sincere thanks to the Adirondack Medical Center, State Police, forest rangers and the volunteers who came into the woods to rescue us that day and search for Toma.

— Ron and Lauren Konowitz