

# 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 Vracarich, 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 Vracarich 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

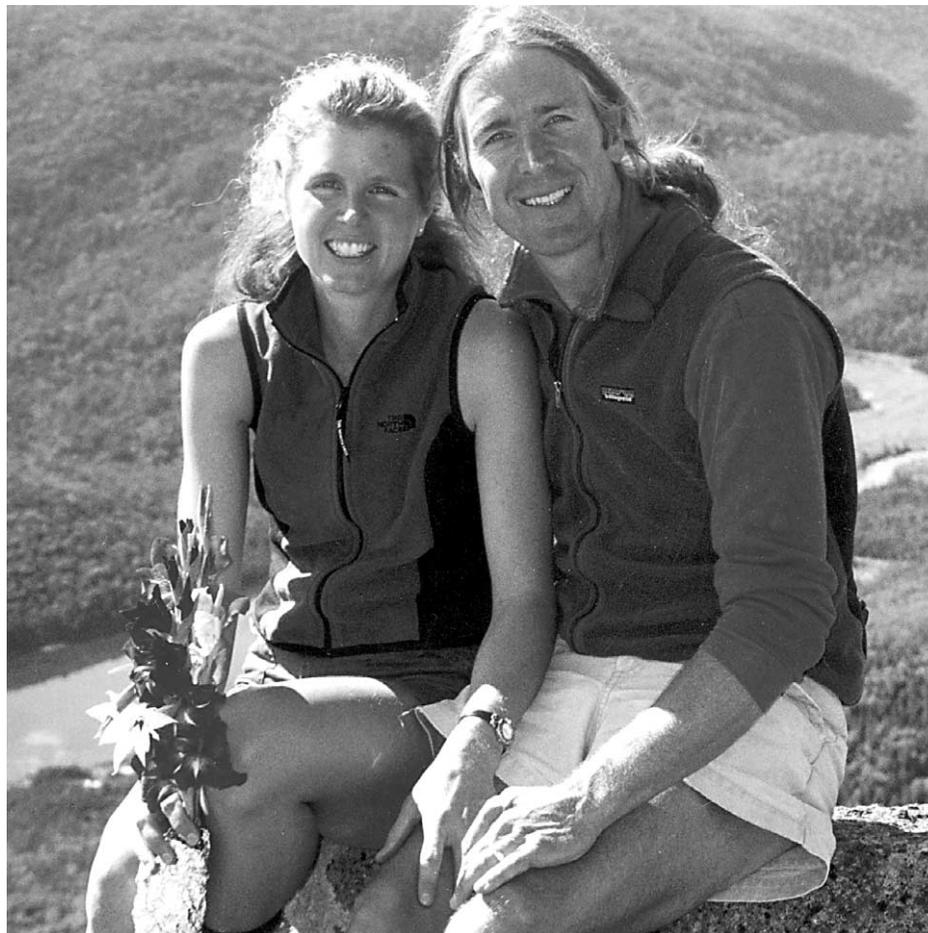


Photo courtesy of Ron Konowitz

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 Vracarich.

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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