

THE PATROLLER

DAVE RICHARDS SHARES HIS STORY OF TRAUMA

SO THAT OTHERS MAY HEAL

By Derek Taylor

IN 20 YEARS OF SKI PATROLLING AT ALTA, and 19 on Wasatch Backcountry Rescue, Dave Richards can't remember how many bodies he's pulled from the Utah mountains. "Quit counting," he says. "A lot." One gruesome incident—an excavator rollover in 2016 that killed a construction worker installing a Gazex avalanche-control system near Alta—proved to be a tipping point.

In the aftermath, Richards says, he spent two weeks in his office staring at the wall until finally his boss, Alta's director of operations, Greg Bell, insisted he get help. That night, his best friend found him in his room, sobbing, holding a loaded handgun; in his words, "There was only one thing in the room to shoot at. That was me." He was taken to the University of Utah Hospital for his first of two weeklong stays at the University Neuropsychiatric Institute.

Richards, the 41-year-old avalanche director for Alta Ski Area, began sharing this story with audiences in 2017 through the National Alliance on Mental Illness. He now gives two to three talks a year to different groups in the ski and outdoor industries. There is a stigma toward mental illness throughout society that Richards believes is even more pronounced in mountain towns. The only way to break through that, he's learned, is to talk about it.

"Talking for me is about healing," he says. "I think the only way to get people talking is to do it yourself. And then the other duty we have is not just telling your story, but listening to theirs. Everybody's got a story, but they don't know if it's OK to tell it because you're supposed to be tough in this industry."

From a young age, Richards epitomized the mountain hardman stereotype. In the late '90s to early 2000s, he was a flourishing professional skier earning magazine covers, TGR segments, and trips to Alaska and the Alps. Younger than most of the contemporaries he skied with, he was nicknamed Grom.

"I would say that him and Dave McReynolds were the two biggest influences in that era," says

Sam Cohen, a 27-year-old professional skier who grew up at Alta. "Those guys were like true core Alta locals. Grom was the guy, the dude who was from here, was still here, and made it as a pro skier."

The transition from pro to patroller was a logical progression for Richards. His father was a patroller. He grew up skiing the Wasatch and climbing in the Wind River and Teton mountains. He triggered his first avalanche when he was just 13. At 21, he joined the Alta Ski Patrol. A year later, he started with Wasatch Backcountry Rescue, a nonprofit search-and-rescue organization that responds to winter-related incidents. In 2015, he ascended to his current role as head of Alta's avalanche-mitigation program.

As Alta's avalanche director, Richards oversees a team of 71 patrollers managing hundreds of avalanche paths within the resort boundary and formulating the daily avalanche forecast and terrain openings and closures. "I like to think of it as playing a big game of chess with a chessboard you can't see," he says. "It's actually really fun." In addition to his team, he deploys a Howitzer, five Avalaunchers, a selection of gas exploders, and an average of 5,500 individual rounds of explosives per year. His crew also assists the Utah Department of Transportation with controlling avalanches affecting the road up Little Cottonwood Canyon.

In many ways, Richard's upbringing prepared him perfectly for this career. In others, though, it left him less equipped for what he would experience as a first responder. "Initially, you were raised as this stoic person in this community—'Grown men don't cry,'" he says. "And then later on, it became really helpful because I realized, 'OK, these people have feelings too.' It's not just me being some punk kid with hurt feelings."

For Richards, public speaking has been instrumental to his trauma recovery. It feels good to help people, he says, but it also gives him an opportunity to tell his story. "It's like doing psychotherapy sessions by talking to 600 therapists at once," he says. "It made it easy for me to say, 'Hey, I need help.' I'm still getting it. And it's going to be a long process."

