

Everest - A mother's end

One particular story of a body's recovery illustrates both the human cost, and the lengths that it can take to show the dead the proper respect.

Francys Distefano-Arsentiev died on Everest in 1998, and came to be known as "Sleeping Beauty". Her son, Paul Distefano recalls just how distressing it was seeing photographs of his mother's body online. "It's like being really embarrassed, like being called on by your teacher but not knowing how to read. It's horrible."



In the 1970s, climbing Everest was less commercialised than it is today (Credit: Rex)

When he was 11, Paul's mother, a world-class climber, had set her sights on becoming the first American woman to climb Everest without bottled oxygen. "I don't know why she decided she had to do it without oxygen, but I think she felt like she needed to prove something," Paul says. "I think she also felt invincible because she was with Sergei, my stepdad. His nickname was 'the snow leopard' because he was so agile."

Francys reached her goal and made Everest history. But on her descent from the peak, something went wrong

The day before Francys left, she dropped by Paul's school in Telluride, Colorado, and told him, "I'm going to leave this up to you." In one of the most vivid memories he has, he remembers telling her, "If I tell you you can't go, then at some point you'll be an old lady in a rocking chair saying, 'Dang, I should have done that.' I don't want to be the one to take that from you."

That night, however, Paul had a nightmare: two mountaineers, a complete whiteout, snow surrounding them like attacking bees. When he woke up, he phoned his mother, telling her that he had changed his mind. "You know Paul," she replied, "we talked yesterday, and you're right: I have to do this."

"I don't think science can really explain why people want to climb these mountains," he says. "In the end, the whole reason my mother climbed was because she had to."

On May 22, 1998, Francys reached her goal and made Everest history. But on her descent from the peak, something went wrong. She and Sergei were forced to spend

the night in the death zone and became separated. The following morning, Sergei suffered a fatal fall while attempting to rescue Francys, who had collapsed at around 8,850m (29,000ft). Climbers [Ian Woodall](#) and [Cathy O'Dowd](#) came across Francys at 05:00 and gave up their summit bid, staying with her for over an hour in subzero temperatures before they were forced to descend to ensure their own safety. Sometime later that morning, Francys succumbed to frostbite and exhaustion.

When Paul's dad sat him down on a sunny afternoon and delivered the news, Paul felt like he had been hit with a sledgehammer. Yet he was hardly surprised. "To be honest, I already knew," he says. "When someone that close to you dies, it's strange and unexplainable, but you just know."

Today, Paul harbors no resentment toward his mother. "I love her and wish she could be a part of my life, but she's not," he says. "Her death is certainly something I'll always be dealing with, although in some ways it's a blessing that my mom died doing what she loved."



Some researchers think climbers attempt mountains like Everest to assert a sense of control over their lives they can't get from everyday life (Credit: Getty Images)

Years passed, and Francys remained on the mountain. But Woodall, who had stayed with her in her dying hours, had become haunted by his inability to save her and deeply bothered by the fact that her body had become a landmark.

In 2007, Woodall, with O'Dowd's support, returned to Everest specifically to remove Francys' body from sight. "It was an opportunity to say goodbye," he says. "But most importantly, to get her out of sight."

After one false start, Woodall and Phuri Sherpa, who usually works on Everest but who volunteered to help, hiked up to the spot where he remembered leaving Francys – a steep slope, set at about a 60-degree angle and covered by broken shale. The original plan was to create a rock cairn for her, but to Woodall's dismay, he found the

area buried in four feet of snow. “There was no sign of her at all, just a huge, unstable snow slope,” he says.

It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, much harder than going to the summit – Ian Woodall

The two began to dig. Thanks to a mix of luck and memory, they found Francys on the second try. A rock grave was no longer an option, but they had just enough rope to lower her body over the mountain’s edge. After wrapping her stiff remains in an American flag and saying a few words, they sent her on her way – likely to the same place where Sergei lies. All told, it took them five hours. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, much harder than going to the summit,” Woodall says. “But I felt strongly enough about it to get off my backside and do something about it.”

Paul, however, only learned of this development through the media, and at first felt some resentment for not being informed. “I was like, ‘Dude, that’s my mom!’” Eventually, though, he realised that Woodall and O’Dowd, having witnessed the final moments of his mother’s life, had forged their own special connection with Francys. “My mother and I are bonded by blood, and Ian, Cathy and her are bonded by death,” he says. “I feel that they had just as much a right to move her as we did, and my family honours their effort.”

“I wish they had asked me, I do, but more so I wish to make a connection with them and meet them,” he continues. “Hopefully that time will come.”