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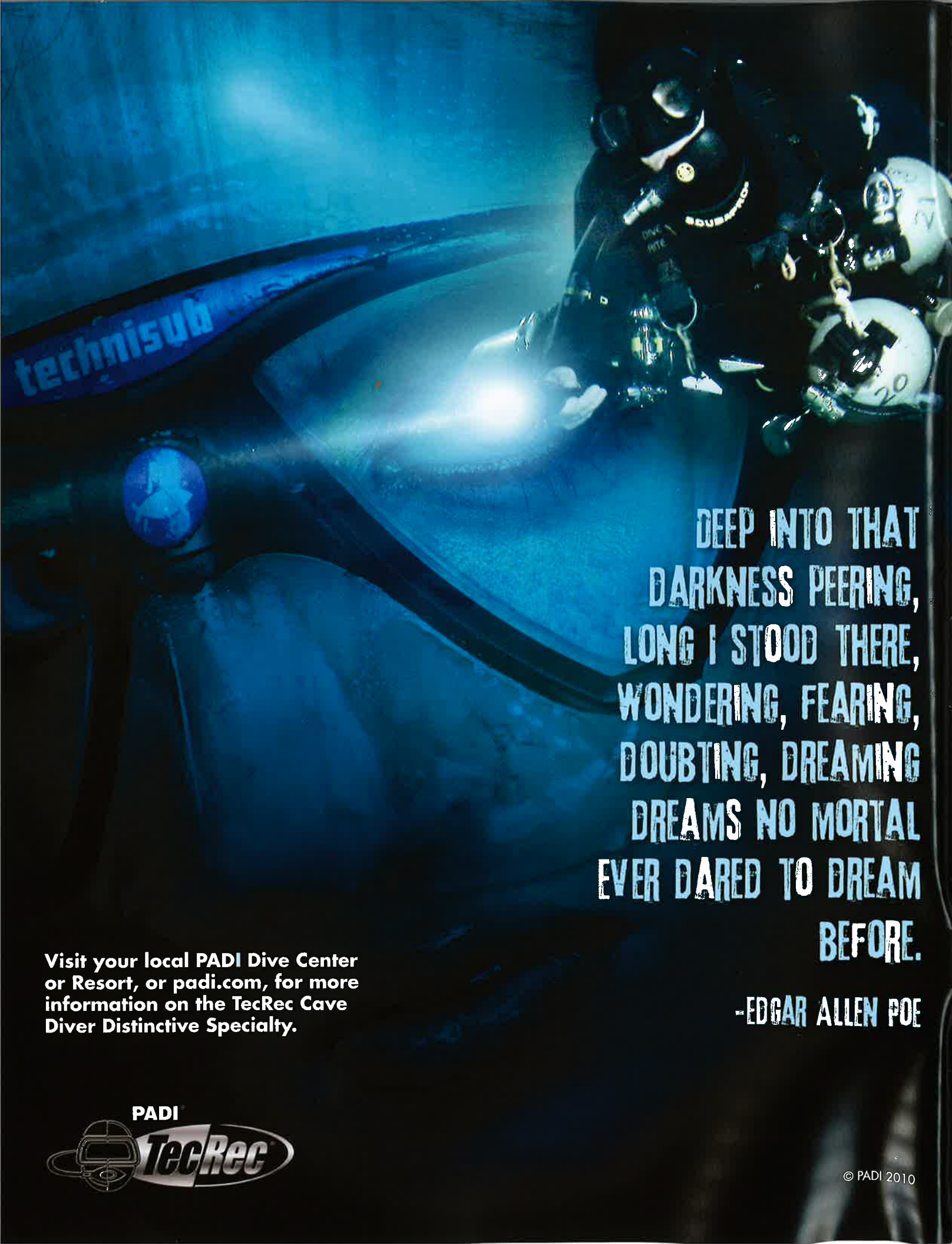
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Remembering Wes Skiles 1958-2010

This special edition is dedicated to the memory of Wes Skiles who passed away on July 21, 2010. Wes' contributions to the cave diving community were enormous spanning more than 30 years. He served as NSS-CDS Training Chairman, explored and mapped over 200 miles of virgin cave passage, was a champion for springs protection, and inspired divers and non-divers alike with his spectacular images of our underwater world. This issue holds the memories of those who were honored to call him friend.

Volume 37 Number 4
October/November/December 2010



DEEP INTO THAT
 DARKNESS PEERING,
 LONG I STOOD THERE,
 WONDERING, FEARING,
 DOUBTING, DREAMING
 DREAMS NO MORTAL
 EVER DARED TO DREAM
 BEFORE.

-EDGAR ALLEN POE

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Underwater Speleology

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COVER PHOTO: Brian Kakuk and Kenny Broad in Burial Mound Cave in the Lucayan Caverns System on Grand Bahama Island. NOVA/ National Geographic Blue Hole Expedition, 2009. Photo by Wes Skiles courtesy of the National Geographic Society.

“So friends, here’s to Wes my husband of thirty years. May we always remember him with a smile and never forget his enthusiasm within life, his compassion and that plain ole’ having fun spirit.”



Wes at Ginnie Springs, circa 1976-77 (above).

Wes on rope in TAG cave country
Photo by Terri Skiles (opposite).

It was in Woodville, Florida (1976) that I first heard about cave diving. During those years while at FSU I learned of a group of people who scuba dove into the many dark and scary holes filled with water in the earth which were throughout the landscape around Woodville. I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to do that...

Wesley

By Terri Skiles

After moving to Jacksonville, Florida and taking a part time job whilst looking for the next step in my life, I had the good fortune to sell a guy a camera. His name was Wes Skiles.

Life became very exciting from that moment on. Wes taught me to dive with scuba gear first in open water then in caves. It was through his eyes I began to understand why those “crazy” people dove into those beautiful (for the most part) pools of water. For me, it was an awesome introduction to the sinks, springs and rivers of north central Florida.

One year later we were married, happily living in Branford, Florida and working at the infamous Branford Dive Center.

Through the years with Wes I have met so many wonderful people from all corners of the world and many walks of life. Met all types of adventurers from open water and cave divers to avid cavers who wanted to further explore their projects via scuba. Some were not even “technically” certified but were considered worthy explorers. I particularly liked meeting ordinary fun loving people who made up the background.

Wes was a member of a group of divers who loved to explore and that they did well wherever they went. Many, many discussions (some of those being top secret) took place in our home concerning dive plans, gear modifications, potential leads, land owner relations, map drawings and of course, booty scooping was always at the forefront. Safety was also of the utmost concern.

Wes studied the springs and the water flowing from them. In the beginning it was always about exploration. Over time his quest for knowledge of every aspect about the caves he loved to explore lead him to try to understand not only where the water came from but what it all meant. He built his life's work around these awesome pools of water. Whether he was studying them, speaking to others about protecting them or capturing the most incredible images of them on still or moving film, Wes was passionate about this precious gift.

One could say that Wes accomplished a lot in his lifetime, so much so that it is impossible to list it all. In reality he didn't care too much about the awards. He didn't have to. A great man speaks through deeds.

It is so true that Wes loved his friends, fireworks and throwing a great party around a bonfire. He loved music and dancing in the rain. He loved his dog, his cats and his hamster, Puff but what really made his eyes flash were his kids... pure love, the future. Wes was and still is a tremendous father.

So friends, here's to Wes my husband of thirty years. May we always remember him with a smile and never forget his enthusiasm within life, his compassion and that plain ole' having fun spirit.



“Wes was the world’s greatest diver, not just cave diver but diver period; with the caves, photography, wildlife, Antarctica, Newt Suit and presentations; he was the world’s greatest diver.”

~Bill Main



Woody Jasper in a beautiful little dual arch in route to the “Ocala Junction Room” ~ Hart Springs (above).

Woody Jasper in the “Braided Maze” on the way to the “Grand Flow Passage” ~ Hart Springs (opposite).
Photos by Wes Skiles

Adios, Mi Amigo Mejor

By Woody Jasper

The first time I met Wes, he and Terri had moved from Jacksonville and he was working at the Branford Dive Shop. I was looking for a new place to do a solo dive and he hand-drew me a map and provided directions to Lower Orange Grove in the Peacock System. Later, when I was thanking him for the very interesting dive, we set up our first dive together. It turned out to be into a small flat tunnel ending with a series of low, very silty dome rooms about bedroom size by five feet in height with two foot high silt mounds in the middle. After Wes found a tie off for the end of our exploration line, we spent the next 10 to 12 minutes of our exit in a total silt out, easily managing a couple of line traps. Turns out we had both enjoyed it thoroughly and two kindred spirits had found each other.

A couple of years and many dives later Wes had a sneak dive he wanted to do. The entrance was a vertical solution tube in a field surrounded by trees but it was less than 100 yards from a lady’s house. After dark the two of us were at the hole with single tanks and one set of mail order vertical climbing gear that I had never used. Wes and Lamar had kluged it together using pictures from magazines and catalogues as a guide. With rope tied around the tree, Wes rigged me up for the 20-foot rappel into clear water below. As my head descended below where Wes was standing I asked, “So how do you put on the stuff to climb out?” “Don’t worry, I will show you how that works when we come out,” Wes said. We found a nice room that didn’t go anywhere. Climbing lessons happened while hanging/floating on the end of the rope. There was so much slack in the climbing harness that each full sit-stand-sit cycle only moved the ascenders about four inches up the rope. It was an intense learning experience for us both.

Several years and lots of dives later we were going for the upper end of Hart Springs exploration on a five-man solo single stage scooter dive. This plan was for everyone to start the dive together but to potentially operate independently. The flaw in the plan was not each having independent (redundant) air supplies. My Teckna clutch started slipping so I couldn’t run settings higher than “3” causing me to scooter through low overhead areas where others were swimming to catch up. After several hard bumps on the ceiling and a long way past the stage bottle drop point, I got a hell of an air leak from my back-mount doubles manifold. Wes just caught my light signal as he was turning the next corner 25 feet ahead. I stopped trying to turn off the valve as he swam up. After he spent 15 to 20 seconds looking over my head at my manifold he backed up and invented a new hand signal, which was both hands turned up. I replied with a question mark sign with my index finger and he repeated his gesture, my manifold still roaring out my only air supply. He replied by shooting me the ‘Bird’, making a slashing hand move across his throat and began to pull out





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From The Chairman

Gene Melton

This issue of Underwater Speleology is dedicated to the memory of Wes Skiles. He is dearly missed by all who knew him. Wes really grew up in cave diving. His mother would drive him to areas around the North Florida springs on Friday afternoons after he got out of school (Note - Wes wasn't old enough to drive yet!). Gear would be unloaded, a pick up time would be arranged for later in the weekend, and Wes would be ready to start an adventure that most kids his age would barely comprehend. After he got his license and a vehicle, his teenage years would be spent learning to explore the underwater caves. During his school years, Wes had the good fortune to be around Rory Dickens, truly one of the earliest pioneers of cave diving gear innovation and techniques. When Wes wasn't off diving, he was constantly absorbing all the information he could get from Rory.

Wes and Terri's home was always open to cave divers. Any time you stopped for a visit, there would be cave divers not just from all over the country, but cave divers from around the world. Wes decided very early in his diving career that he wanted to be a professional underwater cave photographer. He started out with a basic Nikonos and later found a housing for a little Sony Super 8. It wasn't long before he was not only taking wonderful images, but he was developing stories and scripts. His imagination and his eye for a great image kept expanding as he grew older. Though his first motivations were to capture the beauty of underwater caves through photography, Wes discovered the fragility and importance of the underground aquifer. He became not only a renowned photographer, but a statesman and spokesperson for not only the Floridan aquifer, but for underwater caves throughout the world. The NSS-CDS had no finer friend and advocate. He helped the Section many times without asking for acknowledgement or recognition. As Training Director, he started the evolution of the current training levels.

Many of us can share adventures we had with Wes. The evening session and the 2011 workshop will be dedicated to the remembrance of Wes. A fireside chat is in order so we can relate some of the excitement we had with him. Hope to see you there.

By early December, the conversion will be completed, changing the membership processing to the NSS. All dues (both NSS and NSS-CDS) will be paid directly to the NSS. Your membership card will be mailed by the NSS with the Primary Affiliation (Cave Diving Section) printed on it. You will have only one membership card to show your membership to both organizations. Membership expiration dates will be the same and the dues reminders will continue to be mailed by the NSS. Another major benefit of the shift in dues collection will be to eliminate duplicate processing and reduce Section expenses relating to membership. The NSS will send the Section dues on a bi-weekly basis.

Cheryl Doran has volunteered to be the Editor of Underwater Speleology. Her contact information for your articles and photos: Email: cccheryld@aol.com, Cell: 732-674-6550. Welcome and thank you Cheryl.

Dive safely,
Gene

From The Editor

Beth Murphy

I started cave diving in 1995 and read every book about the sport I could get my hands on. Although there was a dearth of information about Wes' exploration, expeditions and exploits, when I met him in 2002, I knew virtually nothing about the man. Call it fate or cosmic alignment or just plain luck, but I found myself accepting a job offer to work for him at Karst Productions two years later.

Wes was turning 46 just days before I was to start to work and I was invited to a birthday bash at Ginnie Springs, ironically held at the same pavilions as his recent memorial. I searched high and low for just the right card and settled for a cheeky one that said although as my boss he would always be right, he would also always be older than me. I watched as he opened it with a fair bit of trepidation but was rewarded with one of his slow, spreading smiles.

It was my great fortune to work for Wes for three years as he produced the second and third films in the Water's Journey series. I can't begin to adequately chronicle the countless lessons learned during my tenure there but suffice it to say that my exposure to such daring creativity is what enabled me to step out on air and begin my own company.

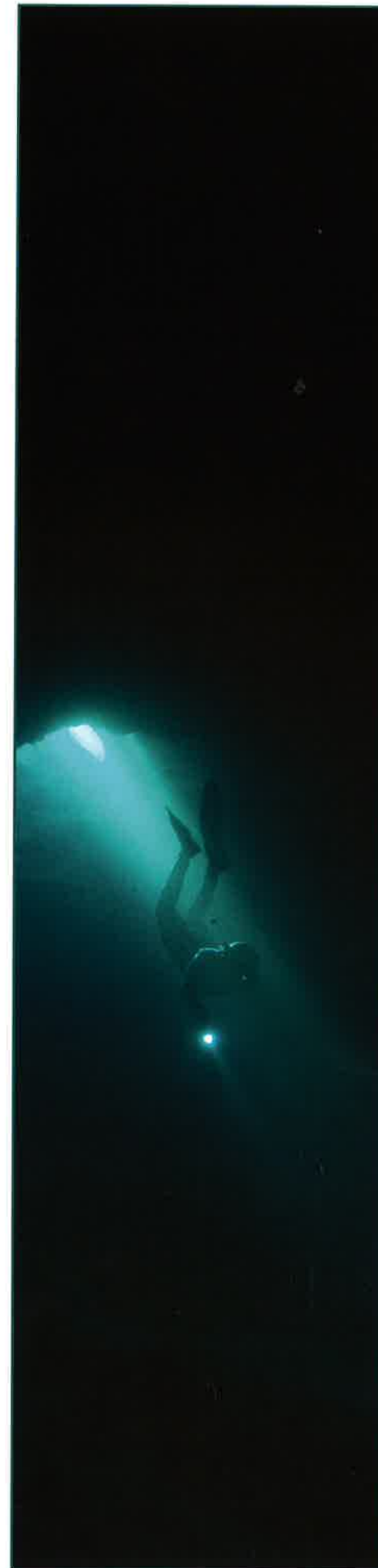
When the news came that Wes had died, it was simply thunderous. It's impossible to imagine a world without Wes Skiles. It's inconceivable that we will not be graced with any new images that take our breath away or new films to spark our imaginations and challenge us to be better stewards for the springs he loved so deeply.

As I sat in the rain at his memorial service, tears streaming down my face as his friends and family members recalled his life's hijinks, heroics, and amazing accomplishments, I had the heart wrenching thought that next year, I will turn a year older than Wes.

Godspeed, my friend.
Beth

A diver descends into Lothlorian on Grand Bahama during filming of the NOVA/NGS documentary on Bahama Blue Holes, 2009.

Photo by Wes Skiles courtesy of the National Geographic Society.



his second regulator for me. As we turned around to exit he noticed a big air dome that was being created by the air that had been lost. We could get our heads out of the water into it and he explained that the regulator yoke had been dislodged on the right valve and that the handle was gone, broken off on a previous bump. We waited for the remaining 60 seconds it took for the last of the air to vent off, told a Gary Hart joke and headed back to the stage bottles. After that dive I could say, "That man saved my life."

First north Florida then the southeastern US became our playground. With the core group consisting of Lamar Hires, Mark Long and Tom Morris we had one hell of a good time. Almost every dive was preceded by having to knot new exploration line and look at the expanding maps or view and consider the photographic products from the previous dive. Wes began using digital video underwater from its early inception with two little Sony Hi8's. This eventually took him and us worldwide for fun and profit and for the opportunity to meet some of the world's coolest characters. Wes was a master of seeing the video potential of a site or story and was able to capture the essence of the opportunity. However much he enjoyed and profited from video, his true love and passion was in still photography. He didn't care if "stills" made him any money; they represented the highest in creativity and flexibility and allowed Wes to share his world with all of his many friends in it. Wes brought this same passion along with his boundless energy to his family with Terri, Nathan and Tess who were the most important things in his life. All this fun and our families growing and flourishing; twenty wonderful years ticked by.

Wes was easily lured into motorcycling. It provided the elements of shared camaraderie, photo ops, adventure, exploration and competitiveness that were the same driving elements from cave diving.

We worked together to buy his BMW 1200GS on eBay. Several days later we spent the day loading my bike on his big trailer and finally leaving for Little Rock at 10 PM to pick up his new bike. We arrived at the dealership late morning of the next day, spent five hours doing paperwork, buying more accessories (the boy liked his toys), loading up and leaving Little Rock for the Smoky Mountains about 5 PM. Wes had done most of the driving and none of the sleeping and about midnight began to see things on the road that weren't there. I finished this push through the "Tail of The Dragon" with the stretch van, 16' trailer and bikes until 3:30 AM to arrive at our destination. Forty-four hour nonstop road trip, you gotta love it. His first three days on the twisty paved and unpaved mountain roads saw his speed increasing by the day until a sporting pace was achieved that characterized our riding style over the next five years.

The last time I saw Wes, I dropped by late in the afternoon on my bike to find him sorting through 30-year-old slides of the caves and people that he loved. He showed me his latest video editing equipment and then he, Terri and I watched a movie until 11 PM. As I geared up to ride home he decided to join me and we toured the back roads until nearly 1 AM. I turned onto my road toward home as he headed to his with both of us waiving goodbye, a final wave that neither of us could see in the night but both of us knew was there.



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Adios Amigo, See You On The Dark Side

By Kenny Broad

“Cliches about having lived his life to its fullest, his limitless talents, and the unfinished business he had - from exploration to conservation - while all true, don't do justice to Wes' life.”



Kenny Broad during filming of the Nova/National Geographic Society documentary on Bahama Blue Holes. Photo by Wes Skiles courtesy of National Geographic Society (above).

Tom Morris, Kenny Broad, Wes Skiles, and Nate Skiles geared up for a dive on the recent expedition to dive the Blue Holes of the Bahamas featured in the August issue of National Geographic magazine (opposite). Photo by Luis Lamar

When offered the opportunity to contribute a short piece about Wes to UWS, of course I accepted, and am now faced with a blank page, a 24-hour deadline, and extreme sensory overload as I try to condense 21 years of friendship and shared adventures into words, an insufficient medium for the task at hand. No one story can convey the complex recipe that combined to make Wes's force of personality, creativity, and skills. Also, many of the stories that come to mind probably should not be revealed publicly, as statute of limitations have yet to expire.

Terri and Wes' generosity (and years later, Nathan and Tessa's) resulted in my becoming a semi-permanent fixture in their homestead - known by many as "The Skiles Campground" - for long periods of time when the cave diving addiction first took hold of me. Often, I showed up with a crew from Miami, resulting in a highly charged cultural exchange of urban-rural hell raising, with Wes re-directing our energy toward some crazy, profitless film project - a la "The Darkside" or "Jacques Eye-Ear" or our 1990 Abaco blue holes expedition. As time went on, the sophistication of projects - from backyard stunts to full scale Hollywood feature films, from exploration for exploration's sake to clear scientific and conservation goals, and the pioneering of innovative photo and film techniques - all increased in intensity. Throughout those years, Wes was the central node in the social network that he referred to as his "tribe", a group of fiercely independent personalities who somehow let themselves be directed by Wes. When Wes called, we all showed up - we trusted his vision and leadership, irrespective of how hair-brained the scheme appeared. The same faces you see in his photos from the 80s were diving and working with him up to the day he died, devoted friends through thick and thin, and there was plenty of both.

Throughout the maturing of these projects, and under the nastiest of pressures, Wes rarely lost sight of the core values and ultimate motivation of fun, friendship, and family. On our recent National Geographic Bahamas expedition, under the gun to finish both stills and HD, Wes pulled the plug on shooting, flew Terri and Tessa over to join our crew that already included Nathan, and we took advantage of a big swell and spent the next few days surfing, freediving, and hanging out around Pete's Pub. To recount the lessons that Wes taught me about prioritizing, both above and below ground, would take volumes. An unstoppable mental slide show of Skiles' vignettes regularly plays in my head, reminding me of the range of experiences we had; sitting together, stunned, on the edge of the drop-off into the San Agustin sump when we got news of Sheck's death; seeing Wes' sh\$t-eating grin underwater after emerging from a long no-vis passageway (where he had left me behind); his chewing me out for bragging about laying a bunch of line, but

not having surveyed the area; his chasing my dog around trying to kill her after she stole his dinner yet again; his dressing me up in ridiculous monster outfits, putting cyalume sticks in front of my eyes, and dragging me through Devil's Eye with no way to clear my ears by myself; his nonchalantly revealing another unexplored hole in the woods by his house that I'd driven by for years without knowing anything was there; or spending the day with our families just cruising the rivers with a boatload full of fun gear, open to whatever adventure offered itself up to us. The list could go on and on, as I am sure it could for many who read this journal.

Cliches about having lived his life to its fullest, his limitless talents, and the unfinished business he had - from exploration to conservation - while all true, don't do justice to Wes' life. Wes was as complex a character as they come - self taught from A-Z,

and willing to share his skills with anyone he deemed serious about learning. For me, he played the role of big brother, diving mentor, hell raising buddy, and most importantly, he taught me that challenges were not the exception, but the norm. The tougher the challenge, the calmer, more focused and Zen-like he became, and he took on adversity with humor, both underwater and on the surface. Selfishly, I have spent the last few weeks thinking about a future that won't be, but what will remain with us are the countless experiences we had together that will never be taken away - from surfing, to tequila therapy, to dropping into the unknown depths of the earth together, to trading advice on raising kids and balancing family with our own selfish goals. The challenge we all face is to live up to the standards he set for taking on more than we think we can handle. Thank you, my brother from another mother, for setting the bar so high.



“The love for storytelling would eventually lead Wes to create breathtaking documentaries and stunning photography, throwing light on places never before seen by anyone.”

~ Albert Isaac



Wes preparing to shoot aerial footage from a flying boat for *Water's Journey: The River Returns* (above).

Wes shooting a rattlesnake for *Water's Journey: Everglades* (opposite). Photos by Jill Heinerth.

Redneck Brother

By Jill Heinerth

ocean odyssey. Dr. Greg Stone, our chief scientist, looked over my shoulder as I typed on my keyboard in twenty-foot seas. Cross-legged on a bench, I squeezed the precious laptop as we pitched and rolled. Eager to know where our story would take us, Greg politely asked, “Jill, how long have you been writing films?” I look at my watch and responded, “three days.” Whether it was the waves or the nausea of discovering his life’s work was in the hands of a rookie, the color drained from his face. He turned to Wes and looked like he wanted to be sick. Wes simply offered, “she’ll be great.” And that’s the way my apprenticeship went with Wes. Full immersion, every step of the way. I began working with him in the late 1990’s on various television jobs, frequently taking on a roll I had never done in my life. On one gig involving a nine foot alligator in a swimming pool, I was asked to create a fake wound with anything I could find at 3:00 am at an all-night Quickie Mart in Homestead, Florida. Two days later I was making a dorsal fin out of an old car mat and weather stripping and trying to drown Annette Slate in a simulated shark attack. With Wes’ creative shooting and confidence in his team, somehow we pulled these shoots off. He already had the vision before the camera was turned on.

And so in the past decade, we moved into the production of the *Water’s Journey* series together. As producer, co-writer and on-camera talent, these productions became a way of life for me. We got the incubator funding for the gig after using magic markers and crayons to storyboard the film on a 30-foot-long chunk of brown craft paper for the Secretary of Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection. He said he had never had such a confident but bizarre pitch for money in his life. For months on end, I lived in the Skiles’ yard in my travel trailer, commuted to Jacksonville for editing and moved in with Wes’ Mom. Terri Skiles was the foundation and stability that enabled our team to pack up the big white van, pile in and go trek through the Everglades, boat down the St. Johns, or swim under the Sonny’s restaurant. Every departure, peppered with the last minute search for Wes’s wallet and tender good byes to Terri, Tess and Nate.

Near death in an Antarctic iceberg; losing a wheel in the Yucatan; epic poison ivy on my inner thighs in the Everglades; punching a man on the Romanian set of *The Cave*; winning the International HD Film Festival; losing dear friends in the sport we all love; rolling my van at 65 miles per hour...I suppose I have experienced many of the most dramatic moments of my life with Wes. Scared, angry, elated and honored. In our director/producer relationship there were high and low moments, but always incredible love and respect when all was said and done. I will be eternally grateful for all of those moments. They represent the truest of friendship with my Redneck Brother. He gave me some amazing opportunities and encouraged me to aim high. I will honor those opportunities and follow his path; mentoring others, living life fully, knowing that nothing is impossible.



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“No one person can change the world, but everybody, individually, trying, can make a huge difference. Ultimately, we’re the stewards.”

~Wes Skiles



Wes Skiles and former FDEP Secretary David Struhs at Wakulla Spring talking to students about springs protection (above). Photo by Jill Heinerth.

A paddler floats in the morning mist on the Santa Fe River (opposite). Photo by Georgia Shemitz

LISTEN!

By Jim Stevenson

Listen! Can you hear his laugh? I can. Wes' laughter would fill a room. He is laughing today because so many of his friends have gathered in his name here at his favorite springs. I am so glad that Wes' family chose Ginnie Springs for this special day.

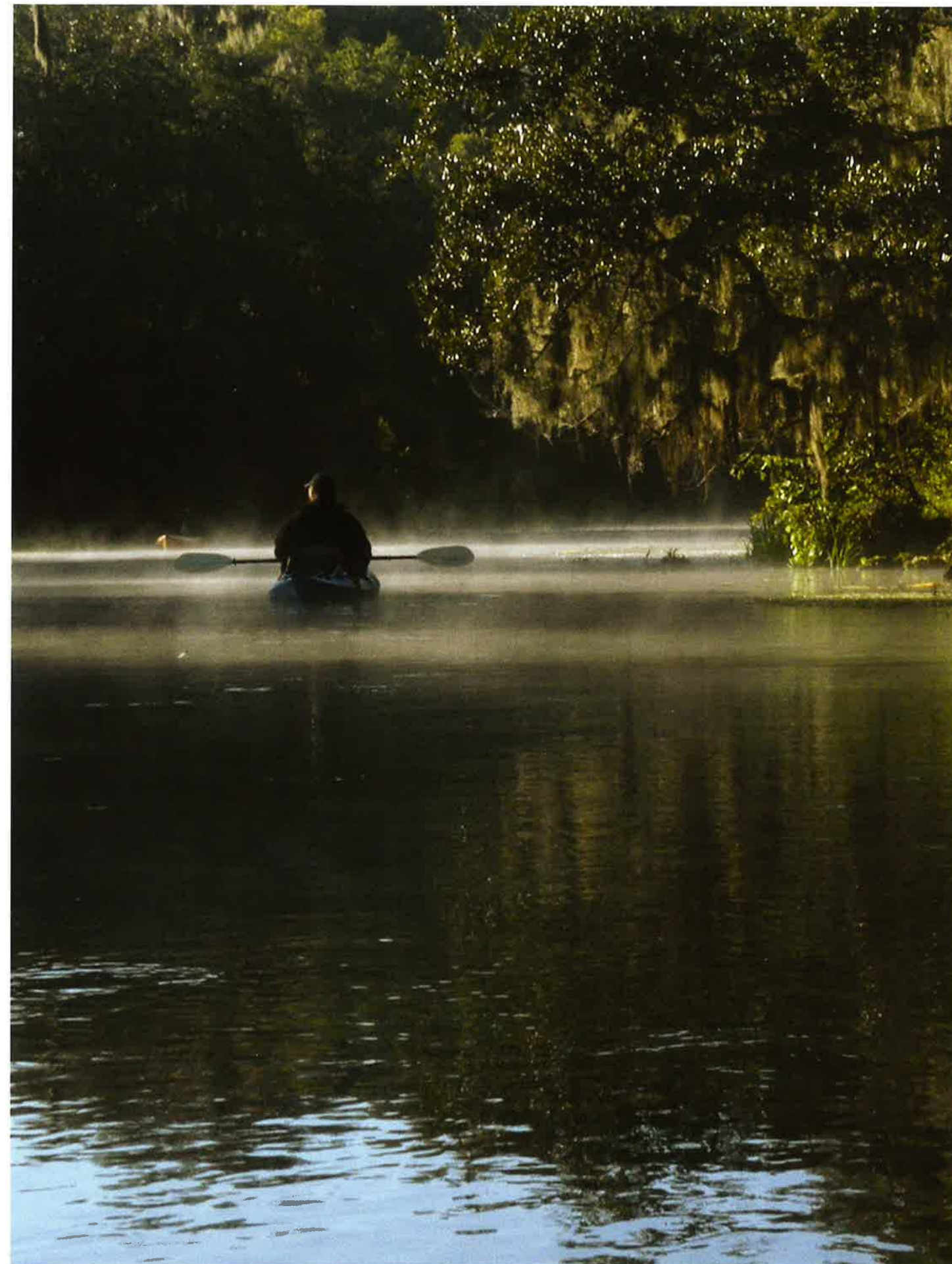
Wes was a champion for Florida's springs before most of us even knew they were in trouble. He didn't go to college to study geology, hydrology or water chemistry. Instead he was self-taught and had deep passion. From years of diving in the caves of north Florida's springs and endless curiosity he figured out how springs functioned.

In 1999, I had the good fortune to appoint Wes to serve on the Florida Springs Task Force to represent the cave diving community. He was a forceful member. During a task force meeting, we were discussing how we should select the most important springs for protection and Wes said that "every spring is important and deserved protection." When agency members had to tiptoe around sensitive political issues, Wes was there to say what needed to be said. Prior to meetings, I would sometimes ask Wes to push certain issues and to insist that we take stronger action. He loved it. It was like having my own "Enforcer." Wes has done more to educate Floridians about the plight of our springs than has anyone else. His legacy is his outstanding films: *Polluting the Fountain of Youth* in 1998, *Protecting Florida Springs* in 2001, *Waters Journey: Hidden Rivers* in 2003, and *The Springs Heartland* in 2008. Several of you are in those films. Wes did his part. We owe it to our good friend to do our part

Listen! I can hear him prodding and encouraging us. Several of you have been actively doing your part for years. But the rest of you need to dive into the action. You divers enjoy clean, clear water for your sport. Wakulla Spring is no longer clear. Silver Springs and Hornsby Springs are no longer clean. Ichetucknee Springs has lost 25% of its flow because of pumping in Duval County. White Spring in the town of White Spring, Worthington Spring in the town of Worthington Spring, Hampton and Fenholloway Springs near Perry no longer flow because of pumping. What will Florida be like without its springs? Would you like to do something for Wes? Then do something for a Florida spring. If you want to know how to make a difference, I can send you a list from which to choose -- for example:

- The up-coming election gives you an opportunity to ask candidates: "If elected what action will you take to protect our springs?"
- If you live in a springshed, stop fertilizing your lawn.
- Take your county commissioner or your legislator to see a spring.
- Take a child to see a spring.
- Buy the "Protect Florida Springs" specialty license plate.

Wes will be grateful and a spring will whisper, 'thank you.'



"Hin Warg Mug Hi!"

By Brian Kakuk

"His legacy lives on in everyone he inspired to live life fully, to have great adventures, to love the wild, and to respect our environment."

~Shannon Caraccia

Kenny Broad and Luis Lamar in Lothlorian, a blue hole located near the eastern end of Grand Bahama Island. The name comes from Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and was named by Rob Palmer in the 1980's. It has at least six entrances in a line that lead into this massive cavern. Photo by Wes Skiles courtesy of National Geographic Society.

Like so many of today's cave divers and explorers, my first cave dives were influenced directly by a man who would eventually become not just a colleague but a great friend. In 1990, while perusing an old VHS tape of Sea Fan's video magazine, I came upon a short video article on multiple lighting techniques in the underwater caves of Florida by some guy named Wes Skiles. In the video, Wes went on to explain in his distinct north Florida drawl, how multiple slave strobes could be used to create amazing images in underwater caves. The video article ended with a strong disclaimer that diving in such places required specialized training and equipment.

Being a young and slightly arrogant Navy hard hat diver as well as an avid underwater photographer, I figured that if the redneck in the video could create such stunning images, then I certainly should be able to accomplish the same results in the Bahamian blue holes scattered around Andros island where I

was living at the time. I snatched up my cameras, strobes and dive gear and headed off to the closest blue hole I could think of.

Within minutes of entering the cave, I was in a complete silt out, by myself, and the only reason I got out alive was the fact that I had seen Wes using a guideline during his dives in the video, and fortunately for me, had done the same on this dive. The dive had scared me badly, but I also realized that if I had the training and equipment that Wes had described, I might return to finish the dive without fear of dying.

I decided to put away the cameras for at least a year and learn how to dive the caves safely. However, after recognizing that most the caves I was diving in were mostly virgin, and no other divers had ever seen what I was seeing, the exploration bug struck hard and I never really regained my passion for the underwater photography.

Fast forward 6 years. My first dives with Wes would be in Wakulla Springs, during Bill Stone's Wakulla 2 project in 1997. Wes and his team were being paid to document the digital mapping project for a National Geographic documentary.

On one mission, Paul Heinerth and I were to drop some emergency bail-out cylinders approximately 5,000 feet into the cave, while Wes and his team shot still images up until we reached an area called the Grand Canyon. As we approached the area that the photography team and the mapping teams were supposed to part ways, I heard Wes begin screaming through his regulator and pointing sharply at one of the other divers. Startled, I immediately went into rescue mode and started to deploy a regulator from my bail out cylinder, when I heard Wes yelling again. This time I could only hear "Hine! Hine!" When I turned to look at

Wes I could see him waving me off as he realized I was trying to react to a non-existent emergency. This was my first introduction to the fine art of understanding Wes' "scuba speak," and afterwards found out from the rest of the team that this was his method of directing the lighting crew underwater, and "Hine" was actually "Brian" in this underwater language.

Fast forward another 13 years.

Over more than another decade, I would have the opportunity to work with Wes on at least four more projects including BBC and National Geographic documentaries as well as one feature film during which I would slowly become fluent in the team's "scuba speak" language.

The last project I would work with Wes on would represent the culmination of 20 years of exploration and research cave diving for me. Wes and my good friend Kenny Broad would pitch a National Geographic documentary and magazine article that would take much of 2009 to shoot in the blue holes and underwater caves of the Bahamas. This project was a cave explorer's

indeed world class and worthy of the National Geographic, one image in particular now has much more meaning to me than any of the others. The image, actually a mosaic of 3 images in the Cascade Room of Dan's Cave would eventually grace the cover and a large pull-out image of the August 2010 National Geographic magazine. However, after learning of Wes' death, the reason for the image's significance would change drastically for me.

The Cascade Room image was one of the last ones shot during our time together on Abaco Island where I now live. During the two days that it took to shoot this image, Wes directed us in elaborate pre-dive briefings as to which diver would be positioned where, and what angle to aim strobes and movie lighting. During one of these dives, Wes would position me in the middle of the room, hovering motionless between floor and ceiling, while staring straight into a bright movie light held by Wes' lead lighting diver, Tom Morris. At one point, Wes yells out in his scuba speak language to me: "Hine, Hine, Hin warg mug hi! Hin warg mug hi!" To the un-initiated (as I was on the 1997

dive with him in Wakulla), most divers would have turned to Wes expecting some sort of emergency. However, I now knew exactly what was expected, and took two short fin kicks towards Tom's movie light. My response was immediately met with rapid fire flashes from Wes' camera, confirming that I had correctly understood the meaning of his underwater screams. "Hin warg mug hi!" simply meant "swim toward the light!"

Dealing with the loss of a friend and colleague is as individual a process as any in life. For me, it was a matter of saying good bye in the environment that we shared. A few days after returning from Wes' memorial at Ginnie Springs, I found myself in my favorite place on earth. The very place where Wes had shared his final underwater words with me. As I swam into the large blue void of the Cascade Room, festooned with massive pillars and a forest of cave formations, I could see the images of the team hanging in mid water and hear the echoes

of Wes' efforts. There I said good bye to my friend, reciting the exact words he had directed at me. "Hin warg mug hi" = "Swim toward the light." Although the words now have a different meaning to me, they are nonetheless, words I will never forget.

"Swim toward the light, Wes." I know I'll find you there when the time comes.



dream. I would get to work with long-time friends Wes, Jill Heinerth, Tom Morris, Kenny Broad, Dr. Tom Iliffe, Nathan Skiles and Agnes Milowka, showing them some world class Bahamian caves and documenting the amazing research our Bahamas National Museum team had been conducting in blue holes across the Bahamian Archipelago. Although many of the images that would come from Wes' camera during our time together were

Time To Make The Donuts

By Tom Morris

“He was unquestionably one of the world’s greatest cave explorers, underwater photographers, and conservationists – most certainly, an uncommon man of many talents.”

~ Dr. Tom Iliffe



Tom Morris being filmed in the sand restriction in Hart Springs for *Water’s Journey: The Hidden Rivers of Florida* (above).

Wes shooting the big hi def camera. Photo by Nate Skiles (p. 21)

I met Wes Skiles in the early 1980’s. He more or less just dropped into my life. I was inside the cavern at Peacock Slough bagging some litter, when a diver came crashing to the bottom. He seemed to be having a seizure. As I reached for him, he righted himself, mimed a belly laugh, pointed to the bag of trash, and gave me the okay sign. Then, off he went. The diver, of course, was Wes. We met later in the parking lot and were soon diving together.

It usually takes most of a day to go diving, but the underwater part only lasts for an hour or two, so it is important that you enjoy your dive buddy’s company. This is why long-term dive partners are usually good friends; without friendship the partnership doesn’t last. Diving is an adventure, and part of the way we fill our time together (surface interval, if you will) is with stories from our personal diving histories. The stories are retold so many times to new audiences that most dive buddies can tell their partner’s stories as well as their own. That is how it was with Wes and me. We are all divers, so I thought you might want to hear about Wes’ diving history and hear a few of his stories.

Wes grew up in Jacksonville, and learned to dive in his early teens. Like many Jacksonville divers Wes spent a lot of time off-shore, and especially loved to spearfish. One day Wes and two buddies were diving out of sight of land, when their boat, which was anchored badly, was sunk by a big swell. They managed to climb up onto a large nearby buoy, and that was where they spent the night and the better part of the next day. They were beginning to despair when a fellow came along in a sixteen foot boat with a small outboard. The boater pulled alongside the buoy and asked, “Which way is Jacksonville?” They pointed west, at which point the lost boater started to motor away. Frantic yelling brought him back, and the man agreed to take them aboard. The boat was severely overloaded, but none of them would volunteer to remain on the buoy, or even abandon their dive gear. The ride back was tense, but they made it. This story would have been perfect for the popular last page feature in the old *Skin Diver* magazine called I Learned About Diving From That. Although, in this case, it should be I Learned About Anchoring From That.

Every diver in Jacksonville knew about the springs, and it wasn’t long before Wes headed over to check them out. Not surprisingly, after his first dive into a cave he was hooked. In those days Wes was too young to drive so he had to convince his mother to run him over to the springs on weekends and drop him off with his dive gear. He would set up his tent and wait for other divers to come along to buddy up with him. Talk about giving your son a long leash!

Around the mid 1970’s Wes started working in the Pro Dive Shop on Atlantic Boulevard, where he met Clark Pitcairn. Soon the two were diving together regularly. Clark soon changed the shop’s name to the Aquifer Dive Center, which strongly suggests he and Wes had a bad case of cave diving fever.

How high was their fever? Well, consider this. The late Dr. Chaplain, a cave diving heart surgeon who frequented the shop, owned Morgan Spring, but he would not let the two young men dive there. The temptation was too much, so they started sneaking in. The dives qualify as epic ordeal. They would park after dark across the river from the spring, put on their 104’s, climb down a steep 20 foot bank, swim across the river, climb up a similar embankment on the other side, walk a hundred yards to the spring basin, climb down the steep 20 foot basin walls, and finally get into the water. Soon they were exploring at 180 feet. After the dive they would reverse the whole process. Yes, they had the fever.

Wes took photography as an elective in high school, and this, along with surfing and diving, became a lifelong passion. When I look through my photographs I find that I have relatively few photos of Wes, because he usually carried the camera. In fact, it got to where he wouldn’t get into the water without a camera, even on ambitious exploration dives. He would often start on the swim to the end of the line knocking off photos, then drop the camera stuff, go explore, and pick up the camera gear on the way back, finishing off the film at deco.

Wes took this to the extreme during the 1987 Wakulla Project, when he mounted video cameras on his Aqua Zepp scooter, clipped still cameras to his harness, and then headed out to explore at over 300 feet deep. Dive opportunities were so precious and limited during the project that Wes did not have the luxury of dedicated photo dives. This made for some pretty severe task loading, but Wes pulled it off. Usually. On one memorable dive Wes mounted a video camera to the Zepp on a tall, strut so the lens looked over his shoulder. He counterbalanced the torquing effect of the camera with carefully placed lead. The problems started when the lead came loose, and the Zepp flipped upside down and floated to the ceiling. It took heroic effort to exit on the disabled scooter.

There have been a number of really good cave divers, but Wes had probably mastered the broadest range of skills of any diver I have known. One of those skills was surveying, and he could do it really fast. As fate would have it, Wes, Paul Hein-erth and I got the last dive of the Wakulla Project. Right before we headed down, Dana Bryant, a DEP biologist, rushed over to me with some collecting gear and said they had to have more crayfish specimens. I reluctantly took the gear, and chased and collected crayfish at several spots along the way, which caused me to fall behind. I caught back up with Wes and Paul as they were tying onto the end of the line. They took turns laying out line from their Zepps and I followed behind, feeling increasingly anxious about my gas supply; I had used too much gas chasing those damn crayfish. When Wes pulled out a third reel, I showed him my pressure gauges. He said just stay close to me, and headed off with that last reel. When Wes finally tied off we were 4200 feet back. I wanted to dash for the entrance, but we had over 1500 feet of cave to survey. Wes and Paul surveyed

like demons, while I concentrated on saving gas and staying real close to them. For years I wondered how good that rushed survey was, but darn if the Wakulla 2 data didn’t prove their survey to be spot on.

Wes was always on the cutting edge of cave diving. It was his idea to make a deco-chamber to take some of the pain out of long decompressions, which could be burdensome in the days before nitrox and the regular use of oxygen for decompression. My kids had a six foot diameter cattle trough they used for a swimming pool, and Wes persuaded me to swipe it from them and help him put it into the Peacock cavern. There is a photograph of it on the cover of an old *Underwater Speleology*. As we filled the trough with air we began to worry that we might collapse the cavern ceiling. But, it worked great and was the model for subsequent chambers installed elsewhere. The tub finally ended up in Cathedral Canyon, where it is rusting away today. Incidentally, Woody Jasper engineered what was probably the ultimate deco-tub. He rented a small Dempsey Dumpster and welded in brackets for bunk beds. We put it in Bird Sink, and named it the Bird Sink Hilton. We even had a full-blown Thanksgiving dinner in that dumpster, in our beds.

Wes was involved in the development of Florida side-mount diving. He and a few others originally looked for ideas by studying photographs of British rigs in books like *The Darkness Beckons*. But, the British style didn’t work too well in Florida; the conditions and diving demands are so different. Through trial and error their side-mount rigs slowly evolved into the more or less standard style we use today. Woody Jasper commented one day that side-mount rigs would help keep him diving into old age because he would only have to carry one tank at a time to the water. I just saw that PADI is now teaching side mount-diving to the masses, with that being one of the cited benefits. Wes was also on to the concept of a long hose quite early. He went out and made up a batch of the first seven foot hoses from the tubing used on CO2 canisters at soda fountains. I still use mine, but I have to admit my dive buddies worry about its age. Divers tend to form small groups based on geography, age, chance, and interests, and Wes and his friends were no different. We had a “tribe” and within it we were somewhat competitive. One manifestation of this was comparing how much air we had left after a dive. One day, after we did the “How much air you got left” bit, Woody Jasper said, “Let me see your pressure gauges.” I can’t remember who cheated the most. Surely, it had to be Wes. Certainly, not me! But Wes really didn’t have to cheat. He was extraordinarily athletic underwater. I was made painfully aware of this during a series of dives we made into Aerialito de Pariso on Isla Cozumel. The swims were long. One fault-controlled passage, the Road to Chankanab, went straight as an arrow for over three thousand feet. To my dismay, Wes would slowly pull away from me, and use less air doing it.

Meeting Wes was one of my lucky moments. I have lost track of the cool paid vacations I have been on to help Wes film or explore. He once said, “You lucky bastard, you get to do the fun part, actually making the films. I have to do the hard part, getting the support and money together, making it all happen.” It would sometimes take Wes several years to get a new project going. There are limited funds for documentaries and the many would-be filmmakers. It is a testament to Wes’ ambition

Carry On Brother

By Bill Stone

“If there is life after death, or existence in a parallel dimension, I know that Wes is out there now, showing them how to make perfect pictures.”



Tom Morris on a stage-laden Aqua Zepp scooter in B Tunnel during the 1987 Wakulla project.
Photo by Wes Skiles

It was in the fall of 1980 that I first met Wes Skiles. I had driven down to Jacksonville non-stop from Maryland to continue training in deep diving with Sheck Exley. Sheck was teaching me how to dive deep on air for an expedition I had planned for 1981 to the San Agustin sump in Mexico. He recommended I pick up a set of twin 104s for work in Florida and went so far as to recommend a dive shop where I could get them: The Aquifer Dive Center in Jacksonville. It happened to be the dive shop owned by Clark Pitcairn, who was then Sheck's partner on several pioneering, long stage dives going on at that time. Wes worked for Clark and split his time equally between surfing and cave diving – getting off once a week on Wednesday evenings with Clark to dive a spring somewhere or the other in the Wild West that was spring diving in north Florida in those days.

So at that time Wes was a 23-year-old cave diving surfer bum, doing anything for a weekly cave diving fix and catching the next wave. Like several of us who were lucky enough in that era, Wes had the good fortune of being an apprentice to Sheck Exley. But Wes went further than most of us and became Sheck's protégé... a redneck protégé with a wicked sense of humor.

I lost track of Wes until the fall of 1987 when an unusual series of events led to us being granted a three month permit to explore Wakulla Springs. By that time, Wes was well known as one of Florida's top cave divers and there was little question he would be involved with the project. So was National Geographic. We had set up our headquarters in the small concession stand building left over from when Wakulla was a private resort. The expedition was short on cash and we had let this fact be known to our sponsors at National Geographic (NGS). At that time, the best known underwater photographer at National Geographic was Emory Kristoff. Not long after sending the emergency note to NGS, Wes and I were working on gear together in the concession stand when comes a knock on the door. Wes goes and answers it and there, in a trench coat in the rain, is Emory Kristoff. He walks in and, doing his best James Cagney impersonation, says, “da boys in DC heard yer message, so dey send me to deliver de money.” Whereupon he opens the trench coat and slaps a \$3,000 wad of cash on the table. Then he turns to Wes and says, “Hey kid, I hear you knows how to run a camera underwater?” And Wes is stumbling for words. So Kristoff continues, “well, de boys in the de basement at 17th and M sent me with another present for yuz.” And he has his assistant outside bring in several boxes with \$20,000 worth of Benthos deep submersible camera gear. He and Wes then disappeared for some time together and the next thing we saw was this tank sled that bolted under an Aqua Zepp carrying all this camera gear. With Emory's encouragement, Wes set off on a mission -- one that would become his life's mantra -- to get a series of powerful images that would turn heads at NGS. He got them but the story got bumped because of the Centennial series of stories

that came out that year. His shot “Phantoms of the Cube Room” in Sally Ward and others of divers riding Aqua Zepps into the Grand Canyon of Wakulla – suspended in blackness as if flying in space -- became the center pieces of the book that was written about the project. That book, propelled by Wes' stunning photos, was one of the principal catalysts of what later became known as the Technical Diving revolution.

One morning at Wakulla in the fall of 1987 we were having our usual pre-mission planning discussion at the lodge. Sitting in the sun room were Sheck, Paul Heinerth, Clark Pitcairn, Paul DeLoach, John Zumrick, Mary Ellen Eckhoff, Tom Morris, Wes and me. We were strategizing who was going to do what and when. Suddenly Wes got this look of sudden apprehension on his face and Sheck said, “Wes, is there something wrong with this plan?” And Wes, yelling over his shoulder as he ran out the door, said “Oh crap! My tanks !!” And we all saw him running down the hill to the springs where we had one of several compressors set up. Wes had put an empty set of twin 104s on charge and since it was going to take a long time to pump he had come up to the meeting... which had lasted longer than expected. When he returned he had this sheepish grin on his face. Sheck, in his usual understated way said “I guess you over pumped them?” Wes, in his equally laconic way, said, “Well, I guess you'd like to say I hydro'd them.... But since they didn't explode I figured, hell, why not keep the extra gas for a better safety margin today?” There was a moment of True Wes. Leo Dickinson was also there in 1987, filming a documentary with Wes' help for the HTV Britain. Following the longest exploration dive of the project – almost 1,400 meters from the entrance in B Tunnel, Leo interviewed Wes and said (when Wes had just turned 30), “do you feel you'll be able to keep this up... to continue exploring?” And Wes responded, on film, “as I get older I know things will become more difficult, but we'll just change that with technology...and keep on diving.”

There was a long gap before I saw Wes again. It was Thanksgiving 1993 and we were testing the Cis-Lunar Mk4 in Ginnie Springs before a planned expedition to Huautla in the spring of 1994. Wes and I went on a dive together, both with Mk4s, to the Hinkle restriction in Devil's Eye and then coasted out. When we got to the entrance and it came time for decompression, Wes told me he was going to use his normal air dive computer, since he did not yet trust the decompression algorithm that we had recently installed on the Mk4. I said OK and proceeded to surface 45 minutes ahead of Wes. He later explained that due to earlier decompression incidents he had to be conservative. I respected that decision as a sign of controlled discipline... something both of us had learned well from Exley.

The next time I saw Wes was at a barbecue at Woody Jasper's in February 1994. It was a send-off party for two important expeditions that spring – for Sheck and Jim Bowden's push on Zacaton, and for our project to Huautla. Late that evening Wes broke out some videos he and Kenny Broad had collaborated on and with a tongue-in-cheek smile, warned us to learn from these videos so we would not make the same mistakes on the upcoming projects. One was the infamous “Jacques Eye-Ear” escapade in which a famous French free diver (played by Kenny) attempts to swim from Devil's Eye to Devil's Ear on one breath; and the second one “Captain Safety”... an insane

underwater horror flick with monsters with glowing eyes and Aqua Zepps that flew upside down. Both used novel points-of-view that were early indicators of Wes' genius behind a camera. His later artistic work “Little Devil's” had a powerful visceral aura to it. Wes, understanding the power of the film, enjoyed pointing out that a certain portion of his growing public audiences seemed to leave halfway through a screening of Little Devil's out of sheer claustrophobic anxiety.

A few months later, during much sadder times following the loss of Sheck in Zacaton and our Scottish team mate Ian Rolland in San Agustin, Wes came to Huautla. He arrived like the Cavalry on a white horse – instilling new enthusiasm to a demoralized team. He was on official assignment from National Geographic and was determined to capture on film the essence of the undertaking and to buoy the spirits of those who chose to continue on. He succeeded in both. He knew exactly what he needed to get and I watched as he spent more than a week hanging on rope, and 27 rolls of film, to get one picture of the entrance to the Sotano de San Agustin that he knew was a keeper. He did that 15 more times in other places and the result was the Geographic story on the expedition printed in September 1995. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Wes for doing that. Had he not brought the team back together it is doubtful we would have gone on to continue exploration beyond the San Agustin sump.

I had the privilege of working with Wes again in 1999 at Wakulla Springs. This time he had a much more mature style, and a crew of six working for him. But he carried that same gleam of excitement in his eye to be there where it was happening and the same determination to get the shot. He was now a regular with National Geographic and his footage was at the heart of the hour-long documentary “Mapping the Labyrinth” that captured the essence of the effort to build the first 3D cave map. I enjoyed the frequent evening camp fires we had at Indian Springs, where the team was based for that project, with Wes telling tales of his upcoming projects.

Over the next decade I did not see Wes much. But during this time his reputation and catalog of underwater films and print articles continued to grow to where he achieved worldwide recognition. He even occasionally stuck little jokes into his films to tease friends, like the hand-held sonar cave mapper in “The Cave.” I could see that wide, Wes grin on the other side of the email as he wrote me about that scene. The day before Wes died USA Today ran a major story on Wes, Kenny Broad, Brian Kakuk, and Jill Heinerth and their recent blue holes expedition to the Bahamas. The August 2010 issue of National Geographic Magazine boasted what may be Wes' most stunning image ever on the cover... followed by a three-page foldout inside. He went out at the top of his game. The best underwater photographer on this planet.

I would have worked with Wes anywhere. Under any conditions. On this planet or off it. He was a true expeditionary man ... a true brother in exploration. If there is life after death, or existence in a parallel dimension, I know that Wes is out there now, showing them how to make perfect pictures. Carry on brother.

and creativity that he had worked his way right to the top. I was with Wes when he made his first film, a small thing called In Search of the Lens. The two of us went over to the Bahamas with a small housed video camera and two video lights. Simple. But over the years, as the shoots became more ambitious, the equipment grew exponentially. One month-long shoot for National Geographic in the Yucatan Peninsula is particularly memorable, as miserable experiences usually are. Wes was shooting video as well as stills, and the pile of equipment was enormous; we must have had more than fifty big cases of gear. We moved locations frequently, and had to load and unload a large truck with high wooden rails each time. With each move we also had to set up a new equipment station, crank up generators, charge an assortment of batteries, fill tanks, fix broken equipment, make meals, set up camping gear, plan the next day's shoot, go to bed late, go shoot, and then do it all over again. Eventually Sylvia, our young Production Assistant, approached Wes and said she thought the crew was worn out and needed a day off. Wes' reply: "Hell, my boys wouldn't know what to do with a day off."

The IMAX shoot of Journey into Amazing Caves in the Yucatan was also memorable. The IMAX camera shoots 70mm film, and is huge, especially with its housing. It actually took a winch to get it in and out of the water. A roll of film cost \$3000, including developing and printing, and runs through the camera in three minutes. So, it costs \$1000 per minute to shoot. There is no instant feedback, like we get with modern video; the film had to be mailed back to the USA to be processed. Later you would get a call reporting on exposures and such. At first we were all freaked out about maybe being the one to blow a \$3000 shot, but we eventually got used to it.

Wes wanted to film Hazel Barton, our vivacious star, swimming through a particularly beautiful stretch of cave, and he wanted to light it with surface supplied lights. But, it was too far back for our 330 foot power cables. Wes' solution was to drill a small diameter hole into the roof of the cave, and feed four cables in near the "set." The plan was to feed the ends of the four cables barely into the cave. Then divers would swim to the cable ends, tug on them, and make four neat piles as the rest of the cable was fed down the hole. Later the cables would be stretched out to their lights. However, the surface tenders felt an imaginary tug and fed all the cable down before the divers got there. What an unbelievable mess; a quarter mile of cable in one huge pile. Our spirits were crushed. But along came Gary Walton to the rescue. He went back there and spent several hours untangling the mess, all by himself.

I believe it was on the IMAX shoot that Wes coined his dreaded call to work: "Dive, dive, dive." Or, alternatively: "Time to make the donuts," which later morphed into "Time to make the babies."

Wes was not shy, and on almost every project he would do something that would elicit a collective "I can't believe he did that." One time we were filming the story of Linda, a woman who was rescued after being lost in an underwater cave for six hours. There were a number of policemen involved in the actual incident, and they were around for the reenactment. At

one point three of them were killing time and leaning against Wes' van. Out of the blue Wes yells, "HEY, GET THE HELL OFF OF THAT VAN!" The cops leapt up like they had been tased. Then Wes, with a sideways grin, said "I always wanted to do something like that."

Wes' career accomplishments are varied and include the IMAX film mentioned above, as well as National Geographic magazine and film specials, television shows such as Rescue 911, Hollywood movies, such as The Cave, and Discovery Channel's Time Warp. But, it is probably safe to say that Wes derived the greatest satisfaction from his Water's Journey documentary film series.

These films follow the journey of water above and below the Florida landscape, through rivers and swamps, into deep underwater caves, and even through sewer pipes. Along the way Wes shows how our activities affect our water resources. He showcased cutting-edge techniques that promise to lessen impacts from agriculture and urban development. But, more importantly, Wes showed how small but important changes in the way ordinary citizens do things can lessen our collective impact on the health of our water. The series was crafted to entertain as well as educate, and it had to be gratifying for Wes to know that teachers in Florida have shown these films to an entire generation of middle and high school students.

Wes, through his exploration, photography, documentary films, and political activism, was probably more influential than anyone else in raising our awareness of his beloved Florida springs and the problems that now threaten them. When Wes first started diving in the springs, they were in pretty good shape. But by the 1990's the delayed effects of over-pumping and widespread groundwater pollution were gradually becoming apparent. Wes' response was a tireless campaign to direct protection efforts beyond the springs themselves and into their watersheds, where the problems originate. His campaign of education and reform ranged from local garden clubs right up to the office of the governor. He was truly a champion of the aquifer.

Wes' last big filming project was the joint NOVA-National Geographic Blue Holes of the Bahamas project, which showcased scientific studies taking place in Bahamian caves. In light of what was to come, it was so great that our little group of friends was able to spend so much time together. Wes was very happy to have his son Nathan along on the crew. So were the rest of us; we had a new victim for our stories, lies, and practical jokes. Wes even put Nathan on the cover of National Geographic. Woody Jasper once commented, "The only reason anyone even knows who we are, is because we have a publicist." He was referring, of course, to Wes.

Wes always had several projects in the works. On the day he died, he was filming unpredictable bull sharks off the southeast coast of Florida. That morning, offshore conditions were rough, and there was debate as to whether or not they should go out. Wes' reported comment on the situation comes as no surprise to those who knew him: "Well, the waves are big and rough, the currents will be strong, and it looks like rain. Sounds like the perfect day to go film sharks."



There could be no more fitting tribute to the memory of Wes Skiles than the spectacular cover and pullout photo in August's National Geographic magazine. I dove with Wes on his first Bahamian blue hole dive over 25 years ago. He was so enthusiastic about this new environment. I watched him struggling to take photos in this black, silty cave. The photos were definitely not the best and we shared the goal of having a photo in "National Geo" some day. Wes persevered and became a fine photographer and filmmaker. He succeeded and brought my dream along with him when his photograph of a remipede was included in the August article. His determination and dedication led Wes to a career which not only included submerged cave photography but the conservation of caves and springs of Florida. Wes captured the essence of the beauty and mystery of the blue holes of the Bahamas. I am thankful for the lasting memory of Wes in National Geographic, sharing the importance of these submerged environments with the world.

Jill Yager, PhD
Prof. Emerita, Antioch College
Puerto Morelos, Mexico

“Gone is the smile,
gone is the laugh but
remembered are the
good times shared.
To my hero, mentor
and friend Wes Skiles.
RIP brother.”

~ Matt Matthes



Viking-style funeral pyre ablaze during the memorial at Ginnie Springs. Photo by Shannon Caraccia (above).

Fireworks lit the sky in celebration of Wes' life following the formal memorial service. Photo by David Uluoa (opposite).

A Fitting Farewell

By David Uluoa

High Springs – July 28, 2010. Last night we attended a most moving tribute to a man who has touched thousands of people with his personality, and hundreds of thousands of people with his work. Ginnie Springs was the perfect venue to commemorate the life and contributions of Wes Skiles.

When we arrived at Ginnie, the line of cars outside the gates was just a small clue that this was going to be a huge affair. It was not until we got to the main spring parking lot that we realized how brilliant the evening was going to be.

As we drove around looking for any type of parking space, we noticed that the main pavilion was full of fantastic food. To the right of the grassy area, a large tent had been erected. In it was a projector showing a touching and personal thousand-image slide show that chronicled most of Wes' life and work.

Just in front of the boardwalk by the main spring stood a stage that was surrounded by hundreds of portable lawn chairs and umbrellas. Despite the looming thunderstorms, each of these personal items was set up in the grass to stake out a spot for the incredible tribute to come. People poured into the park by the hundreds, and respectfully settled in for the formal ceremony.

The memorial began with prayers for Wes and his family, followed by eulogies from his brother, sister, good friends and close associates. Tears fell like the rain, and, at times, the rain fell like tears, but no one ran for cover. And when the rain fell harder, somebody heartfully exclaimed, "Wes wants us wet!"

Following the tributes that made all of us laugh, cry and applaud out loud was a meal that was akin to a HUGE family Thanksgiving. Everyone ate like kings and queens below a banner of one of Wes' spectacular images, punctuated by a shimmering barrage of fantastic fireworks—one of Wes' favorite things in this world.

Magic hour is what photographers call the time just around and after sunset. It's a time of day when the light is at its most brilliant. This evening, after the dark thunderstorm clouds blew away as if on cue, the light was the most spectacular we have seen in a long while. We took a moment to stroll over to the twilight banks of the Santa Fe, where multi-colored flowers swirled in silent eddies in yet another tribute to a man who so loved capturing light.

Two of the most dazzling parts of the evening were the fireworks and a burning Viking pyre tribute. Both lit up the springs with a bittersweet warm glow and reminded us of what made Wes so special and how he has touched all our lives.



“This uncanny ability to pre-visualize, to see something with all its details and intricacies before it was actually produced, that’s what gave him the edge in his work as an artist, photographer and film maker.”



Wes filming in Bermuda on a project with Dr. Tom Illiffe. Photo by Nate Skiles (above).

Wes filming during the River Returns shoot on the St. Johns River. This camera mount allowed him to paddle on camera (opposite). Photo by Jill Heinerth.

Simply Wes

By Agnes Milowka

Wes. Wes - Wes. Wes Skiles’ I exclaimed, as if I had just discovered America. He was, of course, tickled pink that anyone who claimed to be a cave diver would not know him by sight and that I had just happily chit chatted away with no idea who he was. I was profusely apologetic, as I realized that the ‘nice pictures’ on the walls were actually his own incredible photographs and I had a well-developed case of ‘foot-in-mouth’ disease.

On the upside, that meeting set the scene for the rest of our association and friendship. To me he remained simply Wes. The fact that he was a world renowned filmmaker, cinematographer, photographer, explorer, cave diving pioneer, champion of the springs, protector of the aquifer, amongst so many other things... well all that was just a bonus. It was what he did, what he loved doing and what he was incredibly good at, but it was not who he was. His great charm lay in the way he could simultaneously be very down to earth, open and friendly, while at the same time spend his time flying high and rising well above everyone else in any endeavor he chose to pursue.

I think his greatest skill and ability was to see, to imagine and to envision things that were not there. This uncanny ability to pre-visualize, to see something with all its details and intricacies before it was actually produced, that’s what gave him the edge in his work as an artist, photographer and film maker. This is what allowed him to create so many images that captured our hearts and our imaginations.

Above all however, it is this quality I think that made him a friend, teacher and mentor to so many people and why he had such a profound impact on the lives of everyone he met. He did not just see the person, as they were at that moment in time before him – he also saw the potential of what they could become in the future. He could imagine the ‘finished product’ as it were and he gave his unqualified support to those he believed in. He reveled in being a part of the journey and helping you get the most out of yourself. When in his presence it was easy to dream big. When Wes was around, it felt like anything was possible because he not only believed that but also was living proof of this philosophy.

He spent his entire life learning and remained always curious and fascinated by the world around him and the people that inhabited it. His passion for life, his energy, his enthusiasm for, well, simply everything, were all infectious. He eagerly shared his knowledge and wisdom with those who were willing to listen and, as such, changed the lives of many people on his own journey though life. I will always be thankful for the time he invested in teaching me, for the friendship he offered and the things he was willing to share. The outlandish and outrageous stories of his adventures and experiences, something he was never short of it seems, kept a smile firmly on my face and laughter in my belly. Wes Skiles – you will be greatly missed.



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Peace, My Old Friend

By Paul Heinerth

Wes, my old friend...Where do I begin to tell my story of the man known as Wes Skiles?

The year was 1976. While still at the University of Florida, I first heard of Wes Skiles at Ginnie Springs. He was one of the many divers hanging out there. The property had just been purchased and a gate was being welded at the entrance of the cave entrance of Ginnie Spring. Sometime the following year, veteran cave diver Sheck Exley had referred to Wes as the new cave diving kid from Jacksonville that was "a pretty good cave diver." A few miles from Ginnie Springs was the Branford Dive Center (BDC) on the Suwannee River by the bridge in Branford. The dive shop had been (and still was at the time) the center of the cave diving world. The BDC building survived many river floods and was the only dive shop where one could actually "dive" in the shop (during flood times). By 1980, Wes was managing the BDC. One of my fondest memories was after he and his wife Terri had moved into an old farmhouse nearby. Wes was up high on a wobbly stool trying to hang something and Terri, trying to steady the stool, just reached up and pinched him (I can't tell you where...) and he almost fell off his perch. Most men would have been angry. He just laughed it off. What a matched couple, I thought. Throughout the 80's stopping at the BDC was always a must. It was the best way to hear about what Wes was up to and who was diving with whom and where. A couple of years ago, the BDC building was demolished and taken away just as I was crossing the bridge. I saw through my rearview mirror as the heavy machinery knocked it down. A lot of history was gone in an instant. I did not have a camera ready but Wes would have! While Wes was busy teaching cave diving and running the BDC, I was doing the same at my own dive store, Scuba West, in Hudson. We often shared stories only dive store owners and managers would understand. I lost track of Wes for a few years after he left the BDC. He was off making a living with his camera like his wild adventure in Australia where he and his team were buried alive. His camera never stopped recording the event. The result was a great adventure documentary.

Our paths crossed again for the 1987 Wakulla Spring project. It was a rocky start. I was invited to join the group and was told to be there at 8 a.m. on an October day. I was there but no one else had arrived. This was before cell phones... Eager to "check out" the spring and unaware of the diving protocol, I got into the water with my buddy Steve, a local cave diver. Once back on land, I came across Wes who had arrived while we were underwater. To say he was mad was an understatement; he was pissed. He and Dr. Bill Stone were the two guys in charge. Wes almost sent me home, right there and then. Surviving that verbal onslaught, I was more determined to stay, as I smelled the potential of a great adventure. Wes quickly put Steve and me to

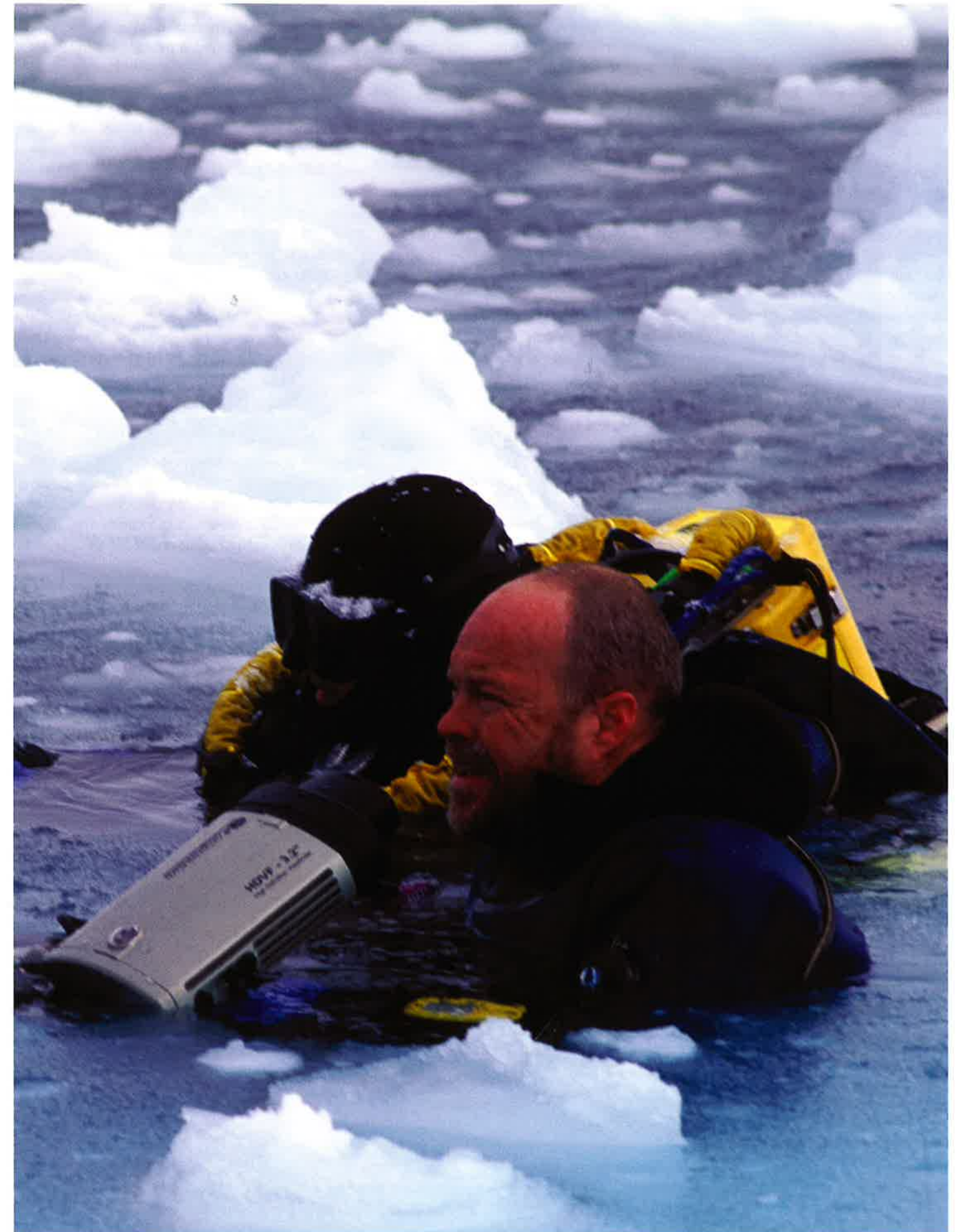
“Many divers have expressed their gratitude for having the biggest dive of their life with Wes. I am very happy to say I did, twice!”



Wes being winched into the frigid waters during the Ice Island project in Antarctica. He almost lost the camera to the depths since the brass clip on the tether of the camera was frozen open and not attached to him. He was shooting his brand new Sony F-900 camera, one of the first full-resolution HD cameras.... #6 (above).

Wes and Paul at the surface in the icy waters of the Ross Sea in Antarctica (opposite).

Photo by Jill Heinerth (opposite).



work building shelves, sweeping floors and whatever else that needed to be done. I had to redeem myself as I always wanted to work with the boy from Jacksonville. The Wakulla Springs expedition was a massive project. The two project goals were a detailed map and a documentary film. With Wes' guidance and expertise, I was able to use the Benthos underwater camera from National Geographic, which was mounted to the bottom of my scooter. In addition I ran a 16 mm movie camera on top of the diver propulsion vehicle. It was an interesting task load along with driving the scooter at 300 ft. deep. Wes gave me some tips and he sure made it sound like it was going to be easy. A book was published from our efforts at Wakulla Springs. Several of the pictures I shot made it into that book thanks to Mr. Skiles. The last dive of that project was done by Wes, Tom Morris and me. We knew it was the last chance for a "big" dive as the decompression habitat was coming out of the water the next day. At this point we had finished our tasks of taking pictures, collecting data and water samples. This dive was going to be a fun dive and we all gave each other high fives under the water and got all of our reels with knotted lines and off we went exploring. We emptied out four reels. Wes and I were nearly 4000 feet back at a depth of 300 feet when we decided to discuss who would put the last reel into the tunnel. I said "here you do it" and he said, "no, you do it." I said, "No, no, you do it." He then said, "No, no, no, you do it;" so I did. Thank you again my friend. Before our big dive, the end of the line was around 2100 feet in the "B" tunnel. After our dive, the surveyed tunnel was just short of 4200 feet. It was an epic dive, my longest and deepest open circuit dive and it was with the best dive buddies possible, Wes and Tom.

Life went on and my dive store kept me very busy as well as raising my son. Wes and Terri soon followed suit by having a son and then a daughter. We would see each other at Ginnie Springs and compare fatherly duties, cave explorations, Star Trek movies, spear fishing stories, and catch up on any film work or project that Wes was into. We hooked up again for the Wakulla 2 project of 1998-99. He was there as the lead man for National Geographic. His duties were too numerous and he did not have the time to go "explore". Remembering our epic dive of the 1987 project, we discussed these new dives where he was surely missed. I recall telling Wes of what I saw on those dives and could see the twinkle in his eyes and his desire to be part of the exploration team. Even with his many duties, Wes still found time to keep the dive team's morale up. Using some sort of metal contraption, he was able to whip up some delicious meals from the campfire, tell jokes and play his guitar. I was always surprised by all his talents, including learning the guitar on his own.

Within a year Wes invited my wife and me on his newest project to Antarctica. It was a grand expedition on which we got to dive into iceberg caves. On one of the early dives, Wes' dry suit flooded. In the typical Skiles fashion, he says, "I will just get this one more shot and then I will get out." Wes was unfamiliar with diving in extreme water temperatures and he went into hypothermia. He was safely guided back to the boat and rushed into a warm shower. No matter what, he always got the shot. Because we had rebreathers, we were able to do an unplanned 3-hour dive in extreme currents and tidal changes. This would

have been impossible on open circuit due to the sub-freezing water temperature. On this particular dive, with the high definition underwater camera, we filmed a living garden under a grounded iceberg. There were a great many cave passages carved into this iceberg. The walls and ceiling were made of white and blue ice and the floor was littered with rocks covered in a myriad of life. The tide changed while we were 800 feet back in the iceberg tunnel. Exiting this dive turned out to be a swim for our lives. Wes had the big camera and I could see he was no longer making forward progress against the incoming current. I knew he would not abandon the camera until the last possible second so I dropped back down with him so that we both could kick out together, one on each side of the camera. We finally made it out. It was one my most unique dives. Oh, yes, the iceberg fell apart a few hours after our exit... Terri Skiles once told me that many divers have expressed their gratitude for having their biggest dive of their life with Wes as their buddy. I am very happy to say I did, twice! Thank you again my old friend.

After Antarctica, we continued to work and dive together. We had some great times together that included alligators, ugly fake teeth, make-believe underwater monsters in a BBQ cooking contest and selling football programs for a Gator game in Gainesville at the University of Florida. We did T.V. episodes and a National Geographic project in a Yucatan cave...the adventures are too numerous to list in one article.

Then it was the first "Water's Journey" documentary film, here in Florida. It was his best work and won multiple awards. It highlighted his talent and dedication to protecting the fresh water resources of Florida. In addition, Wes taught me more on the high definition camera and let me do a lot of the videography. It was an exciting time for me as I always enjoyed working with Wes.

In the summer of 2004 it was back again to the Yucatan for the movie "The Cave." I would not have missed this experience for the world as I got to work closely again with Wes as his fiber optic underwater cable handler. This involved anticipating Wes' every move to avoid jerky camera movement and retakes. We were a great team together and Wes expressed his gratitude to me. He always knew when to praise a deserving team member. Wes had a group of us he called his dream team. He surely knew how to get the best and the most out of each of us.

Unfortunately, we did not work together much after my divorce in 2004. I was on cloud nine upon receiving his call in 2009 to help him for the Bahamas National Geographic project. Unfortunately, due to budget restraints, I did not participate. We were slated to work together again in late 2010 documenting William Truebridge's attempt to break the 100-meter breath hold dive. Damn it Wes, why did you leave? We were just about to ramp up and work together again. You know I would have worked with you anywhere...I could go on and on about his sense of humor, his never-ending source of energy, his need to get that last shot, his sense of fairness, and his sixth sense about cave diving. He was a good man. I am honored and very proud to have spent so many great adventures with him. It will take many to fill the void he has left.



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