

 Around
THE CORNERS

Student of snow

Chris George brought avalanche studies to relevance

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HERALD STAFF WRITER

When you've lived most of your life above 11,000 feet in elevation, you're going to have some stories to tell.

And Chris George has no lack of them.

"My life has been so diverse, what can I say?" George said. "You name it, we've done it."

George, 82, is perhaps best known for his contributions to snow and avalanche research, as well as restoring a hut and ski lodge atop Red Mountain Pass known now as the St. Paul Hut & Lodge.

Recently, George retired from serving as president of the board for the Center for Snow and Avalanche Studies, capping a decadeslong career.

"A pioneer," CSAS director Jeff Derry said of George.

"He took the research of avalanches into the realm of science, so it wasn't just something that was obscure that only mountaineers were knowledgeable about."

George's life adventures started in England, hiding in a bed with his brother as bombs rained down during the Battle of Britain. Growing up, he thought he would be a chef, having even been Charlie Chaplin's cook for a few months.

But as a young man, George took to mountaineering, going on epic journeys in the Middle East's Hindu Kush mountain range and the Alps. When he visited Switzerland, and saw the way mountaineers lived, he saw his life's trajectory.

"It was just a fleeting fancy," he said. "I never thought it would develop."

At the age of 28, the Outward Bound program, which offers educational experiences in the outdoors, recruited George to work in Colorado on a 10-week contract. Ever since, he's called the San Juan Mountains home.

"I decided I wanted to make my living in the high mountains," he said. "I was researching all the places around Colorado, but you come to the San Juans and it's a no-brainer from then on."

George purchased the St. Paul Mine property on Red Mountain Pass in 1973, and quickly got to work renovating it into a ski lodge and hut. Although he was experienced in backcountry skiing, he



JERRY MCBRIDE/Durango Herald

Chris George, 82, has spent most of his life in high-elevation mountains. But about 10 years ago, health reasons caused him to move to Durango. Recently, he retired from serving as president of the Center for Snow and Avalanche Studies, capping a decadeslong career.

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CHRIS GEORGE

said the San Juans presented unique risks.

"I'd climbed high mountains on three continents before I got here," he said. "What I discovered ... was definitely the most complex and treacherous snowpack I'd ever experienced."

"And I still believe," he continued, "that after nearly 50 years of studying it, it is a very complex snowpack and very, very difficult to forecast."

The reason why snowpack is so difficult, George said, is because of the amount of sunshine in this area (not to be confused with high temperatures).

"The solar radiation creates surface instability in the snow," he said. "It creates weak layers. It's very subtle."

In the high country just around Silverton, 11 people have died in avalanches since 2010, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center.

Realizing the need all those years ago to better understand the intricacies of snowpack and avalanche activity, George, along with others, like Ed LaChapelle, started several projects up in the mountains.

In 1975, George took the helm for avalanche observations and reporting for the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research "San Juan Project" on Red Mountain Pass and the newly formed CAIC, both of which he continued until 1995.

"He was always able to relate well with the people doing the science," said Keith Roush, a Center for Snow and Avalanche Studies board member and former owner of Pine Needle Mountaineering.

Roush said he's known George for almost 40 years, and spent the better half of that time conducting search and rescue trainings and avalanche classes together.

"We weren't the science experts, but we spent lots and lots of time in the snow," Roush said.

Great advancements in the understanding of snowpack and avalanches, as well as technology, have been made over the years, George said. But America, in many ways, is far behind other countries, especially those in Europe.

Derry agreed, saying there's usually an uptick of interest in funding projects or organizations that study snow after a winter season with a high number of bad accidents. But more often than not, that momentum fades.

"Europe is light years ahead," he said. "But it has come a long way over the years, and Chris brought into light snow science as legitimate and necessary science."

George lived between the hut and a home in Silverton until about 10 years ago, when health issues forced him and his wife of 41 years, Donna, to move to Durango, which at 6,512 feet, is nearly half the elevation of his Red Mountain Pass lodge.

"It was very hard for me to leave Silverton," he said. "But Silverton is not an easy place to live. You have to be very physical to stay in Silverton."

These days, especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic, George is mostly homebound. But, to be sure, he's got a lifetime of "once in a lifetime" adventures racked up to reflect upon.

"I don't have anything to feel bad about," he said. "There's a lot of things, ever since I was a kid, I thought I'd like to do. By some happenstance, it just happened."