

## **Profile of John F. Mullen**



John F. Mullen, or “Jay,” as his family knew him, was happiest when he was on the water or in the mountains, and once a week he brought his experiences inside, and wrote about them in the sports section of the Washington Post, where he also worked fulltime as a copyeditor.

For the newspaper he was usually writing about short trips in the Washington area. As a traveler on his own, Jay had made a point of seeing the world, beginning when he was 19-years-old and living in Europe for a year. But if his travels brought him worldliness he never let that spoil the pleasure he took in the place from which he came. He grew up in Massachusetts, but as a boy his family usually went north when it was time to get away, and in 1981, when Jay was a freshman in high school, his parents bought an A-frame on River Road in Gunstock Acres. It was here that, for several years, Jay spent much of his free time swimming in Lake Winnepesaukee, stalking the rivers for crawfish and, occasionally, trout, throwing the football, playing basketball, stacking wood beside the house and skiing Gunstock.

On skis Jay embodied for the rest of his family a sublime vision of speed, grace and athleticism, and in his eyes there was the gift given to those who are absorbed in the pleasure of the moment.

His parents sold the house in Gunstock Acres, eventually, but they returned to the area in 1997 to retire, buying a different house on the hillside near the Alton line. When Jay had time off from work, he often came back to the Lakes Region.

His life in Washington was busy and since he did not love the city life, it was important to get a way when he could, and New Hampshire was a place he preferred to be. This was illustrated memorably the day his parents saw him sitting by a window in an odd corner of their house silently watching the snow fall. At Gunstock, after several inches fell, he took run after run with his parents, and after they tired and called it a day, he

kept going up the chairlift without them, and coming down with the exuberance, poise and pleasure he took to those same slopes as a kid. He was 37 years old by then. He'd lived and skied in Steamboat, Colorado. He'd skied at Blackcomb in British Columbia, Jackson Hole, Park City, Keystone, Arapahoe Basin, and the European Alps. But this little ski area in Gilford, he told his mother, was a "treasure" to him.

His home in Arlington, Virginia, was a place not only for the gear that he took to the outdoors, but for the books he read – a library that would grow and be pared down like an unruly hedge again and again over the years. He read prodigiously for so many years, and he read everything, the classics of literature as well as modern classics, biographies of the writers who wrote them, books of poetry, books about the Civil War, about French films, about adventure and travel, about music and more. He could never regret the education it gave him, but as he got older and realized how precious our time on Earth really is, and started seeing his days as a finite resource, he realized he didn't want to spend so much time reading about living, when he could be out there experiencing life for himself.

In the last several years of his life, while he wouldn't put the books away completely, he turned his intense focus to being more active. When he wasn't jumping on a surf board, swimming, mountain biking, snowshoeing up a mountain trail or flying down one on his new skis, he was often training in the gym.

"He was like Thoreau, with muscles," one of his colleagues at the Post wrote.

From the age of 32 to 37, when metabolisms are slowing and guys are waking up with extra pounds suddenly taped around their bellies, Jay made kayaking his chief pursuit. Then in just two years after learning the fundamentals of the sport, at age 34, he rather remarkably qualified to compete for a spot on the Whitewater Olympic Slalom team, as it was preparing to represent the U.S. in Athens in the summer of 2004.

He was more than a long shot to make the team, he knew, but it was the experience of competing at the highest level of his sport that interested him, as well as having the chance to write about it in the paper. For Jay, his choice to live more fully was affirmed by this kind of participation, and reaffirmed every time he paddled, skied, ran, climbed, biked – whatever sport it was -- or whenever he made a new friend in any one of these sports, it was another reminder that he much preferred the active life over the sedentary and isolated one. Such are "the pleasures of merely circulating," to quote the poet Wallace Stevens, as Jay so often did.