

BYU student applies rock climbing expertise to save fellow student's life

Many students at BYU take advantage of the amazing scenery and outdoor opportunities that Utah County has to offer, but not many people are often faced with the danger of saving someone dangling off a cliff.

BYU student and rock-climbing enthusiast Zander Smith was recreationally rock climbing around Bridal Veil falls when he was alerted that his help was needed. After instinctually thinking and adrenaline-based action, Zander was able to save fellow BYU student Kendall Barlow from off the falls, minutes away from death.

The Hero

Students at Brigham Young University are not only academically talented, but represent a diversity of talent and skill. All students are encourage to use their talents to “go forth and serve.” One of those students who has exemplified this ideal BYU has for all of its students is Zander Smith of Hamilton, Montana. Smith has been an avid rock climber for years. His interest started around age nine when his best friend’s dad would help the two boys practice rope and safety skills. Having a close connection with the chief of search and rescue in Hamilton allowed him to explore a future passion of his as well as understand the importance and basics of safety while climbing. When the two friends went off to college at BYU, they gradually became more and more interested in rock climbing. With the amazing opportunities that Utah has to offer, it became easy for Zander to practice his hobby often.

Smith’s love of rock climbing stems from his early start, but continues through the challenge and excitement found in each climbing activity. He says that it’s enjoyable because it’s like “solving a dangerous puzzle” and requires a special type of focus not found in other sports. When asked if he ever experiences fear while rock climbing, he laughed and said of course. Even though he has always enjoyed heights and high adrenaline, everyone will experience fear while rock climbing, according to Smith. However, Smith also says that the ability to rock climb enhances “the mental fortitude to suppress heights and high adrenaline.”

Smith, an English major, says that being a student at BYU has magnified his passion for rock climbing and added to his opportunities to do it on a regular basis. Because BYU’s surrounding terrain and natural environment is so conducive to rock climbing and other adventure sports, Smith has never run out of amazing finds in the world of climbing. Provo Canyon alone has over 1000 routes for climbers to experience. Smith, who has rock climbed in various countries, says that Utah is arguably the best spot for rock climbing in the world. With a diverse and large student population at BYU, Smith has made many friends participating in a sport that he loves.

The Call to Action

One early August morning, Smith took his friend up to Bridal Veil Falls, a popular rock climbing destination in Utah County, to literally “show him the ropes.” When preparing their gear before attempting the 210 foot repel off the top of the waterfall, Smith and his friend noticed that several people were yelling at them. When they got close enough to understand their message, Smith found out that a young man who had been climbing about 80 feet up was stuck. The group gathered at the bottom of the falls noticed that Smith had climbing gear and asked if he could help the struggling climber. With 911 responders already on their way, Zander rushed into

action and ran up to the top of the falls as quick as he could. Immediately after securing his harness and starting his descent, he felt the deep cold of the running waterfall. Feelings of nervousness and inadequacy plagued Smith's mind as he descended towards the climber.

As an EMT, Smith knew the importance of keeping himself safe and avoiding danger. Two climbers in harm's way was certainly not better than just one. After taking his time and carefully repelling downward, Smith finally reached the distressed climber, who he later found out was also a BYU student by the name of Kendall Barlow. By the time Smith had reached him, Barlow was no longer focused on untying his fiercely knotted rope, but staying out of the freezing water and avoiding hypothermia. Smith described Barlow as visually exhausted and very bloody due to constantly scraping against the sharp rock of Bridal Veil Falls.

The Rescue

Upon reaching Barlow, Smith knew that he would have very limited time in helping this stranger out of his deadly predicament. Barlow was violently shaking and well into the middle stages of hypothermia. Smith continually talked to Barlow while trying to figure out what to do to avoid Barlow's inevitable loss of consciousness. Smith described the situation as very difficult due to having to hold on to Barlow, who was grasping him for warmth and security and his own knot while unsuccessfully trying to untie Barlow's knot, which had swelled to the size of a basketball due to water logging. Thinking quickly about his next action, Smith decided to try and tie a loop knot to use his feet to keep him more secure, a new technique he taught himself the week prior to the emergency. After attempting to untie the knot for several minutes, Zander decided that the only way Barlow would escape this dangerous knot was by cutting the rope. He called down to the crowd of bystanders below asking for a knife. One young man tied his pocket knife to Smith's rope and Smith pulled it up after securing Kendall with quick draws and carabiners to keep him as close as possible.

The next few minutes encompassed Smith's most dangerous experience with rock climbing the experienced climber has ever endured. Knowing that cutting the rope was extremely perilous, Smith decided that it was the only possible course of action to save Barlow and now himself of dying from hypothermia. "Stay calm, don't freak out. We will hear and feel a big drop, but it will be ok. Stay calm" Smith assuredly told Barlow, who was drifting in and out of consciousness. Cutting the thick rope with a small pocket knife was extremely difficult, especially for someone who very quickly was losing more and more function in his body due to the fierce chill of the running waterfall. While running on adrenaline, Smith was finally able to slice the rope, and the two immediately took a large swing while the rope launched back up the cliff due to the thick tension it had held. When the two achieved a stopping point after catapulting around the width of the waterfall, Smith was able to slowly lower Barlow and himself down until they hit the ground.

The Aftermath

By the time the two touched the base of the waterfall, several EMTs had arrived and placed Barlow on a sled that led him to a life flight. The EMTs thanked Smith for his hard work and bravery in keeping Barlow alive, as they told him that just a few more minutes in the ice-cold waterfall would have led Barlow to an imminent death. Luckily, both BYU students suffered only minor scrapes and bruises after the incident. Barlow recovered from the end stages of hypothermia quickly within three or four hours and got back to his studies at BYU. The two

students see one another from time to time as they act as a reminder to one another of the sanctity and blessing of life.

Smith was recently awarded two high honors for his brave act: the Utah Life Saving Award and the Brigham Award at BYU. "I was very surprised upon finding out that I was nominated and won the Brigham Award. I am a very middle-of-the-road student, but I am very honored. I am happy that BYU endorses a program that focuses on student nominations to highlight good acts in the community." Smith is an excellent example of how BYU not only encourages its students to participate in activities they love, but also go forth and serve.