



When I first met Wes, only a few weeks after moving to Florida for my year of sunshine and cave diving, I had no idea who I was about to meet as we headed to his house for a visit. I didn't get a brief. Something like, 'Hey, you're about to meet the great and indomitable Wes Skiles,' would have been a good heads up. But no, instead I waltzed into his office and after being casually introduced, I said to the guy wearing a singlet and a bandana 'nice pictures' in reference to all the cave diving prints that graced the office walls. I figured that like most people, he had just bought them to decorate the walls. I liked what I saw, as the pictures were impressive.

Well ten minutes of conversation later, I looked from him to the prints, back to him and the penny finally dropped. 'You're Wes. Wes - Wes. Wes Skiles' I exclaimed, as if I had just discovered America. He was off 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 Floridian 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 where 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 where 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 was also living proof of that 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 the laughter in my belly.

Yet, it was in the underwater realm that I enjoyed his company most of all, as we seemed to have an uncanny connection the moment we submerged beneath the surface. It was an absolute joy to dive with him and when he was holding a camera it almost felt like I could read his mind. I was privileged to share a number of amazing dives with him in some breath taking caves while filming, taking photos and laying line. But one of our favorite underwater moments wasn't anything outlandish in cave diving terms, it was actually the descent into a simple sinkhole in the Bahamas.

We called the sink Magical Mystery but the hole goes by many names. It is a big sinkhole by any measure. The entrance is about 40ft across but upon descent it opens up into an enormous space that drops down to something like 300ft. As you descend you pass through various halocline layers, which is quite a trip. The walls are covered in big and I do mean big stalactites. They are old growth stalactites, so they are not crystal and shiny... but they make up for it in sheer size and presence.

Our first dive in this sinkhole was just amazing and Wes and I shared a very special moment. We were the first to descend down and start checking out the place, in readiness for a photo shoot. The sun was just right and was streaming down hitting the wall where these huge stalactites were hanging. It was a sight to behold, the decoration basking in the sunlight and a great gaping darkness beneath us. It felt like we had entered a cathedral or a shrine, it was startling and glorious. No words needed to be spoken and we were both blown away and captured by the sheer beauty and magnificence of the moment. It wasn't long before the rest of the team was in the water and we began shooting. Moments later the sun shifted, or perhaps hid behind a cloud. Yet those few minutes, those few moments that Wes and I shared where special and will forever be remembered.

Mystery was a difficult place to shoot and we came back again and again, as Wes continued to chase the perfect photo. Never again was the spectacle repeated and we concentrated on the job at hand. It was not unusual for Wes to descend down to the depths, in between trying to

orchestrate the divers, lights and strobes above his head. It was hard work for all of us but Wes especially. He took amazing photos and yet remained unsatisfied. In the end the cave proved a nemesis for the team. It was virtually impossible to get the shot he was after because of the huge distances involved and that pesky halocline that so readily confused communication. Yet, it remains special because of one magical moment.

Our last dive together was in Convict Springs. No cameras, no line laying, no work - just a tourist dive to enjoy the cave, which was very unusual for him, as typically the camera went everywhere he did and he liked doing stuff on dives. It was his first time in Convict and we decided to go back after I gushed about its beauty and my dive there the previous day. It was his last cave dive as it turns out but it could very well have been his first. He came out of the water enthused, impressed with the cave and its beauty and wide eyed and excited about the fossils. He was grinning from ear to ear and you'd never guess he had done thousands of cave dives in his time. Then while we snacked and I tried to make my way through a super sized sundae with fudge cookies, he spent almost an hour talking to the owners of the park, telling them all about the high nitrates in the system, conservation, water quality in the aquifer and cave exploration. Very typical Wes, the things he was passionate about and believed in, he could never stop talking about and he wanted to share with everyone.

Wes Skiles - you will be greatly missed in and out of the water.

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