

# Simply Wes

*By Agnes Milowka*



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, 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.

*Photo of Wes filming in Bermuda on a project with Dr. Tom Iliffe by Nate Skiles*