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Ruedi Bear remembered as entrepreneur, champion skier

Former Trimble Hot Springs owner dies in crash

By Mary Shinn (/staff/49-mary-shinn) Herald Staff Writer | Friday, April 21, 2017 7:17 PM



A former owner of Trimble Hot Springs, Ruedi Bear, was remembered Friday as an entrepreneur who loved jazz and skiing.

Bear, 72, died in a one-vehicle crash Thursday evening south of Mancos, where he lived.

A native of Switzerland, Bear moved to Durango to coach skiing at Purgatory and later bought and rebuilt Trimble Hot Springs.

Bear was discovered Friday morning in a field off Road J, said Sgt. James Saunders of the Colorado State Patrol.

Bear was thrown from his 2007 Audi, which went off the road sometime Thursday evening, crashed through brush, struck a large rock and rolled. He was not wearing a seat belt, Saunders said.

"It is very unfortunate, and a hard loss," Saunders said. "We all need to commit to wearing seat belts so this does not happen in our community again."

When Bear did not arrive home after going to pick up take-out, his longtime girlfriend Nancy Burgio began searching for him but didn't find him, she said. She got up about 6:30 a.m. to start looking again.

The crash was discovered about 6:30 a.m. Friday by a passing driver, Saunders said.

Burgio met Bear in 2007, and they were best friends who loved to cook and garden together, she said.

"He just loved everybody, he always had a soft heart," she said.

Bear is perhaps most well-known for rebuilding Trimble Hot Springs after it was shuttered for nearly 30 years after a fire.

In a short published autobiography, Bear wrote that no one was interested in the hot springs, which had calcified and were completely blocked. He bought it for \$110,000 and used a decalcifying chemical agent to revive the springs.

"One hundred and twenty degree water started pouring geyser like into the abandoned pool ... What a blast," he wrote.

He reopened the attraction in 1988. Rebuilding it was probably his proudest accomplishment, longtime friend Gary Ruggera said.

“He didn’t own the hot springs, he was just its steward,” his daughter, Barbara Frontella, said.

In the early days, Bear and his family heated the hot springs facilities instead of his house to keep the business open in the winter, he wrote. Bear sold the hot springs in 2006 to an investor group after offering to sell it to the city.

Before buying Trimble, Bear developed Bear Ranch, south of Durango. It was a vacation resort with condos, tennis courts, cross country skiing and a Swiss bar and grill.

It was an enterprise that nearly ended in bankruptcy, but he was eventually able to sell it, he wrote.

Ruggera said Bear was inspired to be an entrepreneur by his mother, who was the first woman to develop a golf course in Switzerland.

“He highly respected her his whole life,” Ruggera said.

Bear’s parents also founded and managed one of the first sports stores in Switzerland called “Bär Sport.”

While growing up, everything in his life involved sports, he wrote. When he was 16, he was the Junior European Champion in downhill and combination. In the combination event, skiers compete in one run of downhill and two runs of slalom.

He went on to be a professional racer in the U.S. and later coached.

At the end of his coaching career, he wrote a book in 1976 for Sports Illustrated, *Pianta Su: Ski like the Best*.

He was married to Leith Lende, a racer on the U.S. Ski Team, for about 14 years, and they had two children, Frontella and Jack Bear.

Frontella described him as her friend and a powerful personality, who enjoyed attention.

Once, for a Snowdown parade float, he filled a hot tub with dry ice and dressed up as Julius Cesar. He was accompanied by girls in bikinis holding palm fronds.

“He was the most interesting person I think I know,” she said.

Ruggera described Bear as an outspoken liberal, who was concerned about climate change and equal rights for women and the gay and lesbian community.

He also loved jazz, and he organized several jazz festivals in Durango, Ruggera said.

“The three great things in his life were jazz music, skiing and being an entrepreneur,” Ruggera said.

His most recent venture was a small marijuana grow, Ruggera said.

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The Journal reporter Jim Mimiaga contributed to this report.