

A New Year's Resolution for Aconcagua: To Move Mountains

It has been two years since the tragedy in Aconcagua in January 2009 when my husband, Federico Campanini, and his clients were stranded near the summit of Aconcagua for more than two days. I was told of the situation on January 6th when I received a phone call from my brother-in-law in Argentina telling me that Federico and his clients were stranded but that “they are fine, everything is fine, Federico is tired but he is fine”. During these two days Federico’s family and I received information that was fragmented or incorrect and we always received it secondhand. On January 8, at 3:00am I received another phone call telling me that Federico had died. Three of his four clients survived and they call Federico a hero.

Many mistakes were made during the rescue attempts of Federico and his clients, but instead of becoming bitter I decided to start the “El Fede” Campanini Foundation in order to improve the rescue system on Aconcagua. I collaborated with many people, including Willie Benegas, who helped me create a list of the minimal equipment needed for a rescue. Then, I raised the funds, via donations and fundraisers, in order to buy the equipment needed—the equipment that wasn’t there during the rescue attempts of my husband. Many companies also kindly donated rescue equipment, such as Adventure Medical Kits.

One year ago I returned to Aconcagua to help install the rescue caches at three strategic locations on the mountain: Nido de Condores, Refugio Independencia, and La Canaleta. One hour after installing the highest cache (100 meters below the summit) a woman collapsed on the summit and the equipment in the cache saved her life.

The work of installing the caches was a collaborative effort involving Park rangers, guides, porters, doctors, members of the Search and Rescue Team as well as the support of some guide companies such as Fernando Grajales Expeditions and Inka Expeditions. Such collaboration is the reason that the project was a success. Everyone helped without pay, but with heart and for love of the mountain and for the respect of its people and life.

Today we are in a new year of 2011 and as always whenever we begin a new year we also make resolutions with ourselves in order to improve our lives. Today I ask you to make a New Year's resolution, as an Argentinean community as the community of Argentina to continue improving the quality of life; therein to continue preventing unnecessary deaths on Aconcagua.

Federico Campanini was a mountaineer and a professional mountain guide; he was also Argentinean, he loved his country, he valued the people and their ways of life. During the rescue attempts in January 2009 the biggest error was the inefficient communication between the different parties on the mountain. Therefore, many received incorrect or delayed information. And when the situation is an emergency there isn't time to lose.

Today I ask The Department of Natural Resources to honor the formal agreement that it signed one year ago promising to continue with improvements on the rescue system on Aconcagua. An emergency protocol was written before the current season but it has yet to be integrated into the Park system. I have written to the Director of Natural Resources on many occasions for updates on the condition and use of the equipment as well as the progress being made, if any, on the protocol. The director emailed me saying that he would respond soon to my inquiries and then his secretary emailed me the same. I have yet to receive any answers. Therefore, publicly, I am asking the Department of Natural Resources to implement—actively—the drafted emergency protocol. This entails teaching and training the various parties that work on Aconcagua how to use the protocol, because if nobody knows that it exists or how to use it then it is not functioning as an emergency protocol and therein the same mistakes that were made during the tragedy of January 2009 can happen again.

Today I write in order to reflect on this year that began with the donation of rescue equipment. I am in contact with the head Park ranger and the head member of the Search and Rescue team and they have informed me that the donated rescue equipment continues to help and save lives. However, they also have informed me that there are too many rescues for the amount of individuals that work on the mountain. Therefore, a protocol is even more helpful in this situation because it provides efficiency.

I would like to thank the many hard workers within Aconcagua Park: the Park rangers, the doctors, the mountain guides, the porters, the Search and Rescue team and the guide companies that work diligently, professionally and whole-heartedly. To the rest I ask that you take their examples and begin to work as well. The equipment donated by the foundation was not expensive; it did not cost thousands and thousands of dollars, more than anything it was just a lot of hard work. So it isn't a question of money, it's a question of work ethic, and working together.

So, I hope that you begin to help us move this mountain.