

On March 26, William "Will" Crljenko died in an avalanche on Mt. Tom. He was one of the Eastern Sierra's most venerable and beloved mountain adventurers, musicians, and he was a skilled Radiology Technologist at Northern Inyo Hospital.

Will was born on 1952 in San Francisco, and first came to the Owens Valley on outdoor adventures during high school. His love of the mountains pointed him to take work as a firefighter, and he became a helitack "hotshot" for the Inyo National Forest. He also became a research assistant at the White Mountain station on Mt. Barcroft, and a snowcat driver on Mammoth Mountain. In these endeavors as well as his personal adventures, partners came to know that they could always count on him in demanding situations. He would not only keep a level head, but he would keep things going with a wry smile and quick wit.

In June of 1986 he married his longtime sweetheart and frequent adventure partner, the ceramic artist Frances Cholewa. As the two of them worked toward a more settled lifestyle, Will commuted to school in radiology at Bakersfield City College, and he graduated at the top of his class in 1990. He soon obtained a position at Kern Medical Center but only until he could work into an opening here at Northern Inyo. By the early 1990s he had learned to work Computerized Tomography systems and so he began imaging patients with C-T scans. When Northern Inyo obtained their Magnetic Resonance Imaging facility five years ago, Will learned how to operate that, and this became his primary job since then.

Will always had a love of music, and went to music festivals whenever he could. In the mid-1980s he began to get serious about playing string instruments. Within a few years he began playing dobro guitar in the local band Rush Creek. As he came to find his musical home in bluegrass and old-time acoustic music, he helped form the band Idle Hands, who play frequently around the region, including many sessions at the Millpond Music Festival. He also collected and played a variety of string instruments, from Bolivian Churangos to steel guitars.

Of all the activities that Will did, his most compelling passion was skiing the Sierra backcountry. He started skiing here in the late 1960s, and the open slopes and great basins were where his heart soared. He also climbed dozens of peaks in the summer, and one summer day he and two compatriots ran the whole main crest of the White Mountains, probably the first to complete this now-legendary high tour in a day. He became a local legend for skiing in the Sierra backcountry many, many days each year, often alone simply because there weren't so many partners who could keep up with him. He almost always was able to find partners in recent years, and all of them found him to be a cautious skier. On the day that he died he was with six other very experienced skiers, and the Sierra snowpack happened to be in a state that was more tenuous than even their combined experience had led them to expect.

Though many knew Will's by his reputation as a hard-core mountaineer, his most important characteristics were compassion and generosity. He always had a beer at the trailhead for everyone at the end of a trip. Will showed his love for Frances every day in small and subtle ways.

He is survived by his wife Frances Cholewa, his mother Hazel, his sister Sally Hands and her two daughters, sister Nancy Kelbley and her three children, and his brother John.

A memorial service will be held at Izaak Walton Park on Saturday, April 2 at 1 pm. Following that, at 4 pm will be a potluck celebration of his life at the home of George and Kerry Lozito, 403 Mt. Tom Road, in Bishop.