

Written by Rick Silverman, Executive Director, Mountainfilm in
Telluride

I wish that I could be standing with you this day to personally deliver my too hurried thoughts about Jim's life and death, but raising kids and the general lack of cooperation of United Airlines has me stuck in the Southern Rockies.

My neighborhood, the former mining town ...now ski community of Telluride, Colorado is, however, an appropriate place to note a significant aspect of Jim's activities, for many of his best years were spent here...and his "Good Works" have continued long after his address changed.

The Jim Ray that we knew in the early 1970's when Telluride was an unabashedly bawdy, and almost unimaginably beautiful hideaway was a foretaste of the man most of you have come to know. He was leaner, faster, a fixture as one of the mountain's finest skiers, and evolving as a patron of the arts that so shaped his life.

And, while in the wonderful phrase of Mark Twain, Jim "was never a man to neglect his habits", new snow stirred his blood...got him out of bed early. And, the surging passion for craftsmanship, the carving of eagles most notably in the hands of a score of local woodworkers, stirred his artistic sensibilities. The house that he built was a testimony to it all...a rustic gathering place for creative beings.

The spirits in Jimmy's mind must already have been stirring at breakneck speed so he did not retain his primary residence here long, but his love of Telluride, his identification with this roughewn landscape brought him back again and again. As such, in his various sojourns into this Alpine Valley, the Jimmy we knew ultimately came back as the James Ray you know...his appetites and resources having expanded to broaden him from mountain man to a bona fide activist in support of so much that is good in life...yet always one of our own.

Thus, the Jim Ray that we experienced, and that my community has known for the last dozen years, was an engaged steward of the arts...as acutely aware of the nuanced differences in a flautist treble as he was likely to help a friend in trouble.

He was an ardent funder of our adaptive skier program,...giving the physically handicapped lifetime helpings of the rush of skiing (that was in many ways his own psychic mainstay), our local jazz festival, and the unabashedly eclectic Mountainfilm Festival that I directed for many years.

The same man that had a taste for the wild side and the compulsive need to fly close to the flame was for us a caring shepherd whose outreach made life better for thousands of people.

In Mountainfilm, he could further his foundational pursuit of his enduring interests in the arts, music, kids, animals, exotic cultures and the cutting edge. His wisdom in noting the need to bring these themes to a broader audience resulted in an ingenious plan to provide seed funding to a score of distant non-profits and grassroots environmental organizations that allowed them to offer to larger audiences our touring program and the ideas and arts we jointly respected...while developing a funding scheme to help those groups sustain operations in their own backyards. I have seen Jimmy in a variety of locations in the last decade...Idaho, British Columbia, Telluride and Seattle. In a sense, perhaps like many of you, I was sometimes not sure who I was seeing, for the inner drumbeats that drove him often made him mercurial.

We were always bound, however, but what I know was an enduring sense of mutual respect and affection, and the knowledge that Garrison Keillor's telling line of "doing good work" resonated deeply through our lives.

Those wars waged in Jim's mind and body are largely unknowable to most of us, but what I saw was a man of mythic proportion, ever focused on producing beauty, and surrounded by caring people who

loved him...and struggled to keep his flame bright.

He was the “Jimmy Shimmy” in deep snow, a head turning figure of now perhaps unimaginable grace, and he was an artist, musician, mystic, patron, poet, philanthropist and philosopher. His excesses were undoubtedly a source of awe, but that they contributed to the creation of a man of exceeding kindness, as forceful in the good works that will succeed him as they were in any medical chart, is also abundantly wondrous.

Everything about Jim’s life seems somehow bigger than reality. He surely had little taste for the mundane or the meager, but he leaves behind a gaping hole for the thousands of us whose lives were impacted...made better...by him.

Jimmy was a force of nature. I miss him enormously, am grateful for all that his racing mind and heart accomplished, and hope that the spirit world for which he is bound is ready for the dazzling array of his gifts.