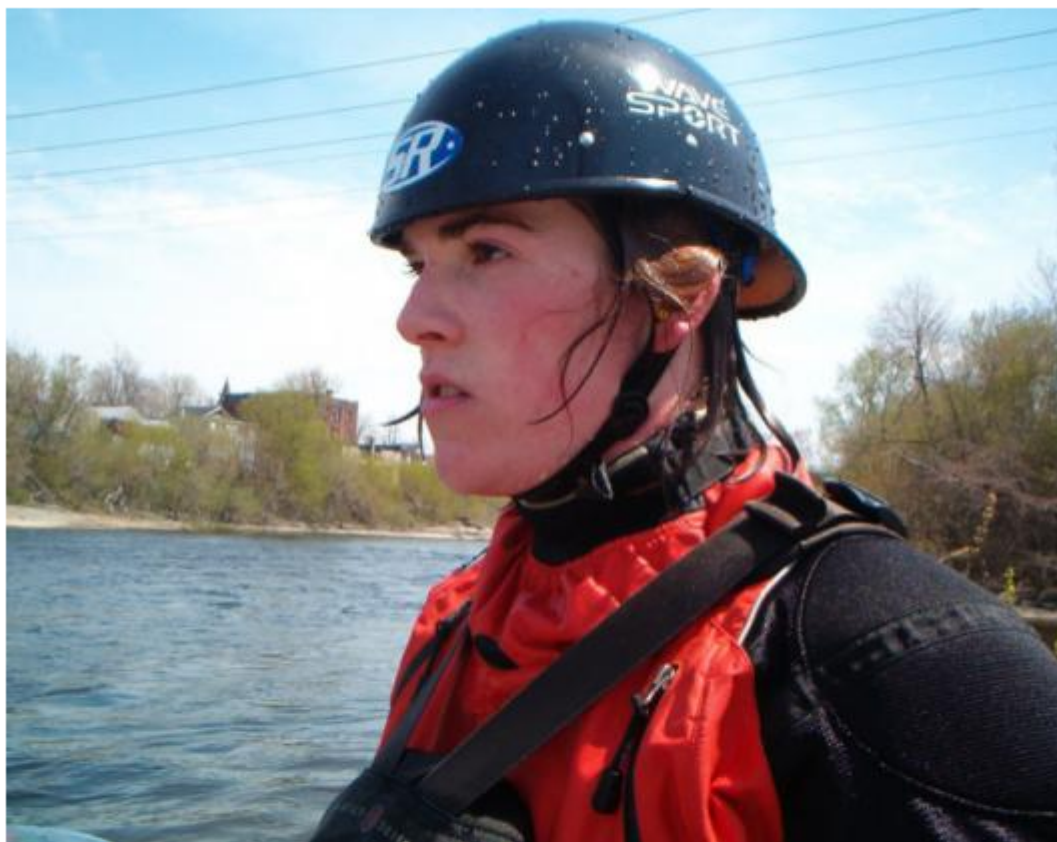




## Learning from a life too short



Ian Mickle was a nationally ranked freestyle kayaker, but he became unable to compete because of a back injury. (Mickle family)

By Bella English

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Ian Mickle was happiest when he was in motion. And he was fearless. When he was a youngster playing hockey in Milton, he

couldn't wait until the players were old enough to start checking one another.

When he was 11, Ian wanted to add another sport to his repertoire, so his parents found a kayaking camp in New Hampshire. It was the beginning of a love affair that was to dominate the rest of his life. Ian began to focus on white-water kayaking, spending hours on rivers all over the country and the world.

If he was fearless, his mother wasn't. "Watching him in competitions was heart-stopping," says Laurie MacIntosh, placing a hand on her chest. "The water is so big, and it's deafening, too."

We're not talking about paddling gently through the marshes. Ian Mickle would do flips and aerials in his kayak, over rocks and amid churning 15-foot waves. "These guys could get killed any time, and that's part of the attraction," says Laurie, who is president of Sustainable Milton, a nonprofit that raises awareness of environmental issues. Her son had told her last summer that he'd faced death three times on the water.

But it wasn't his beloved white water that killed Ian Mickle at age 22. On Dec. 19, he took his own life in his apartment outside Vancouver.

Ian had taken the semester off from the University of British Columbia, where he was a philosophy major. He had a girlfriend and a job, but he had struggled with depression for a few years, exacerbated by a back injury. At age 15, he suffered stress fractures in his vertebrae while training for the world white-water kayaking competition. He had made the US Junior Freestyle Kayaking Team that year, its youngest-ever member. He remained a team member for three years and placed 14th - in the world - at the Pre-Worlds, a warm-up for the World Kayak Championships, which are held every other year.

But because of his injury, he could feel his goal slipping away. Sure enough, he was unable to compete in the Worlds in Austria during his junior year.

Freestyle kayaking is something you've probably never seen. It isn't an Olympic sport, but it should be (especially given that beach volleyball and ping-pong are). In freestyle competition, paddlers have 45 seconds to perform a series of maneuvers in the rapids, from cartwheels, where the kayak spins through the water, to verticals, where the boat stands up on one end.

Ian Mickle never was a conventional kid. In high school, he attended a couple of residential kayaking high schools - in Vermont and Tennessee - traveling around the world with his instructors and classmates during the winter to train and compete. They went to Chile, Argentina, New Zealand, Australia, Costa Rica. He'd get up at 6 a.m., train for two hours, go to classes, train for two more hours, then homework and bed. [Continued...](#)