

RACHEL SCHMIDT

I was born in Seattle in 1963, and we moved to Eugene before I was one. My parents were still working on their master's degrees. But then in 1966 when they graduated, they were both in the education profession and we moved to Germany. Long story short, my parents had met in Europe, in a German language school, and they just wanted to go back. I am named Schmidt for a reason. (laughter) So we moved there when I was three. My parents put me directly in a German kindergarten and said, "Learn German." (laughs)

Williams: Sink or swim.

Schmidt: Yeah, sink or swim. And it was taught by the nuns, who were terrifying, but I did learn German. So I went to the German kindergarten and became a fluent child in German, before I started in the American schools, because my parents taught in the American schools. My mom thought it would be a little weird if she was a teacher and she sent her kid to a non-American school—she had to support the system. So yeah, I grew up as an only child in Europe, with parents who were teachers, who had teachers' schedules, so that really gave us the freedom to do a lot of traveling. So traveling was definitely part of my world at an early age, which was awesome.

Williams: And in the summer, mostly there?

Schmidt: Summer, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, we had all the holidays, and predominantly we would travel in Europe. Every other summer we would come back to the U.S. because my parents had to do continuing education and often did a road trip across the U.S., visiting family, and then back to Germany for the school year. When I got older and really started wanting to travel, I told my parents "Well, you taught me all about traveling, so..."

My mom lied about my age so she could get me in first grade sooner. She had to get back to work and didn't need a kid around the house. For the first two or three years of grade school I couldn't even celebrate my birthday because she was afraid she would get in trouble. But she fixed that a few years later and we got the date corrected, so I could actually celebrate my birthday in school.

We started in Munich, Germany, and by the time I was in first grade, we were in Bitburg, Germany, which is right near the Luxemburg border. We stayed there for my entire schooling. All my friends were the kids of military, and my best friends would leave every three years as they rotated out. So I totally got used to meeting new people, being heartbroken because my best girlfriend had left, and then had to meet new friends. But I think that was an education in itself.

I was actually in the same school as my parents, so ended up having my mom as an English teacher. I got [caught] kissing in the hall by my dad when he was a guidance counselor in the same high school, so I was really glad when he moved to a different school; but everyone loved my mom as a teacher, so it worked out pretty well.

I had an awesome science teacher in seventh grade, Mr. Gray. He took us out backpacking and climbing and rappelling. It was definitely the first time I did that kind of thing, which was awesome.

Williams: You probably got an "A."

Schmidt: Yeah, I sort of did pretty well. I guess teachers as your parents could go either way. You could either be totally rebellious or you could be a straight "A" student, and I went the straight "A" route (laughter) and actually was valedictorian of my senior class.

Williams: Oh! Little-known trivia fact!

Schmidt: It was only a class of eighty people, but still.

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Skiing in Germany, age 8.

Doing these interviews with friends you have known for decades is so much fun. It's not like you regularly sit down and talk to your friends for hours about their life journeys, so it was a treat to have that excuse with Rachel. The trajectory of everyone's story is so interesting and Rachel's is especially full! It is clear that from early on she has always looked forward and followed her heart. And we are all grateful for that!

These days as co-owner of Ceiba Adventures, a river outfitting service in Flagstaff, Rachel uses her skills and positivity helping support private trips.

Interviews were conducted in Flagstaff in person and by phone in March and April, 2020.

—Mary Williams

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Schmidt: Over in Europe, in the military system they have a similar program to Outward Bound, only it was called Project Bold—technically for people, like Outward Bound was, for juvenile delinquents, but I wanted to go there because it was cool climbing and backpacking and camping down in the Bavarian Alps. I did a program there between my junior and senior year and learned all kinds of things. And then the summer after I graduated from high school I went back as an assistant. And I got to be the assistant to this awesome, hard-core mountaineering gal who was probably about ten years older than me. Her name was Cathy Day and she definitely opened my eyes to the world beyond what I knew. She was a NOLS instructor, and being ten years older than me—I heard



Early days of bike touring on the California coast.

a LOT from her about how hard it was to be a female in this industry. All that went straight over my head. It was like, "Whatever." (laughter) "I don't get any of that." But she was awesome and I learned a lot from her, and I think I learned a lot of where I could possibly go, things I could do. At that point, when I finished that summer, I was sure my next thing was that I was going to be a NOLS instructor, for sure.

I graduated from high school in 1980 and then I just wanted to get as far away from home as possible. I didn't want to stay in Europe, I wanted to go to a university where there was either snow or sun. Growing up in Germany, we lived in what's called the Eiffel, and that is one of the grayest, rainiest places, just like the Northwest. We were technically residents of Oregon, so I could have gotten in-state tuition at Oregon, but I was like, "No! It's rainy and cold there." So I applied to all schools in California and Colorado. I was heartbroken when I didn't get accepted at Stanford, but looking back, I'm thankful—I probably never would have ended up here if I'd gone there. So I ended up at University of California Santa Barbara, which is definitely... everyone says, "Oh man, the party school!" But it was an amazing place to go. I had an uncle who lived in L.A., he helped me get set up in Santa Barbara, but I knew no one. It was full-on new place, new people, no history.

So I worked my butt off, I got some scholarships, and I became a California resident within a year, which was awesome in the UC system. It's amazing.

Williams: And what did you think you were going to study when you first went there?

Schmidt: You know, I really had no clue, so I just took the broad spectrum of anything. For some reason I signed up for calculus, and I cried over my homework every night. It was just hateful! And after that first quarter, I sold my calculus book and said, "I will never take another calculus class." But that wasn't quite true.

I just took anything, had fun, but the whole NOLS world was still on my mind. So after two years I managed to get into a NOLS semester course in the Rockies. I had to promise my dad that I would go back to college.

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Schmidt: Growing up, obviously I learned German. I was exposed to all kinds of languages, but German was sort of second nature, and I studied it all the way through high school. It's really helpful when you learn a language as a kid. It makes all the following languages you learn, a lot easier. So before I was getting ready to take a year off from college, my parents said, "Hey, you know, we're thinking of going

to an Italian language school.” And I thought, “Sign me up, I’ll go with you!” So I took a year of Italian at college and I was ready to go. So then comes summer and they said, “Oh we decided we don’t want to go.” I said, “Sorry, I took a year of Italian, you’re going to drop me off down there, I’m going to go to Italian language school. That was the summer of ’82. They dropped me off at a place called Perugia and I spent the summer there in language school. It was another eye-opening, awesome experience.

Williams: Wow!

Schmidt: Yeah, it was really cool.

Williams: So are you still fluent?

Schmidt: No.

Williams: Can you speak any Italian?

Schmidt: No. But I blame that on the fact that I later learned Spanish, and they’re so similar that Spanish took over. But I used it that whole summer. That fall I came back to the States and did a NOLS course; went back to Germany at Christmas to see my parents, and tried to get a job in Italy so that I could practice my Italian. I ended up in Northern Italy in a place called Val Gardena and got a job in a hotel, running the bar. Northern Italy is really cool because there’s a real mix of German and Italian, so the owners of this restaurant spoke predominantly German. All the clients and the community spoke Italian, so I got to really work on all of that. It helped to end up with an Italian boyfriend for a little while. But yeah, it was sort of this really cool year: language school, a NOLS course, and then back to Italy for winter skiing and working, still remembering that I promised my dad that I would go back to college. (laughter) Oh man!

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Greetings from Perugia

VAL GARDENA, ITALY

Schmidt: But the NOLS course—to back up—the NOLS course was another sort of amazing outdoor education. The semester courses you spend... what all did we do? We spent a month backpacking in the Wind River Range. We spent a couple weeks caving in the Bighorn Cave System, somewhere up... I’m not even sure where that was.

Williams: Wyoming?

Schmidt: Yeah, somewhere up in Wyoming. Then we spent three weeks—this was my first true exposure to the Southwest—we spent three weeks in the Grand Gulch area, sort of Fish and Owl Canyons, just backpacking. And then another couple weeks doing snow camping in the Absarokas. So it was amazing.

Williams: Pretty well-rounded.

Schmidt: Yeah, a little bit of everything. But yeah, I think that was definitely the beginning of my infatuation with the Southwest, for sure. And that was in the fall of ’82, so it wasn’t overrun with people. You would be out in these places and you would see no one. I finished that, and again was thinking, “I’m going to do an instructor’s course, I’m going to become a NOLS instructor, but I have to go back to college, I promised.” (laughter)

So I finished my awesome year off and went back [to Santa Barbara] for school and then, of course, I had to decide what I was going to study. And this is where that calculus comes back in, because I sort of narrowed it down to a geography, or a geology major. And truly the geography major looked too easy, and so I agreed to go into geology, which meant I had to go back and do a full year of calculus, a full year of chemistry, which were all hateful, but I was a little more mentally prepared



for it. So yeah, I became a geology/environmental studies major.

A lot of people around here might be familiar with Rod Nash, [who] was sort of the big guy on campus as far as the Environmental Studies Program. I took Environmental Studies 101, which was called Wilderness and the American Mind—something like that.

Williams: Yeah, that sounds like a Rod Nash title...

Schmidt: Yeah, and he wrote a book that his whole class was based on. I'd go into that class, and he always had amazing slide shows, and you would come out of that class—I mean, this was a huge lecture hall, well over a hundred students—and you would come out and you would just be pumped. It's like, "Yes! I'm going to go backpacking! I'm going to get out there! I'm going to do this and that!" I mean, he was truly inspirational as far as that. He was a good speaker, and it was just like, "Wow. Okay." School was a mixture of geology which had field studies, field camps, you were outside... geology students worked hard and they played hard, and then environmental studies—it was just an awesome combo, for sure, and definitely got me fired up for getting through school.

A couple of courses, again, brought me back to the Southwest. One was a small, twelve-person class with Rod Nash, that was a study of public lands, and included a San Juan River trip, which I got to ducky, and the water must have been moderately high, because I remember sand waves.

Williams: Had you been on the water at all, or paddling?

Schmidt: Maybe once, in Europe, for a one-day trip or something. But that was amazing. And somewhere in that same time period that I took another course that was also a study of public lands, where we traveled around, and I did end up, through that program, doing an internship at the Maze in Canyonlands, tracking bighorn sheep. So over those next few years finishing school, I definitely got my taste of the canyon area.

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Schmidt: My first Grand Canyon experience, a group of us hiked into Havasu. This might have been in '84. I didn't really know that much about the Grand Canyon, other than looking over the rim. And one day of the trip a friend [Laura] and I hiked all the way to the river. We got down near the river, and the trail wasn't super-obvious, so we hiked down the waterway all the way to the mouth, and saw where the blue water and the gray water were mixing. It was probably March. We turned around to go back, and we were swimming back up the mouth, but the current was pretty strong. I swear I nearly drowned. Laura was a good swimmer, and she pretty much did the lifeguard pull, and I'm like clawing my way back up the wall to get back upstream enough so we could get on land. We had this epic day, hiking

all the way down there, and feeling like I was going to drown. (chuckles) And several years later I come back on a river trip, and there's a trail that takes you directly to the river, and I looked down at the confluence and thought, "What was I thinking?! How did I miss that?!" (laughs)

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Schmidt: I helped pay my way through college by working in the salmon canneries in Alaska.

Williams: Oh! I worked on processors there! What year?

Schmidt: I think it was like '84 and '85.

Williams: I was there in '80 and '81. Oh, too funny!

Schmidt: Yeah, Kenai Packers. I got sort of lucky, I worked in the can shop the first summer, which was a dry job. I don't know how I lucked-out with that. The second summer I worked in the freezer, which was also... You know, I never had to work on the "slime line." Every once in a while I'd get to go out and help to unload boats, where you'd go sit in the hole and sling fish over your back, into the big basket, to pull them out to go into the cannery. It was amazing. Yeah, living—we were "bluff rats," just camping out and waiting for the jobs to come.

Williams: Was that in Seward?

Schmidt: That was in Kenai. Some friends and I, in the two or three weeks while we were waiting for [fish]—you know, the fishermen would strike because they wanted better pay and all that—we opened a little restaurant called the Home of the Broken Egg. I mean, this bluff was amazing. It was like a pallet city, and people would set up camp. And these are people from all the lower forty-eight [states] looking to make the big bucks. Some friends of mine were musicians, and we would have music, and we would serve breakfast—just to get rid of the boredom (laughs) while we were waiting to go to work. You know, it covered the cost of our food. And it was fun. So that was really great.

Williams: Did you have a tent, or what?

Schmidt: I must have had a tent to live in. And we had the whole kitchen set-up with tarps. You know, just a total tarp city. It was funny, because there were all these different contingents. There was this whole Hawaiian contingent of people who were more long-term workers. It was just a wild world up there.

Williams: Were there a lot of college students?

Schmidt: There was a fair number of college students, it varied over the course of the season. There were the locals who worked every summer, who actually had a home to go to. We were just sort of the trash that came up trying to get work. I went up there and took my bike, because by this time I had actually started mountain biking already, which is a big part of my life now. I was going to ride my bike all the way to Fairbanks, but that didn't ever quite happen. But I did do some biking out



Salmon cannery antics.

in the middle of nowhere, by myself, pre-cell phones. Never thought about bears.

Williams: No bear spray?

Schmidt: No bear spray. I mean, I think back...

Williams: All by yourself.

Schmidt: ... I'm lucky to be alive, with a few of the places I went on my own—things that a parent these days would never let you do. I think it was a good thing I didn't have a phone, because if I had told my parents what I was actually doing, it would have driven them berserk! But, like, yeah, camping out, hitchhiking. One of the summers I came back from there, I took the ferry back down. I caught a ride from Seattle, where you came in on the ferry, down to Portland, and then from Portland I rode my bike all the way down the California Coast, Highway 101, all the way back to school at Santa Barbara.

Williams: All by yourself?

Schmidt: Yeah.

Williams: (laughs) That's awesome! But you're in your twenties, and at that time that's just what you did.

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Schmidt: Let's see, I graduated December of '85, so it took me five-and-a-half, six years, to graduate, but I did finish with a degree in geology, and a minor in environmental studies. I ended up getting to swamp a Cataract Canyon trip somehow that summer, and it turned out it was a group of Germans who couldn't speak very good English, so here the swamper, who'd never been down Cataract, got to be the translator and lo and behold, there's all these rocks you can talk about! And I was a geology major! Like, "This is awesome!"

Williams: Perfect! "My niche!"

Schmidt: Yeah! I got off that Cataract Canyon trip, and I was, "Ding! This is what I'm going to do!" So I



Cannery camp on the Kenai Bluffs, "Home of the Broken Egg."

immediately—this is with Tag-A-Long Tours in Moab—I immediately ingratiated myself with them and said, "Hey, I really want to come back next spring and learn how to row a boat." And that was my goal, so I ended up back in Moab the following year, the spring of '86, as the little newbie, wannabe boatman, and learned how to run the Moab Daily. (laughs) So that was truly the beginning of my boating career, the Moab Daily with Tag-A-Long Tours. I think I might have gotten a couple of Deso trips, and maybe a couple of Westwater trips that year, and I probably got to swamp a Cataract trip or something.

Williams: Did you just love it?

Schmidt: Yeah. And, you know, I also was into biking, and that was, like you said, Moab before the mountain biking boom. There was one bike shop. You could still go out and get completely lost on the trails that are mainstream today. I mean, there were no signs, there was very little trail marking. It was an adventure. Any time you went off the beaten path, you were out there. And again, it was like...

Williams: No cell phone.

Schmidt: No cell phone. If you get stuck, you break down, you have a flat tire and can't fix it, you're screwed, start walkin'! Truly. You had to learn how to fend for yourself. That was part of the deal, came with the terrain. People are soft these days and I'm right with them! Trail Forks? Where am I? How many miles have I gone?

Williams: Damn, no cell service here!

Schmidt: I know. I know. I'm glad I lived in that age. I'm glad I grew up with that. You know, I think it made me more self-reliant for sure. If you're going to get yourself into something, you're going to go out there, you'd better know how to get yourself back. You know? It's not a phone call away. So I'm glad I learned that, for sure.

I'd been to Moab for that Cataract Canyon trip I swamped, and then finished school, got to do some field work in Tucson in the Santa Rita [Mountains], and then worked my way to Moab and kind of parked there for the better part of eight years. Moab was home. I thought, "I will never leave Moab."

Williams: And you were a year-rounder there?

Schmidt: Yeah, pretty much, year-rounder for the first year. (laughter)

Williams: So what did you think about Moab back in those days?

Schmidt: Oh, I loved it! It was a funky little mining town. I mean, it was at the end of the mining era, it hadn't become what it is today. Mountain biking was just starting; boating was already well-established; but there were very few people who could really make a go of it year-round. I'll bet the full-time population was definitely under 4,000. A lot of rednecks. It was awesome. It was amazing, you could go anywhere. It's like I've always said, you could travel the rest of your life on the Colorado Plateau and never see it all. You don't have to go beyond that, if you didn't want. You just went out and did things: biking, hiking, climbing, boating, whatever. I worked for Tag-A-Long my first two seasons there.

Williams: And mostly rowing?

Schmidt: Yup, rowing—a little bit of motor boating, but mostly rowing. So two seasons at Tagalong, and one long winter in Moab. I think maybe that was when I realized I didn't have to spend my entire winter in Moab, and the next fall, the fall of '87, my boyfriend at the time [Clark] worked for Sheri Griffith River Expeditions, and he got the offer to go to Africa and work on the Zambezi. We had been talking about going traveling after the river season ended, and it was like, "Well, shoot, you've got to go take advantage of that. I'll see ya'. Have fun! You can't say no to that!"

I piddled around Moab that fall, and my parents still lived in Germany, so I went back to Germany to spend time with them. Clark, in the meantime, did a season on the Zambezi, and he had a bunch of connections in France. So we made plans to meet up in Europe when



First year boatman on the Moab Daily.



Living the Airstream Dream, Moab, Utah – 1988.

he was done with his Zambezi season. We spent some time in Germany with my parents; we spent time with his friends on a small vineyard in France, I practiced my French. I got pretty conversational with French, and drank lots of wine, and ate lots of cheese and bread. And then it was getting to be spring, it was like, "Well, wow, we should probably be thinking about going back to Moab." And Clark was like, "Well, why don't we go back to Africa?" You know, he could get a job again on the Zambezi, working for this company called Shearwater. There were only two companies at the time working on

the Zambezi. "Let's just go traveling, at least, first." So I don't know, it was maybe late February. We pooled our money, bought tickets, flew into Nairobi, and started traveling. I thought, "Okay, we've got two or three months" before we would have to be back in Moab. We went to Kenya, Tanzania, and then as we got in the depths of being in Africa, "Well, we are pretty close to Zimbabwe. Why don't we just go back there and see if you can get a job?" So it's like, "Okay, we'll see what happens." And we made our way over there. I'm glad I went to Africa then, because I think I would be, with

illnesses, and all the different [political] shit going on down there now, I don't think I would feel the same way now. But we traveled by bus, by boat [for] pennies. We were rich because we were Americans, but truly we were on a five-dollar-a-day budget. And we showed back up in Zimbabwe and met one of the owners of Shearwater where Clark had worked before, and they said, "Sure! That'd be great. You should come back. And oh, who's this, your girlfriend? Oh, I guess she can hang out." And I was indignant. I'm like, "Okay, I'm a two-year veteran boatman of the Moab Daily!" And all of a sudden there comes flooding back to me my friend Cathy Day, who had shared with me all her trials and tribulations of being a woman in the outdoor education field. I'm like, "This isn't fair!" And Clark's like, "Just shut up. Let's just get there, we'll work it out." And sure enough, everybody needs a boatman, and it's a fifty-foot rule, and so Year Three of my boating career, I became a boatman on the Zambezi! Like, "Wooo!" (laughter)

Williams: From the Moab Daily to the Zambezi! One big step!

Schmidt: Exactly! And then at that point it was like, "We don't need to go back to Moab. We'll get back there sometime, but we're staying in Africa." So yeah. I was eyes wide open, the Zambezi, high water, big water, pool drop, crocodiles...

Williams: Hippos?

Schmidt: Yeah, the Zambezi Daily is like every big rapid in Grand Canyon in one day, plus some. There was an opportunity to flip your boat every day. We were rowing boats. There wasn't a whole lot of paddle boating, but during the course of my four-month

season, I think I had eleven flips, which was right about average with all the other veteran boaters who were there, so I felt pretty good—even had a Daily Double one time.

Williams: Is that where you do two trips?

Schmidt: No, where you flip twice in one daily trip.

Williams: Oh my God.

Schmidt: It was the beginning of apartheid, and Zimbabwe was the only country that was still allowing visas for South Africans to travel. A lot of the other African countries had shut down any travel for people holding South African passports. So Zimbabwe was sort of the shining star of independence at that time. A lot of our clientele were both travelers who were traveling to see Victoria Falls, where we were based out of, as well as a lot of white South Africans and white Zimbabwean farmers. And it's a hard-core, male-dominated culture.

Williams: I imagine they're pretty hardy.

Schmidt: Very hardy. Oh, very hardy. And, you know, ready for a big ride. They would come down and stand in

front of your boat in the morning and look at you like, "So you're the boatman?" And I'd just be looking at them like, "Yup! I'm your boatman!" And you'd really just want to stuff them in the first, biggest hole and hope that they all swam. And by the end of the day, they all had a lot more respect for [me]. But, you know, it was really interesting.

Williams: Did they do that to the other [guides]?

Schmidt: Not to the male boatmen. There were one or two other gals that were working there at the same time I was, and there had been a few in previous years. There was a big influx of American boaters, because they had the experience; and there were definitely Zimbabwean boaters who were in the mix, but they were using the skills of the whitewater rafting experience of U.S. boaters, because it was a new industry for them. So yeah, it was fun, it was wild, it was terrifying.

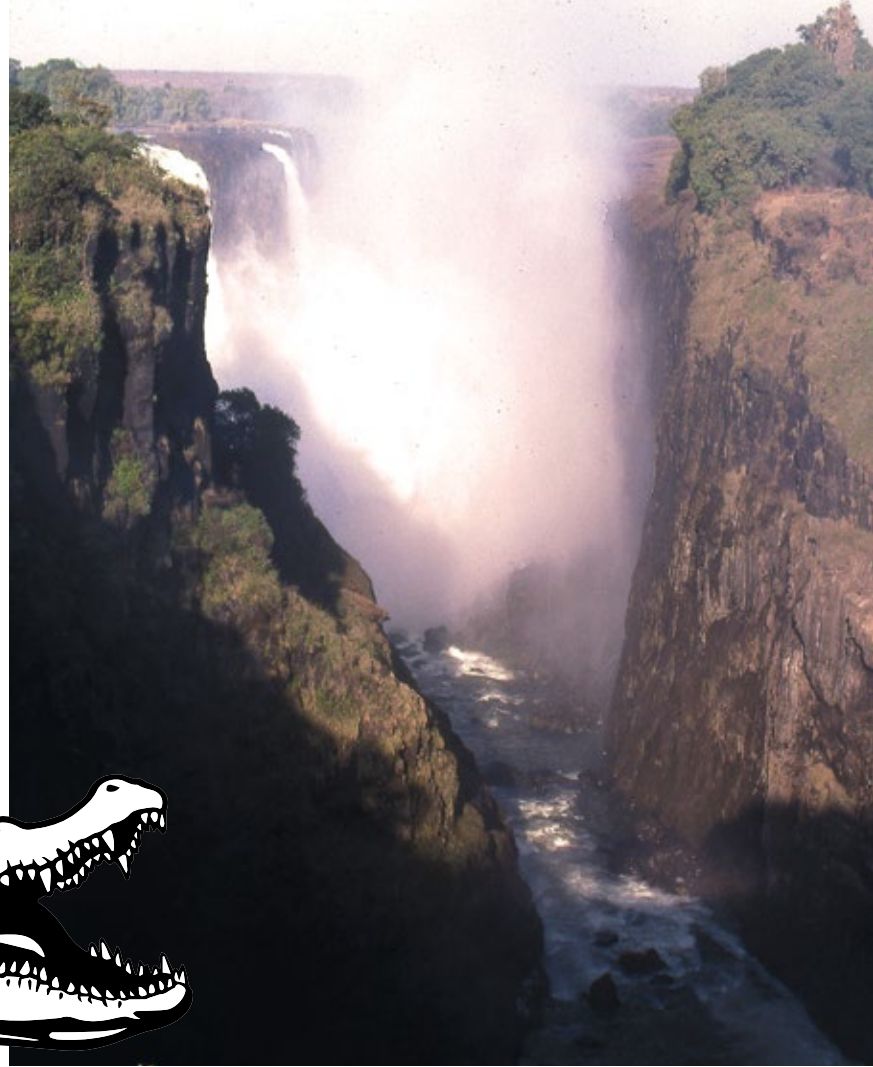
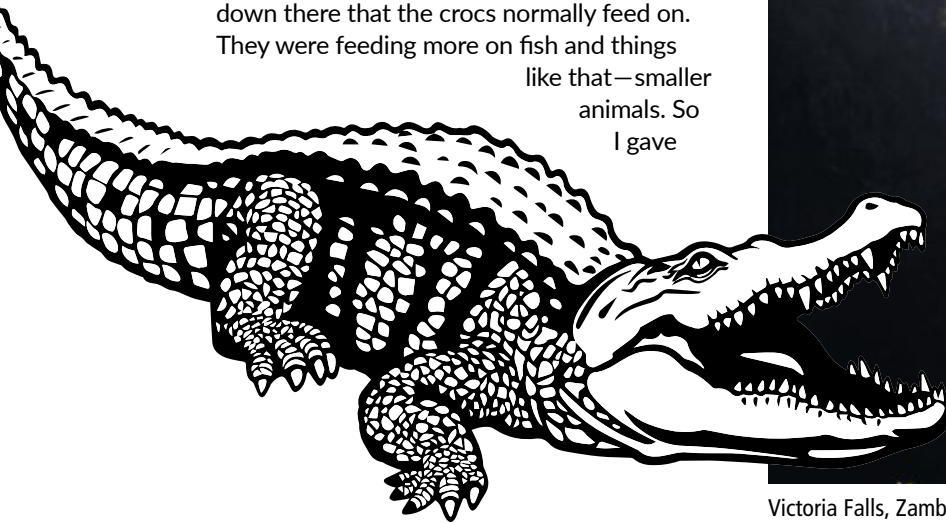
Williams: Did you ever have any epic swims or rescues or anything?

Schmidt: It was all pool drop, I mean, huge rapids, but a pool down below. The scariest thing was knowing that there were crocs in there.



Surfing Rapid 18, Zambezi River, November 1988.

Over the course of the season, you saw big crocs in between all the rapids. I went to the croc farm in Victoria Falls and learned way too much about them, knowing that they were used to ritual, like same time, every day, women coming down to wash clothes—things like that. Well, okay, every day we come down to the river to launch. We're all jumping in at the same time, and the buffet is about to start floating. Yeah, we definitely saw a few aggressive moves every once in a while, but never truly had a close call. The Zambezi, where we were running, was in a big basalt gorge, so my theory was there weren't a lot of large mammals down there that the crocs normally feed on. They were feeding more on fish and things like that—smaller animals. So I gave



Victoria Falls, Zambezi River, on the Zambia–Zimbabwe border.

myself a little reprieve, thinking, “Well, they’re not after large mammals, like [the ones] in the open low lying areas.” (laughs)

Williams: Right, where they’re used to taking elephants and zebras.

Schmidt: Yeah. Exactly. So that was how I got through it. (laughs) Sobek was on the Zambian side, they also did some float trips up above the falls, and there was actually a hippo attack. The hippos were actually more dangerous than the crocs, and the big bull hippos would charge intruders in their territory. The story we heard, and saw the boat afterwards—this bull hippo just shredded a whole quarter panel of a boat because it was in his territory. That was actually Kelly Kalafatich who was rowing that boat. That was when I first met her. Talk about inspirational women!

So we ended up in Africa for a whole year, unplanned, and just like, “Let’s go for it!” (laughs) And third-year boatman! Woo!

Williams: Well, you went from a second-year boatman to about a tenth-year boatman after a season there.

Schmidt: Yeah. At least in my own mind. (laughs) Oh man. But yeah, so [we] came back from that, and I was making the move from Tag-A-Long Tours to Sheri

Griffith Expeditions, and we came back from Africa and got invited on a Grand Canyon private trip. And that was my first Grand Canyon trip.

Williams: What time of year?

Schmidt: It was a spring trip. It was March or April. I didn’t have my own boat, I was sharing a boat, but we all kind of shared around. We had a bunch of rowboats. I remember we had a paddleboat. It’s like I have little snippets of memory from that trip, and one of them I remember was we were sitting in the paddleboat, up above Bedrock, just thinking about our run and José Tejada, who now owns Sheri Griffith River Expeditions, was the captain, and he heard this noise, and the next thing I knew, he dove across the boat, and this big barrel cactus came plummeting down off the cliff, right onto our paddleboat! I think it was probably kicked off by a bighorn or something, but I just have this total vivid memory of that. It’s like, “Oh my God!” And he dove across the boat and ended up in the water, and we’re above Bedrock, which I haven’t even run yet for the first time, so I don’t really know how scary it is. (laughs)

Williams: And meanwhile you’re getting attacked by a barrel cactus!

Schmidt: Yeah.

Williams: That's good!

Schmidt: I have that memory and I remember doing our own shuttle before the trip. I remember the trip leader was insistent that we get dry ice. A couple of us drove all the way to Flagstaff. We'd come from Moab, went to Lees Ferry, and a couple of us had to go to Flagstaff to try to find dry ice and block ice. I just remember it being this epic journey—everything we did, just to get on the river! There wasn't anyone to call to do our shuttle. We had all our own gear. I had my little Toyota pickup, that was jammed to the gills with gear. It was fun, it was awesome.

Williams: And was everybody mostly guides from Cataract?

Schmidt: Everyone was mostly guides, and almost everybody worked for Sheri Griffith: José, Sheri Scouten, Larry Hopkins—a handful of people.

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Schmidt: Some people at Sheri Griffith had connections in Costa Rica. So it's like well, I'd love to go there and learn Spanish... and boat. In fall of 1990, I went to Costa Rica for the first time, and I worked for Costa Rica Raft the first year, but I lived in Turrialba, which is sort of the hub of the day trips in Costa Rica. I wanted to learn Spanish. I had my grammar books, and I met a Costa Rican friend who became a great tutor.

I worked that first season, for like four months, and felt like I came back with decent Spanish, which was cool. And, boated in an awesome place. I worked there for the winter, came back to Moab, worked in the Southwest all summer long, and was planning on going back to Costa Rica and, sort of happenstance, I got invited to be on the Project Raft Team Grand Canyon. Which was sort of funny because I hadn't started working in Grand Canyon yet but I had contacts with people who did, who were putting together this team and needed someone who was familiar with the rivers there. So, I lucked out with that and went down to Costa Rica again, in the fall of '91 with Project Raft and stayed to work.

Williams: Who was on your team? Do you remember?

Schmidt: Well the person who asked me was Larry Hopkins, who I had worked with at Sheri Griffith. But let's see... Nancy McClesky, I'm pretty sure Linda Jalbert...

And so that was the first time I met some of those people. It was a great event. I also, in that whole scene, met the new owners of an Idaho rafting company and that was how I ended up getting some work on the Middle Fork of the Salmon for a season, working for my friend Emily Johnston. Going to Idaho to work for Emily and James, that was where I met Julie Munger. We both ended up working for them, so another small little world.

I made tons of connections down there but the

unfortunate thing about that year, after Project Raft and the start of the season, I was trying to learn how to kayak, and just getting to the point where I had my roll, and sort of comfortable running Class III, when I dislocated my shoulder. (laughs) On a run in Costa Rica at the beginning of that season so that was more or less the end of my kayaking career.

So I come back up to the States to rehab my shoulder, and spent two or three months working on that, and then got an invite to go down to Southern Mexico. So that was my intro to Chiapas. A friend of mine, Barry Miller, who I had worked with previously, was working with Slickrock Expeditions down in Mexico, and they were just starting to run the Rio Jatate with paddle boats. It had always been a self-support kayak trip. And Cully [Erdman] really wanted to open it up to more clientel with paddle boats and a small support boat. So, I came in to run paddle boats which was super exciting. I mean, that river is wild, it's like Havasu on steroids. You know, you're actually running travertine falls and just wild things you would never think you could make it through.

Williams: And what are the sizes... the range of these drops?

Schmidt: The vertical drop in places was easily, like thirty feet. But you were sliding over these travertine ramps on four inches of water, down into a big hole at the bottom. It was crazy. It was boating like you've never done before. So it was another big learning curve but really exciting.

I took the train all the way from the border, in New Mexico, down into Chiapas, all by myself, to go to work. (laughs) And that was an exciting journey as well. But I spoke Spanish so I did just fine. And that was when I first met Scott [Davis]. Cully, running Slickrock Adventures, and Scott, running Ceiba Adventures, were based out of the same place. Scott had his river running and caving and birding trips, and Cully had more kayak-oriented trips, but they worked together, shared shuttles, did a lot of logistics together.

After Mexico I came back to Moab and worked on the Middle Fork of the Salmon for part of the season. Did mountain bike tours, had an awesome schedule; Moab boating, Idaho boating, mountain bike tours for Western Spirit Cycling in Colorado and Idaho—it was a great scene. Like, "Wow, I can do this year 'round!" So that was just the big explosion of the guiding world for me. I continued to do that through '92, '93.

Williams: So '92, '93 were you going back down to Chiapas?

Schmidt: Back down to Chiapas and working for both Slickrock and Ceiba.

Williams: So how did the transition to Ceiba work?

(laughter) Where did the relationship fit into the work...?

Schmidt: So, when Scott and I first met we just hit it off, we were great friends, could talk for hours, and the



Clockwise: Rio Agua Azul waterfalls, Chiapas, Mexico.
 Rio Congrejal shuttle, Honduras.
 Guatemalan lancha lunch on the Rio de la Pasion, in
 the Peten of Guatemala.
 Strangler fig, Petexbatun, Guatemala.



next year I drove down instead of taking the train. Scott always would drive down with a bunch of his gear, and it was in his four-wheel-drive van called "The Iguana," pulling a big pick-up bed trailer full of stuff and a bunch of his guides. So that year, I drove down with them, which is a four or five day event, leaving from Arizona via Durango, Colorado, where Scott was living, and heading down across the border. That year I worked mostly for Slickrock. I'm sure I helped out with some Ceiba trips, and did some work in Belize for Slickrock. And then drove back home in "The Iguana" at the end of the season. I went back to Moab boating, biking, Idaho, Colorado, and got to swap my first Grand Canyon trip for Hatch with Scott. So that was in '93. That was probably in the time range when it changed from just being friends into being a couple. (laughter)

In '93, at the end of the season, Scott worked on "The River Wild" which was a big boating production. When he finished up with that project he moved from Durango to Flagstaff and that was more or less when I moved to Flagstaff as well, and moved in with him.

Left: Rio La Venta, Chiapas, Mexico.

Below: Old school mountain bike tour guiding, White Rim, Canyonlands, Utah.





Adventures with Scott: Rio Chocolja, Chiapas, Mexico; Gooseberry Mesa, Utah; Cueva El Chorreadero, Chiapas, Mexico.

I spent most of '94 going back and forth between Flagstaff and Moab, just filling in my schedule. Those first trips were super fun. I boated with all kinds of different people and it was funny because now, at this point, I did have several years of experience but you did have to do the baggage boat first. (laughs) There were all kinds of funny things that happened as a baggage boatman but it was like "OK, this is the direction I'm going, the direction I want to go." So by the time I got through '94, the next season I pretty much did the same—back to Mexico, back up to the States, and ended up with a decent schedule from CanEx. I still did some mountain bike tours, you know, filling in my schedule like any guide does. And it was great because I got to do a little bit of everything.

Williams: That's sort of been a keystone, I think, of your career. Fitting in all these really different things that you love to do.

Schmidt: Right, and then that led right into actually getting married. (laughs)

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Schmidt: That was a big deal, especially since I think we're going on twenty-five years this year. And yeah, for the record, I'm married to Scott Davis, who when I met him was a Hatch boatman. He was also the owner of the original Ceiba Adventures in Mexico, which is where we met. You know, there's all kinds of funny things there. It's like we met and hit it off just as great friends. We were good friends for a while before anything moved forward, but once it did move forward, my only fear was he wasn't a mountain biker. He had some "Walmart Special" bike, and not only was I into boating, but mountain biking was a huge passion, so I was a little nervous about that. But he proved himself early on, and that's become our passion together.

A couple things about him in my world is, he always says that I would probably still be living out of the

back of my truck if we hadn't gotten married. He definitely expanded my world as far as what the realm of possibilities were. He doesn't really do anything half-assed. Little did I know what I was in for. We make a good pair. He's sort of the Big Picture guy; I sort out some of the details as far as, "Wait a minute, you can't do that. We have to think about this." I'm really good at playing devil's advocate—sometimes almost too much. (laughter) We were spending a lot of time in Mexico when we first got together and were married, we often would play the "good cop, bad cop" in all kinds of situations, whether it was dealing with Mexican police, or dealing with a van driver, or whatever it was. My Spanish happened to be better than his. He knew all the words for car parts, and I knew the rest. (laughter) [We were] a very good pair, as far as that goes. So yeah, that was a big deal in 1995. How old was I then? I was thirty-two years old and my mother thought I would never get married. When I told my parents I was getting married, she was like, "Wow!" And later she asked me, "What did he do to make you say yes?" (laughter)

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Schmidt: So the engagement story... we were in Mexico, we were out on a little day run on some small river in Chiapas, and had two friends with us, Dave Kashinski and Denise Nadeau. We were on our way back and the van broke down and of course, Denise and Dave were just hanging out waiting, and Scott was under the van, and I'm just helping out—and what I became really good at was becoming the mechanic "ayudante," the helper. And we got things going, whatever was wrong with it, got back in the van, and we were on a small dirt road so Denise and David were up on the roof rack and Scott and I were in the van, and as we're driving along Scott's like "Well, what about getting married?" (laughter)

And my reply was "Well... sure... maybe next year?" And Scott says "Oh no, if we're going to get married and

you say yes, we're getting married this year. There's way too many men out there in the Grand Canyon world for you to stay single." (laughter) It was not very formal. It was more of a discussion than a proposal. (laughter) But I did say yes.

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Schmidt: Let's see, other big moments after that... when we got married was when I had started working in Grand Canyon, so that was a big change.

Williams: Were you working for CanEx then?

Schmidt: Yes. I had swamped one Hatch trip maybe, and gone on one private trip, and then put my resume out there to all the rowing companies, and CanEx was the one that came back and offered me a couple of baggage boats. So I was like, "Sure!" And it clicked, and I never left. It was a good fit. In 1994, I did my first baggage boat [for CanEx], all the way to twenty years later. I think my last trip with them was in 2015 and although I'm not big on statistics, I believe I have made over 100 trips, but who knows? (laughter) But yeah, that turned into just a great thing, great people, and just a lot of fun.

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Schmidt: Like I said, mountain biking is a passion. A couple big events for me were the Leadville 100 Mountain Bike Race, twice—once in my thirties and once in my forties.

Williams: Where does that go from?

Schmidt: They say it's a 100-mile ride, but it's really like 103 or 105 miles, and it starts in Leadville, Colorado, and it's a big out-and-back. You ride over 100 miles, you have, I think it's like 10,000 feet of climbing. There are some people who are out there for winning the gold medal, but most everyone else is just out there to survive, and so you're not in that big of a hurry, and you have conversations while you're riding. It's just an awesome event, something you just want to complete—it doesn't matter how you do. And I actually did alright, I came in like tenth and eleventh in the women's both times. I was pretty psyched about that.

Williams: Nice! And what were your times, generally?

Schmidt: Oh, I want to say mine was right in the ten-and-a-half-hour range, which for me is totally admirable. (laughs) And I still have hopes of doing it maybe one more time, maybe in my, who knows, could be in my fifties or sixties—we'll see.

Williams: Do you stop at all?

Schmidt: You have rest stops, and Scott was my wheel boy on both rides, along with either my mom or another good friend, Barb. They have these rest stops, so you can get refilled with food and water, so you see them like three or four times along the way. That was a cool experience.

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Schmidt: Boating-wise, my first and only boatman motorboat trip was a GCMRC trip on a flood flow in 2004. That was moderately terrifying, but I ran a motorboat from Lees Ferry down to Phantom before I hiked out. It was on, 30,000–40,000 [CFS], so that was pretty exciting. You don't have any rocks to hit, you just have to hold on! (laughter)

Williams: And how come you ran a motorboat?

Schmidt: Well, it was one of those scenarios where it happened at last minute. I was originally the cook, and once they got to Lees Ferry, they realized they had way too much gear for the science equipment and the food, and so they added a motorboat, and they're like, "Well, who's gonna drive it?" "Well, Rachel, can you drive?" And I was like, "Sure," because I'd run a few motorboats in Cataract, and I'd swamped a fair number of motor



Leadville 100 finish line.



Dawn to Dusk 12-hour race: Team Bumblebee Bitches won 1st place, Marieke Taney, Rachel & Kat Spillman.

trips, so I wasn't like I didn't know what a tiller was. (laughter) So anyway, I ended up as a boatman. Parke Steffensen was my official swamper. He was probably much more competent than I was at the time, but I was the one who said yes.

Williams: Smart girl!

Schmidt: Yeah. The biggest run I remember was in Hance, and I had radio communication with Scott, because Scott was running the science motorboat. That was my biggest worry, and I was following him, and he ran first, and he was radioing to me and telling me things. I remember just having this enormous ride. You know, my eyes were probably like saucers before we made it to the bottom, but we made it through, which was good. It was exciting.

I ended up collecting firewood one afternoon, because I think it was November. I slipped and banged up my wrist so I hiked out because my wrist was all bruised up. Someone else took the boat on down which was probably just as well because then the water dropped out and I would have been running, like, on 8,000 [cfs]. (laughs)

Williams: Yeah, that might have been a good thing.

Schmidt: Yeah, it was probably good. Truly, I'm more of a rowboatman.

Williams: Did you paddleboat a lot too?

Schmidt: I did a bunch of paddleboats because CanEx runs the little 14-foot paddleboats, unloaded, and super-sporting. I learned how to paddleboat in Costa Rica and then Mexico, so I was pretty up on that. I definitely did my share of paddleboating for CanEx, and

had some big runs, and definitely turned over a handful of boats. It's a lot of work, you know. And it's not just the flat water, it's those miles. Any paddleboat captain in Grand Canyon can attest to this, it's the flat water, it's the miles in the wind, or no current—that's the true paddleboat captain's expertise, is getting people excited about going downstream when there isn't any big whitewater.

Williams: Yeah, I've done that a time or two. It can be a challenge.

Schmidt: It can be a challenge, but it's fun. It is fun. You can be absolutely terrified, but sometimes the crews that you have the least confidence in come through for you, and you are just like so high on life, and so are they.

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Schmidt: Let's see, what else? My parents had moved back to the States. My dad passed away in 2003. My mom's still awesome and hanging in there. She's one of those people whose glass is always half full—and that's maybe a wine glass. (laughs) But she has always been an inspiration to me, and I just hope I can be as positive as her. She has so often visited us on the holidays and gone to parties with us, and I don't even have to worry about her. I see her over in the corner just chatting away with someone she doesn't even know, and having an awesome time. (laughs) So she's an inspiration. She turned eighty last year.

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Big run in Specter, and yes, it did turn over!

Schmidt: And then there's... health and turning fifty! (laughter) Before I turned fifty, I had my round with breast cancer. I've been a healthy person all my life, so it wasn't until I was like forty-six that I ever spent a

night in a hospital. I think about the biggest thing I had ever had before that was stitches. (laughter) So that was sort of a wake-up call, being in a place where you feel like you are the healthy person, but yet you're in the mix with people who are very sick... but again, I had a lot of awesome support with that. It was the winter of 2009–2010, and went through the whole surgery, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and all of it. When I was talking with my oncologist, it was like, "I have a river trip in May of 2010, and I'm going on that trip!" (laughs) "I have these goals. We gotta get this shit done because I've got life to deal with!" (laughter)

In my chemotherapy, when my hair started falling out, my good friend Marieke [Taney] turned me on to her hairdresser. Weren't you there?

Williams: Yes I was! I remember that fun party.

Schmidt: Yeah, the hair cutting party—haircut/shaving party. That was awesome, that was a great way to just celebrate going bald.

Williams: Yes. Perfect.

Schmidt: But yeah, it was like, "Wow, this can happen to anybody," even when you're a healthy person. So my advice, the hindsight advice of the older person to all of our younger friends is like, "Stay healthy, stay on top of



Rachel and Annie Schmidt.



Julie Larsen doing the deed with friends and wine to help celebrate.

things, get your baseline studies done, put the money out to do that, so you know if things change.”

And then in 2016, I had a big year of body parts. I had my shoulder fixed, rotator cuff surgery, with some added stem cells, because most of the doctors had told me, “Oh, you need a full shoulder replacement.” And it wasn’t any one event, it was probably just years of rowing boats, and playing hard, and riding bikes, but it had finally caught up to me. But I did a little research and ended up going to Texas for rotator cuff surgery where they also use stem cells to help with the rejuvenation of the joint and the actual surgery.

And that same year, it’s like, okay, things all happen at once, and I was starting to feel that I had hip issues. My shoulder was in February or so, and then that same year in November I had a hip replacement. So yeah, it was a big year. It was my first year completely not on the river. And that was definitely a big deal. I was down to only one or two trips a year just because Ceiba was taking a lot more time. And then funny as it goes, it’s like, “Well, you know, maybe I don’t need to continue being a guide right now.” So truly, 2015 was my last commercial

different buddies of ours.

Williams: What a great idea! Were there any that were particularly memorable?

Schmidt: Well, the number one ride, because my birthday is in January, and I feel like it might have been either right before or right after my birthday, we went down on the Black Canyon Trail, which is south of Cordes Junction, and there were about seven or eight of us, and it was frigid! (laughter) And we had to run a shuttle, and we all, like, left the trailhead in our Puffy jackets. We did this 25-mile ride, which is through this spectacular scenery, but it was so fricking cold. I totally remember that one. (laughter)

Williams: Way to kick off the year!

Schmidt: Exactly, exactly. Most of the rest of them were a lot more pleasant.

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Schmidt: We’re in that age range where we came in on the coattails of a lot of amazing women who made it a lot easier for us to come into this whole world of



December 2009 thru October 2011.

boating. I feel like it was a lot easier for me coming in ten, fifteen, twenty years after some of the pioneer women that made their way and made their stand, being totally credible boatmen no matter where they were working.

Williams: Yeah, I do too.

Schmidt: And we're surrounded by so many of those people here in Flagstaff, and up in Moab, so hats off to those before us who made it easier, for sure.

Williams: You had mentioned that you had a mentor early in your youth...

Schmidt: Well, a couple. I think I might have mentioned the very early youth mentor was a junior high science teacher. And right when I graduated, I worked with a gal who was probably about ten years older than me, Cathy Day, and she worked predominantly with NOLS. She definitely was an amazing person and I didn't even realize what—didn't even have a clue what she was offering, her experience, to me. It's funny how in hindsight you go back and think, "Wow, that person was an amazing person for what they had accomplished and what they were doing."

Williams: Yeah. And the time of life that you were at, you didn't even know to realize that.

Schmidt: Exactly—especially when you grow up as an only child with educators as parents, who were the best for being supportive and telling me, "You can do anything you want." I didn't even know that there were stumbling blocks out there. And maybe I ran into a few, but I was maybe naïve in even realizing that's what they were. (laughter)

Williams: I can picture that!

Schmidt: It's like you're just positive. "Oh, I'm doing this and I'm doing that." Yeah, in hindsight you realize the benefits you were afforded by other people making their way in, and even just being positive about things so you didn't even dwell on events that may have seemed negative.

Williams: So when you first got into boating, did you have any sort of teachers that you learned from? Or did you just kind of jump in?

Schmidt: I definitely sort of just jumped in. I mean, I feel like there were a few different people along the way. Barry Miller was a good friend of mine, and he worked out of Moab, but he also was a Selway River ranger. I ended up working a lot of river rescue courses with him out of Moab, through Canyonlands Field Institute. And boating-wise, he was definitely a big mentor and supporter, as far as that went. Bego Gerhart, who wore a skirt, who I met in my twenties. He was always a huge supporter of women in the field, and he was a super-good friend in those early days when I was learning how to boat. And then early on, my Year Three of boating when I ended up with a season on the Zambezi. The people I was with were all awesome supporters of anybody learning how to boat.



Desert mountain biking in Arizona.

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Schmidt: We can't have this conversation without talking about our dogs!

Williams: Right.

Schmidt: That was one thing, I never had dogs growing up, because we lived in Europe, we traveled a lot, my parents always told me, "Well, you know, it's not fair for us to have pets because we can't take care of them all the time." So my first dog, I was super-hesitant to get, but, you know, Scott had grown up with dogs, and had dogs all his life, so he was like, "We need to get a dog." And I'm like, "Well, how do you have a dog when

you work on the river all summer?" Our first dog, Maya, spent a lot of time with a lot of different people every summer. I would get these messages when I got off the river, "Oh yeah, Maya went to Durango with us. Oh yeah, she did this and that." So I don't know quite how it all worked, but we ended up with this awesome dog who people loved to take care of. And we passed her around and had her with us for like ten years.

Williams: I think we had Maya a couple of times.

Schmidt: I'm sure you did! I know Fritz and Dirk took Maya a bunch, and yeah, she went all over. She was like the happiest black lab mutt, rescue dog, that had ever been.

Williams: And she would go to Mexico with you and everything?

Schmidt: She went to Mexico with us. She was the sweetest dog in the world, but she could look really fierce if someone wasn't used to dogs. So she was a great guard dog as well.

And then we ended up with Millie, who Lynn Roeder pawned off on us. She had rescued her from a pound in Parowan, Utah. And Millie came with tons of baggage, as you know.

Williams: Yes. (laughter)

Schmidt: And then finally we decided it was time to have a dog we started from almost scratch, and our most recent addition is Nitro. He's just a young punk, but he's an awesome companion. Oh my God, when you're hanging out a lot at home, or without a lot of people around because of the COVID, it's certainly nice to have a dog, that's for sure.

Williams: So did the black dogs start with Maya, and you just always wanted black ones after that? Or where did the black ones come from?

Schmidt: You know, I think a little bit was Scott had always had labs, but yeah, there was a time at Ceiba where all we had were black dogs there. There were six of them. Now Ceiba has expanded into a much bigger

Scott Davis, looking for answers.



variety of dog faces. But yeah, any given day at work there can be six or seven dogs there, so we're definitely dog-centric—as is all of Flagstaff—but definitely a dog-centric place. For all their pain-in-the-butt moments, we love them.

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Schmidt: I have a couple little mottos. And every once in a while someone who's heard them for so many years, will say them back to me, like out of the blue. But I feel like the river brought this out in me, and this is maybe a way I look at life... "If you make everyone around you look good, you're going to look good." And that definitely is key on the river—especially as I moved into being a trip leader. It's like you don't have to micro manage, and if you make everybody else look and feel good, you're going to look good. So that's definitely one of my mottos.

And then another one, "Indecision is the key to flexibility." I think we've all felt it when we've been the trip leader on a trip, especially when you're out front, and you're trying to figure out where you're going to stop, and if there's going to be shade, and what all of your guides on the trip are thinking of your decisions—and are you going to make the right one? If you don't set in stone what you're going to do, then you have so many more options. I deal with a lot of private trips, and I have lots of conversations. And really, what you try to pass on is that. Don't get worked up on exactly what you're going to do. You'll only make it hard for yourself. If you just open yourself up to what experience you're going to have, and be positive about it, you're going to enjoy so much, and your next trip is going to be completely different.

Williams: Yeah. That's really good advice.

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Schmidt: But yeah, I just... It's been an awesome ride. I mean, Grand Canyon is always going to be there—especially right now [when] people have been limited going downstream with the whole COVID-19—whether it's a government shutdown, or a pandemic, it's like the Grand Canyon is still going to be there for us. We don't have to worry about that going away, we just have to make sure that we can get back there.

Millie and young Nitro. Photo by Geoff Gourley.

