Mill Valley Oral History Program
A collaboration between the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library

Chris McNamara

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Natalie Snoyman and Abby Wasserman in 2021

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Chris McNamara is a big wall climber, former wingsuit BASE jumper, author of 10 books, and founder of multiple outdoor recreation companies. Born in San Anselmo to Kay and Steve McNamara, Chris moved to Mill Valley in high school, and began rock climbing as a teenager under the guidance of mentor Mark Melvin, founder of Touchstone Climbing. In this oral history, Chris shares how his enthusiasm for climbing led him to illicitly scale the Golden Gate Bridge and, with his brother Morgan, become part of the youngest team to summit El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. From there, Chris describes his subsequent forays into writing climbing guides and gear reviews, founding his companies SuperTopo and OutdoorGearLab, and his discovery of and eventual retirement from the dangerous sport of BASE jumping. Since quitting BASE jumping, Chris has become involved with several trail building and community redevelopment projects in Lake Tahoe, where he now lives with his wife Viktoria and their two children. Throughout the oral history, Chris offers insights into his personal attitude toward entrepreneurialism, the risk and thrill of extreme sports, and outdoor community-building.

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Editor's note: This transcript is based on a recording and has been reviewed by Chris McNamara, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:00.0 Natalie Snoyman: Today is Tuesday, September 21st, 2021. I am Natalie Snoyman, Supervising Archivist at the Lucretia Little History Room. I'm here on behalf of the Mill Valley Public Library and Mill Valley Historical Society Oral History Project to conduct an interview with Chris McNamara: a climber, former wingsuit BASE jumper, author, cyclist, founder, and that's just a short list. Along with us today is Abby Wasserman, and the two of us are really excited to talk to you today, Chris. Welcome.

0:00:36.5 Chris McNamara: Thank you. Very excited to talk to you both.

0:00:39.0 Natalie Snoyman: Great. So, Abby, I think we're gonna get things started with you, if you'd like to kick us off.

0:00:46.2 Abby Wasserman: Alright. Thank you. Chris, great to meet you. I know your parents. I know — Well, I know Steve and Kay, and I think one of my first questions is, who are your parents? Where were you born? And where did you grow up?

0:01:05.6 Chris McNamara: So my parents are Kay and Steve McNamara. And I was born in San Anselmo in their house, I think, off Scenic Way up in the hills there. And then I believe when I was two, we moved to Tam Valley, where I lived for the next 14 years up on Pine Hill. And then, in high school, moved to downtown Mill Valley, and spent the next probably off and on 15 years, since I came back at various times after college to hang out. So, the short answer is a whole lot of time in Mill Valley, which has been wonderful.

0:01:57.8 Abby Wasserman: So when you started school, where did you first go to school?

0:02:02.6 Chris McNamara: Pretty sure the first school was right across from the Mill Valley Library, which was right across from Old Mill, which is now, I think, three townhomes. But there was a little school right there on the corner, right on Throckmorton, and I believe that might have been Marin Horizon School, and then Marin Horizon moved to Corte Madera. And so then I started going to Corte Madera for school.

0:02:36.2 Abby Wasserman: So maybe that was before Marin Horizon School came to Homestead Valley? I'm wondering. I wasn't around then.

0:02:42.9 Chris McNamara: Yes. Yeah. So Marin Horizon was off Paradise Drive for at least 10 years, maybe longer, in what I think is now the French American School Campus. So yeah, they've moved around. But yeah, it was only later that they moved back to Homestead.

0:03:02.3 Abby Wasserman: And you have one brother named Morgan, is this correct?

0:03:06.1 Chris McNamara: I have one full brother, Morgan, and then three half-siblings: Kevin, Natalie, and Lisa from my dad's previous marriage. And then, kind of an adopted sister as well. We actually haven't figured out the right term, but there's my new sister, Marissa, who — And so there's six kids total now.

0:03:41.0 Abby Wasserman: Of which you are not the oldest then. You would be like the fourth.

0:03:47.9 Chris McNamara: Yeah. Second youngest. Yeah.

0:03:52.0 Abby Wasserman: So, let me just launch in. Your father gave us some background, Chris, and it was really helpful. So I wanted to ask you about your first — as your father put it — entrepreneurial inclination that began in grade school. This was your soda-making venture.

0:04:18.3 Chris McNamara: Yeah, yeah. So, I loved going to the Marin County Fair. And one of those booths that I'm guessing my parents wish I'd never walked by was this make-your-own sodas. And you could make a root beer or a Coca-Cola imitation. And you would carbonate the water and then have this big pump where you added in all the magical sugary syrup. And I did the math that if they bought this for me, I could then drink my way back to profitability for myself and them by making all my own drinks, which I think they saw probably the holes in that, but they also saw the entrepreneurial intrigue, and they didn't wanna snuff it out. And so, they let me buy this machine and then kind of work off the cost by drinking sodas, which of course, creates all sorts of problems, 'cause now there's this giant incentive to drink as much soda as possible to therefore make the investment pay off. But that was, I guess, one of my first entrepreneurial ideas.

0:05:34.6 Abby Wasserman: That's so creative. Instead of trying to sell the sodas to other people, you would drink them, [chuckle] make them into profit.

0:05:42.7 Chris McNamara: Yeah, yeah. [chuckle]

0:05:46.2 Abby Wasserman: And then you had some other ideas. You ran the snack bar at Little League for a while, did you?

0:05:55.6 Chris McNamara: Yeah. I loved Mill Valley Little League. I loved playing it for a long time, but I think I might have even liked more just really being on kinda the production side. And so, I would either umpire a game or usually I would do the snack bar. And before I did either of those, I would go load up the chalk machine to put down all the different lines on the field. And so, I was kind of in heaven. I just loved the whole scene there and running my own little shop there and thawing out the nacho cheese and

re-heating the hot dogs and making the popcorn. And I was really into saving money, and I really liked being able to save money. And most of my friends I remember would always go buy something every day like, “Oh, I made some money, let’s go buy bubble gum or playing cards or whatever,” but I was like, “No, I worked really hard and I’m gonna save it for something. I don’t know what it is, but I just really wanna save it for something.”

0:07:14.1 Abby Wasserman: Did you open your own bank account to save money?

0:07:17.9 Chris McNamara: Yes.

0:07:23.0 Abby Wasserman: So, how old were you then when you were working at Little League? That would have been at Boyle Park, is that right?

0:07:31.5 Chris McNamara: Yeah. I’m guessing I was 13 and 14, but I’m not sure exactly, but somewhere in the 12 to 14 range. And I remember it coincided with — I did pretty good at Little League, but when Mill Valley little league ended and went to that next level where you’re playing on the high school field at Tam High, I was like, okay, that’s out of my league. It’s no longer kind of fun, this seems like a little more serious now, and that coincided with, “Oh, there’s this way to be still connected with Little League by running the operations and this is even better.” [chuckle]

0:08:18.9 Abby Wasserman: So, you were obviously athletically inclined, but what was it that really sparked your fire when you were a teenager?

0:08:31.1 Chris McNamara: Yeah. So, I think when I was 14, I went to a climbing gym birthday party, and it was my first time ever seeing indoor climbing and just pretty much instantly loved it. I think it was maybe my first exposure to a non-team sport, other than sitting on my butt going down a skateboard on the hill, where I just kind of saw like, “Oh, this is amazing." Like, this whole idea of a sport that you can kind of do by yourself or with your best friends, kind of on your own terms and not such a team-structured environment. I just loved and became hooked on climbing.

0:09:19.2 Abby Wasserman: Did you have any fear of heights that you had to overcome?

0:09:23.3 Chris McNamara: Yeah, I had actually gone climbing once in seventh grade, so — What is that, when you’re like, 11? Or — Yeah. And I remember it was in Joshua Tree, and I watched all the kids go before me, and whenever they got to the top of this 30-foot cliff, they all got really scared. And I remember thinking like, “What’s the big deal?” And then sure enough, I went and climbed the cliff, and then the first time I looked down, I was like, “Oh man, I’m, like, I’m holding on — I’m only being held up by this piece of tooth floss.” Like, suddenly it all got really real really fast, and I certainly had that fear. I think everyone has that fear to some extent, and then really the variable is how quickly do you get over it? And I think I got over it pretty quickly. Once you just

convince yourself like, “Oh, this rope that looks like tooth floss actually will hold 2000 pounds, so I think I’m good.”

0:10:29.4 Natalie Snoyman: Was that before you met Mark Melvin?

0:10:33.1 Chris McNamara: Yeah, yeah. Because — Yeah, so that was seventh grade, which — Yeah, I forget how old I was. But I met Mark Melvin when I was 15, I think. And I had been climbing in the gym for a little bit, and then he — My Outdoor Ed teacher at high school had a business plan for a climbing gym. And I had my life savings from the Little League that I’d been looking for something to do with, and because I thought climbing was the greatest thing on the planet, and that if I invested in this gym, I would get a lifetime membership, it was one of those like, “Oh, this is a no-brainer. I’m just gonna get lifetime membership to a gym. And who knows? Maybe it’s a good business too.” I didn’t really know how to evaluate it then. And so, Mark Melvin, the gym owner, offered to take me up El Capitan. I don’t know why exactly. Maybe I just seemed that excited about it. But at the time, I’d never climbed anything really taller than the Golden Gate Bridge.

0:12:00.9 Chris McNamara: And so, to go from something that’s a few hundred feet up tall to 2000 feet tall was a pretty big jump, and it would have normally taken me, I don’t know, or taken the average person years to kind of train up to that, but Mark said, “I think you’re ready. Let’s go.” And I said, “Sure.” And we went and we climbed the west face of El Capitan, and I’d say that probably changed my life maybe more than any other 10-hour event before or since.

0:12:35.7 Abby Wasserman: Let’s just go back a wee bit —

0:12:37.0 Chris McNamara: Yeah.

0:12:37.7 Abby Wasserman: Because Natalie and I want to hear about that Golden Gate Bridge climb, and how old you were when you did it, and who your friend was, and how on earth you did it?

0:12:47.0 Chris McNamara: Yeah. Yeah so, that was when I was a freshman in high school, so I’m guessing I was 14. And I had a friend who also had kind of dabbled a little in the climbing gym and had climbed just enough to own his own kind of harness. But that was kind of — And a rope, and that was kind of the extent of our equipment, maybe a couple carabiners. And it had been his idea to go climb the Golden Gate Bridge, but he went there with some friends. And I forget the details, but it just didn’t work out. It sounded like it maybe just wasn’t the right team. And so, then, I think he turned to me and tried me out to be like, “Huh, maybe you’re — Chris is the partner for this project.” And I was totally thrilled. And I remember we went and rappelled off the Golden Gate Bridge like in the middle of daytime on the Marin County side where you end up in bushes. But anyways, you’re climbing around on the bottom of the Golden Gate Bridge, rappelling, all the types of things that if you did after 9/11 would probably get you shot.

But at the time, it was a different world with terrorism threats, and we were like, 14, so we kinda felt like, "They're gonna probably give us a pass-ish."

0:14:20.1 Chris McNamara: So, yeah, we just waited until a typical foggy night, told our parents we were camping in the Headlands — which is funny 'cause today it would be so clear that it's illegal just to go camp in the Headlands anywhere you want. But they seemed to think that all made sense, and so, we set up our camp, waited for the fog to roll in, and I don't know, it was probably like 2 a.m., 3 a.m. We hiked up and climbed to the North Tower of the Golden Gate Bridge, which is — It's actually like a relatively easy climb, but it was more just kinda figuring out the logistics and how to get on the bridge at night. And it was all like a pretty amazing, awesome adventure, especially when you're 14.

0:15:11.4 Abby Wasserman: Were you climbing on the cable, or were you climbing on the bridge tower?

0:15:15.0 Chris McNamara: We were climbing on the cable. So, it's really more of a walk-up once you figure out how to get on the cable. And then at the very end, when you slide off the cable onto the little catwalk, it's also kind of an exciting moment. But the cable itself is relatively simple. It's just super exposed, and it's at night, and there's this thick, wet fog and it all makes it plenty adventurous. We weren't complaining it was too easy.

0:15:48.3 Natalie Snoyman: Did you have to place any — I mean, did you use any of the carabiners?

0:15:54.4 Chris McNamara: We took these little pieces of rope and made little leashes, almost, kind of as backups. But we realized pretty quickly you didn't really need it, and it was a pain in the butt to take it off every time there was like a — Whatever you'd call it, a cable post or support. So we ended up not really using any gear until the very end. We rappelled off so that we wouldn't have to jump back on the sidewalk and run down the sidewalk in the middle, being exposed. So, the only technical part was actually rappelling at the very end.

0:16:44.1 Abby Wasserman: And did anybody see you guys, or were you just kind of shrouded in the fog?

0**:16:48.4 Chris McNamara:** No. Yeah, no, we — It was just a time when I think people were less concerned about there being real threats to public infrastructure. And even to this day, it's just— It just wouldn't be that popular idea. [chuckle] "Let's just go climb to the top of the Golden Gate Bridge."

0:17:10.1 Abby Wasserman: So, after the El Cap, the initial climb in El Cap, your father had mentioned that you then spent summers at Yosemite, and you would sleep under your car and poach unfinished pizzas for your meals?

0:17:28.7 Chris McNamara: Yeah. Yeah. All true. I kind of — I thought through the whole summer job equation, and I was like, "Well, people are working these jobs that they don't love, but they're kinda fun, and then they go spend all the money partying. Well, what if I could just figure out how to not spend any money? Then I wouldn't even need to really get the summer job, and I'd come out in the same spot. Either way, you come out with no money, but I would get to live in Yosemite all year." And so, Mark Melvin loaned me all his gear, which had that not happened, I would have been out of luck, 'cause climbing gear is expensive. And then, I went to Costco and bought a whole bunch of canned corn and pretzels, which for whatever reason I thought were the cheapest calories. And then — Yeah. To augment that diet, there was just a lot of us — There's a lot of people who are on the same wavelength of, "How do you live in Yosemite?" I think the phrase was, "at either end of the social spectrum is the leisure class." And so, we were the leisure class by figuring out how to not spend any money and just kind of — And camp for free and kind of, you know, live in —

0:18:49.0 Chris McNamara: Live in Yosemite. But to augment that diet, we realized every night there's this giant pizza scene over in Curry Village, and one out of every three tables will leave a whole bunch of pizza that if you've been part of their group, it would seem totally normal to just grab that slice of pizza. And since we're kinda hovering there like squirrels watching it, we were pretty sure no one finished their pizza and then spit in it or did anything to it, so we were like, well, it just makes total sense that as soon as someone gets up to leave their table, we would slide in to get the table, and then just, like anyone else would, but just the difference, we would then just finish all their pizza for 'em.

0:19:36.2 Abby Wasserman: Sounds like a great plan. [chuckle] So Natalie and I kind of divided this up so that I'd be asking about your teen years, but of course things will go back and forth. And she as a climber will have a lot of special questions to ask you. But we were both interested to know about the experience of taking your 13-year-old brother up El Cap.

0:20:03.4 Chris McNamara: Yeah, that's one that still kind of puzzles me in retrospect. But I thought that, having climbed El Cap I think three or four times by the time I was 16, I was now qualified to take my brother, who wasn't a climber, and his — All I really did was show him in the backyard tree how to attach a mechanical ascender to a rope so that I could climb one pitch, one rope length, anchor the rope, and then he could kind of put these mechanical ascenders on the rope and then come up and join me. And I just thought, like, "Oh well, if I can teach him to do that, then there's no problem." And so, yeah, luckily, it all just worked out pretty smoothly, and it's only now, as a parent myself, that I can fully comprehend how terrified my parents must have been. And I feel grateful that they even let us kinda go up and do that.

0:21:11.3 Natalie Snoyman: Your dad told us that they were sitting there in the meadow kind of watching you and Morgan climb and taking the occasional break at the Ahwahnee Hotel bar to calm their nerves. And it's really — It's an amazing story that you and Morgan, who really had no — as you just said, no proper climbing experience —

are still, I think, the youngest team to have summited El Cap. So, I was curious, we know a little bit about your parents' experience, but do you remember what it was like? You and Morgan accomplishing this amazing feat together? Do you remember thinking about your parents watching, or were you just so focused on that experience?

0:21:58.2 Chris McNamara: Yeah. Yeah, I just remember it all seemed pretty smooth. The one funny thing was these Swedish guys showed up — The way it works is whoever shows up to the base first gets to go first. And so we showed up at the base just minutes before this Swedish group. And so we got to see them at the base. And I just remember the disappointment in their faces because one of 'em was one of the best climbers in Sweden, and they'd been thinking about El Cap all their lives of what a grand thing this was. And right when they get to it, they — Their direct quote was, "The kindergarteners beat us to it." They were like, "Wait, what are we gonna tell all our friends of this heroic journey, but then there actually were these, like, kindergarteners who were on the wall right in front of us?" But anyways, we then became actually great friends with them, and I still keep in touch with them every once in a while to this day. So that was the only real noteworthy part. There was a few moments where Morgan would swing out in space, and he was like back to that — It takes a little time to get used to exposure. He was amazing for getting used to it as quick as he did, but he still is human, and so he still was, at moments, like, "Woah." It's a whole different reality when there's thousands of feet right underneath you.

0:23:37.5 Abby Wasserman: Chris, who was belaying you?

0:23:40.0 Chris McNamara: So Morgan was belaying me, and I was leading all the pitches.

0:23:44.6 Abby Wasserman: I see. So he would belay you, and then you would belay him?

0:23:49.2 Chris McNamara: Well, that's what you'd do in a normal climb. But on a big wall climbing kind of specific to El Cap and walls like it, I would climb up, and then I would anchor the rope, and he would attach these ascenders to the rope, and so that I wouldn't actually belay him, he would — I would actually spend that time hauling up all our supplies and our portal edge and stuff. And then meanwhile, he would use the mechanical ascenders to go up the rope. So it's kind of a slightly different set up than when most people go climbing, where one person goes first, climbing the pitch, and then the second person also follows and climbs the same way. When you're big wall climbing, it's often one person goes up, and then the second person follows on the mechanical ascenders.

0:24:43.1 Natalie Snoyman: And how long did it take you guys to summit?

0:24:49.3 Chris McNamara: We did it in one night. So two days.

0:24:53.4 Abby Wasserman: Was there a full moon the night you went up?

0:24:58.3 Chris McNamara: No. And in fact, we got tricked by how fast the wall goes into the shade. And so we not only never climbed at night, but we stopped climbing really early in the day. And I remember the Swedish guys below us being like, "Really? Didn't you wanna go a little higher? It's like 4 p.m."

0:25:19.4 Abby Wasserman: Are there any other teenage stories or high school stories that you know about your adventures in any way that you'd like to share?

0:25:30.6 Chris McNamara: I remember the year before I went to college, I went to Baffin Island first, and kind of figured out that I wasn't into the really big slow expedition style climbing, which is what you would do up there. I realized I was much more than an El Cap climber, and then I also went to Norway, where I had a similar epiphany that I was really an El Cap climber, I wasn't into these traveling to climb big wall things, but I also saw my first BASE jumper there in Norway, who actually was pretty much the legend of the sport, so that kind of planted the seed that then came back a decade later.

0:26:16.0 Natalie Snoyman: What was their name?

0:26:18.0 Chris McNamara: The name was Frank Gambali, "The Gambler," who then taught the people who taught me. And I actually then, was on El Cap when he jumped over me BASE jumping, and the rangers had been told he was gonna do that and they were waiting for him in the meadow. And when he landed, they chased him and he chose to jump in the river and he drowned. So that was kind of one of the early stories of just how BASE jumping's totally different than big wall climbing. With big wall climbing, pretty much no one was dying. If someone died it was considered a total freak accident, 'cuz it usually was, which is totally different than BASE jumping where death just seems a part of it.

0:27:13.9 Natalie Snoyman: Yeah. And I definitely wanna — We'll talk about your experience BASE jumping and wingsuit BASE jumping. You talked a little bit about Mark Melvin, and he was an early mentor. And I'm curious, what approach to climbing did he instill in you?

0:27:39.3 Chris McNamara: Well, yeah. Mark's a legend in a lot of ways. He's one of the best off-the-couch climbers I've ever met, meaning he can just climb really well with very little training if he hasn't been climbing for a year or months or whatever. He's also really fast, at kind of everything he does in life. And so that was inspirational, both the way he climbed, of just how efficiency is so much a part of it. And then watching him build the first climbing gym, Mission Cliffs, in San Francisco, and then subsequently he's built like, I don't know, 12 or 15 others. Just seeing how much he was hands-on and how much he was kinda setting the tone by being hands-on and efficient was certainly kind of a key life lesson, key business lesson that I've held onto ever since. So yeah, I feel super lucky I have had three to five super key mentors, and he was definitely one of 'em.

0:28:42.4 Natalie Snoyman: And I'm also curious, you talked — It sounds like you had a bit of a dirtbag experience, being in your early days in Yosemite. Did you already know people going up there, or how did you join that community or become involved with the community there?

0:29:02.7 Chris McNamara: Yeah. So there was just this whole — So the idea of making the Yosemite pilgrimage, that was kind of well-known. So you knew that you just kinda show up there. And that's what's unique about climbing, is there's not a lot of sports that have such a world-agreed-upon epicenter — not only as the start of the sport, but where everyone still goes to this day, and must go if you wanna be really serious about the sport. And so it's kind of a no-brainer that you go to Yosemite, and — if you're really passionate about climbing — and spend as much time as possible there. And so when you arrive, you pretty quickly just kind of see the other people — how they live there, and everyone is kinda doing it underground.

0:29:58.3 Abby Wasserman: Just asking about climbing style, but I've noticed with speed climbers when I watch on YouTube or the competitions, is that you — It's almost like when you climb fast and when you're confident, it's — You hardly touch the rock. It's almost like you're floating, and your whole weight, your body weight is not pulling you down. You're kind of lifted. And I just wondered — I can't express it well, but it's almost as though most of the time, the — Nothing is touching, and — Could you comment on that, Chris, and give me some insight on that?

0:30:47.7 Chris McNamara: Well, the speed climbing, that style of speed climbing, Olympic-style speed climbing is definitely a new thing in the climbing world. And so I've actually never tried it, and it's — It was never really something that was a part of climbing culture growing up. What was a thing was speed climbing on El Capitan, and that was always — People are always trying to have the fastest time. But it looks very different than the Olympic style because, A, the rope is not above you; you have to put up the rope. And so for a lot of reasons, you end up looking a lot less dynamic than you do on there. But no, but I agree. Watching it on the Olympics was pretty much the first time I'd ever seen speed climbing. So I was impressed.

0:31:49.6 Natalie Snoyman: I have a question about the psychology of climbing I noticed has become a topic of growing interest over the last couple years. How to manage fear, how to keep your focus. And I wonder if you could take us a little bit inside your approach and how you handle those issues.

0:32:11.7 Chris McNamara: Yeah. I think the two things, where one is, you just surround yourself by people who are better than you, and it kinda just makes you — If I'd gone climbing by myself, the first time I was exposed to that exposure, I would have been like, "Okay, this just feels wrong, I should not be doing this." But then if you then watch a whole bunch of your friends do it, or you watch an expert do it, suddenly you go like, "Oh, I guess that's — Actually can be made to become sort of normal." And so I was lucky because people like Mark Melvin were teaching me. I was able to see at this high level where you could get to. And so it made me — It just makes you go like, "Oh, well,

that can be done. That's not — Even though it feels a little scary, you can break through it." So that's one thing. And then the other thing is, I was really into Buddhism kind of around the time that I was getting into climbing. I was reading everything, Alan Watts' tapes, Zen stuff, Tibetan Buddhism. And so I was definitely interested in the whole idea of the mind and where it goes, and how you're way more in control of it than you often or almost always think. And so I think those two different things came together to maybe give me a leg up in really thinking through the psychology of fear and all of that.

0:33:51.3 Chris McNamara: And I'll also say, now that I've seen so many people die BASE jumping, I realize it's pretty important early on to have a whole lot of positive experiences in a row. If you have a lot — If you start out something and immediately have some negative experiences, it can totally just change the whole trajectory. So I felt lucky in that I had a whole lot of positive experiences with great people, and so it — Then when negative things would happen later, it made it more of the exception than the rule.

0:34:26.6 Natalie Snoyman: Yeah. Yeah, I was wondering about that, just how you — Your transition into BASE jumping and wingsuit BASE jumping, 'cause when you're climbing, you really don't want to fall. It happens, but it's pretty antithetical to climbing. And I'm wondering how that experience went for you to have been a climber on the big walls, and — For so many years, and then just letting yourself go, literally letting yourself go.

0:35:00.4 Chris McNamara: Yeah. Well, it's terrifying at first. [chuckle] Everything in your body tells you not to jump off things, especially like 300- or 500- or 1000-foot things. But I'd already seen in climbing how you can take something like climbing El Cap, which at first seems impossible and terrifying, and make it more or less normal by surrounding yourself with really good teachers and taking it one step at a time, and just putting in the time. And then you do all of those things and it's kind of — That's what's — That's one of the cool things about being a human, is it's pretty amazing just how far you can go just based on surrounding yourself with just really great mentors and kinda having that desire.

0:36:00.1 Natalie Snoyman: Yeah, absolutely.

0:36:01.3 Abby Wasserman: So who were your wingsuit — Who were your BASE jumping mentors?

0:36:08.9 Chris McNamara: So I learned with someone who just kind of said, "Hey, jump, throw the parachute," and the parachute opens, and it was a really small jump. And I knew that I would never be interested in that style of BASE jumping, and so I really thought after I'd gone one or two times like, "Okay, that's great. I did it. Never need to do it again. I'm done."

But then I saw these guys called the VKB[1], these Norwegians who created their own home-made wingsuits, 'cause at the time they started, wingsuits were all home-made. And they were jumping off these cliffs in Norway that were like 5000, 4000 feet tall, and so — way taller than El Cap. And then they were flying down terrain, and they truly were flying, which is a whole different sport than jumping off something and just falling straight down. And —

0:37:14.0 Chris McNamara: And so when I saw the flying, I immediately knew like, "Oh, that's the coolest thing I've ever seen." And I knew that this sport was in its infancy. And being a climber who loves Yosemite, I'd always dreamed of what would it have been like to show up in Yosemite in 1958, right when El Cap was first getting climbed, and what would that have been like to be a part of that golden age. And I saw pretty quickly like, "Oh, this was the moment for this sport of wingsuit BASE jumping. This was the golden age." I think I started in 2002 or 2003, and I think it had only been a few years before that that you could commercially buy a wingsuit, that you no longer had to make 'em yourself, which was kind of a key moment in the sport. 'Cause people had been inventing ways to fly their body forever. You could go back to Icarus, I guess. But it was only in that moment, right around 2000, early 2000s, that you could buy a wingsuit, and therefore it was really kind of a sport.

0:38:27.7 Natalie Snoyman: So was that your first time in Norway? Was that where you met some of these early collaborators, or did you actually jump there?

0:38:39.0 Chris McNamara: No, I actually — Actually to this date, I've never jumped in Norway. But I was just so inspired that I went and then built my own home-made wingsuit. And then suddenly, I went from like, "Oh, I BASE jumped once or twice, I'm done with the sport forever," to, I totally flipped and said, "Okay, I now need to become really good at skydiving as fast as possible so that I can then convince these BASE jumping companies to sell me gear." 'Cause the sport was so small that there's only three people that you could buy new gear from. And they had these restrictions on like, "We're only gonna sell you a BASE rig if you've skydived 150 or 200 times." And I was like, "Well, that's way too many times. I've already BASE jumped. Can't we just work something out?" And so they actually worked me out the express package plan where I only had to skydive like 50 or 75 times, and then they gave me a BASE jumping — They sold me a BASE jumping parachute.

0:39:48.1 Chris McNamara: And then I worked out the similar thing with the wingsuit, where they were like, "Yeah, we don't wanna sell your wingsuit until you've done this many skydives, and —" So anyways, the point is, I, as fast as possible, got all the skills that I needed to to buy a wingsuit. And then before I got the wingsuit, I actually started going to different large cliffs around the US and started BASE jumping with my

[1] Værdal'n Karsk og BASE (VKB) is a BASE jumping group from Trondheim, Norway specializing in high-speed tracking and proximity flying. By using the mountainside as a "vertical runway," VKB members have been able to achieve horizontal flying at speeds of 160-170 mph. Their first DVD, *SuperTerminal*,was released in 2005 to much acclaim from the BASE and parachute communities.

home-made, what's called a tracking suit. It's not technically a wingsuit, but it's basically a home-made wingsuit.

0:40:23.6 Natalie Snoyman: Can you talk a little about the home-made suit?

0:40:27.7 Chris McNamara: Yeah, it's — So it's gonna sound ridiculous, but this actually works, is you just take string, and you put the string inside your jacket, and then you attach — One side of the string has a loop, and you loop it around your thumb, and then you run the string through the arms in your jacket to your other hand, which you can then kinda control the tension. And what it does is, when you jump, it then pulls your arms down the fabric and your arms down tight, and that creates just a little bit of a wing. But you then do the same with your feet, where you — With your feet, what you do is you tie the string, it runs through the track pants — it's basically like a tracksuit, you look like "The Sopranos" style, like mafia suit, like tracksuit-type thing — and you run a piece of little cord around one foot, and then through the legs of the tracksuit down to the other foot, you tie both feet, and then you adjust the tension so that, just like your arms have now created these wings, your legs, it's now pulling the fabric inside your legs.

0:41:53.1 Chris McNamara: So basically what you do is you — let's call it "doubling your surface area." So whereas before, you had x, now you have $2x$ the surface area. And you then basically just turn your body into the shape of a wing — which if you've ever seen a long-distance ski jumper, it's the exact same thing with — All they're doing is turning their body into the shape of a wing to be able to get as much glide as possible. And you do the same thing. You turn your — It's the exact same position. You look like a long-distance ski jumper, except you just have this home-made wingsuit now. And just like long-distance ski jumpers are able to then kind of turn their bodies briefly into birds, you do the exact same thing.

0:42:49.1 Abby Wasserman: So how does this relate then to your going into the equipment business yourself?

0:42:58.9 Chris McNamara: So my whole entrepreneurial thing was, I dropped out of college many times, and each time I kinda knew I was never gonna be able to get a day job. It just wasn't in my personality. And so I had to kinda — I just knew I had to invent my own something. And the only thing I was passionate about, or the thing I was the most passionate about was climbing El Cap. And so I figured, "Oh, well, what if I created a guide book for climbing El Cap?" And so I created that, kind of an article that went into one of the magazines with this whole new concept of a really detailed map for how someone would climb El Cap. And that got such a great response that it made me wanna go from beyond the magazine article to writing an entire book. And of course, my dad is a publisher, so he was totally thrilled and gave me kind of support for the idea. And there was a real tradition in climbers being dirtbags, not just eating other people's pizzas, but also making their own books and not wanting to go get a publisher.

0:44:10.2 Chris McNamara: But no, I wanna go do the whole thing myself and keep all the money and try to make it a business — a very, very niche, maybe the most niche

business, but — And so I started that, and then I was really good friends with Galen Rowell and Barbara Rowell, who were kinda famous outdoor photographers who ran a photography business gallery. They invited, every year, some friends to go backpacking deep in some wild place in the same way that the Sierra Club used to when they were the Sierra club. They were just a club of people going into the Sierras before they became an advocacy organization. So they liked to recreate that. And so on one of those trips is where I met Randy Spurrier who had just sold his company to Adobe, and then an Adobe VP, and then quit and was kind of just now an angel investor for whatever he thought was cool. And he saw me with my guidebook idea, and saw the internet starting, and at the same time put two and two together and was like, "Hey, would you wanna start this kind of online guidebook, online community?"

0:45:27.5 Chris McNamara: So we did, together, called SuperTopo. We spent a decade doing that, and then realized that climbers were dirtbags just like myself, and that a free online service just dedicated to climbers was gonna be a hard, long-term business idea. But the one thing that he saw that was related was that with the online world, it was changing how purchase decisions were made, and that it wasn't just people asking their buddy what they should buy, but people were starting to research online what they should buy, and that if you could come up with one of the best online resources to help people figure out what to buy, that could be a real business. And so we started with climbing gear, and when climbing gear looked like it was gonna work, we expanded to backpacking gear, and then camping gear, and then all outdoor products through what we started, we called OutdoorGearLab, and then we just kinda kept going from there into home products. And so now we do 800 different categories, everything from carabiners to toasters.

0:46:41.0 Natalie Snoyman: Yeah, it's an amazing, amazing resource. How do you think your homemade wingsuit would have scored?

0:46:46.7 Chris McNamara: Low durability score. Yeah, it's funny. It would have definitely been the best value option though. It was $22 to make a home-made wingsuit.

0:47:00.8 Natalie Snoyman: Geez. [chuckle] I am curious, in 2010, you wrote this really insightful essay on your decision to quit BASE jumping. And in that essay you wrote about a particular time when you were about to take flight, and you found yourself questioning, "Is this worth it?" And you wrote that, that was when you knew it was time to quit, when you found yourself asking that question. What do you think it was that led to that question to enter your mind?

0:47:37.5 Chris McNamara: Well, I was already familiar with how big wall climbing can go from seeming impossible to like, "Oh my gosh, it's possible," to being the best thing in my life, "I'm gonna devote the rest of my life to this." But then I climbed El Cap 80 times, and I started to feel like, "Okay, this doesn't feel like it once did. It wasn't as exciting as it once was. I should probably not hold out on that original vision of, "I'm only gonna climb El Cap for the rest of my life." I'm gonna open myself up for new opportunities. And so with BASE jumping, I knew it could go through that arc as well.

And so at the beginning, it was the coolest thing ever, and I'd never been more excited about anything, but it then started to become more predictable and normal. After BASE jumping hundreds of times, it was now I could more or less see what the outcome was gonna be. And at the same time, I started to have more and more friends die. I had — I was on a jump where someone died.

0:48:42.6 Chris McNamara: And so I knew — Now I knew what the best case scenario was, and knowing the best case scenario already makes it less exciting 'cause you can already see the future, so there's no adventure. But what I don't know is like, "When is someone gonna die around me? When am I gonna die?" And so, put two and two together and I was like, "Yeah, probably time to move onto the next thing." And since, ironically, I already knew that you could kind of quit wall climbing or not do it as much and then be available to the next cool thing which then arrives, which was BASE jumping — I knew that if I quit BASE jumping, I would find something maybe that didn't look as good on YouTube, but I'd find something next, and I really wanted to make sure I got to next and didn't die like so many of my friends were, 'cause I knew that it definitely wasn't worth dying for, as cool as it was. There's just — I had at least another 60 or 70 years ahead of me, and I wanted to see what else was possible.

0:49:50.5 Natalie Snoyman: Yeah. And you wrote — I think it was 2016, you wrote — or you updated that 2010 essay to write that you were having these more meaningful and fun experiences. Can you talk a little bit about what some of those have been since then?

0:50:07.0 Chris McNamara: Yeah. So after BASE jumping, I was like, "Oh well, the next thing is also gonna be something personally adrenaline-related." So I was doing a lot of dirt biking and a lot of kind of big wave surfing or medium wave surfing, and I was learning how to paraglide. But none of those things were quite as exciting as BASE jumping. And it made me realize just doing the pursuits kind of just for myself maybe wasn't the answer, that maybe the answer was collaborating with other people, and that that would be in itself a new and exciting adventure, because just hanging out with yourself in your own head is much more limiting than trying to create some really amazing project with a bunch of people.

0:51:00.4 Chris McNamara: So I got really intrigued by where I live now, Lake Tahoe, as being this amazingly beautiful place that was just not necessarily laid out so well on its first attempt in 1950. It was basically casinos and strip malls, so unless that was your dream of what the true potential of a mountain town could be, there was clearly a lot left on the table to be worked out. And so I got really inspired again, this time not so much from mentors that I knew, but through reading about other people, like Tony Hsieh, the guy from Zappos, who redeveloped downtown Vegas, and just a lot of other examples. I realized that these things that seem so permanent, like cities, are actually much more dynamic, and that it's also way easier — or it's not easy, but it's often less people than you think who can steer the trajectory. And so I saw this real opportunity to make Tahoe more than about gambling and motels, but to really bring together some great people and try to make the ultimate mountain community.

0:52:25.0 Chris McNamara: And as part of that, I started learning about these trail organizations. And to oversimplify it, there's a lot of rural communities that have been totally transformed by a brewery and a really great trail system. And it seems to be like the low-hanging fruit of how you bring economic development to an area that formerly had an industry like logging or whatnot, and the industry evaporates, and there's this giant hole in the economy. And time and time again, the low-hanging fruit solution, or at least one part of the solution, is to build world-class sustainable recreation with a brewery or other businesses that then support that activity. It doesn't work if all the people eat pizza off the table, but if they're actually buying their food, it all comes together. And so that became a big passion, thinking about how trails could transform communities. And I'd been exposed to a lot of people who are really good at fundraising, and a lot of these trail communities are horrible at fundraising because they're just getting started. And so I realized that I could maybe play a role in helping them kind of achieve their big vision.

0:53:52.9 Natalie Snoyman: I guess this makes me think, 'cause I'm thinking of the Lily Lake Trail that you helped establish very recently, which I really wanna check out one day. You've accomplished so many firsts in climbing and BASE jumping, and most recently with cycling with this trail. I'm curious how you pick your projects, and do you have any particular favorites?

0:54:21.6 Chris McNamara: Well, the big project is the first multi-use trail around Lake Tahoe. So the first trail that you can day hike and bicycle. So that's 130 miles. And so in order to do that, you need a lot of smaller projects. And so that's where Lily Lake and a lot of these other projects are — They're amazing on their own, and then they get even better when you think of them in the context of being a part of some really big, exciting thing. And so I've mostly thought through, "What would be the biggest, most exciting thing?" And then put the smaller projects into that context. That's kind of in the process. So I'm also helping — Above us is Sierra Buttes, basically all the terrain north of Truckee in the Sierra, and they wanna create this 360- or maybe 600-mile network that connects all 15 communities in the La Sierra. And so that's a super exciting big project. So I'm trying to help them do that. And then, of course, that big goal is a whole lot of small projects to get there.

0:55:39.8 Abby Wasserman: Chris, you're married to Viktoria, and you have a daughter, and are expecting a boy child, I understand, in December.

0:55:54.6 Chris McNamara: Yeah, yeah.

0:55:57.2 Abby Wasserman: When did you marry, and when did you and Viktoria move to Nevada?

0:56:08.0 Chris McNamara: So we got married three years ago, and we moved to Nevada — Well, I moved to Nevada eight years ago. I basically came to South Lake Tahoe my last year of college, which I think was 2003, and couldn't really make it stick because I just didn't connect with the community. So I kept going back and forth between

Marin and Tahoe for basically another decade, until I really got this — really felt the community and this possibility of building a great community and saw all the amazing people here. It just took a little while to piece it all together. And so kinda fully committed to being here in 2013. And then I think Viktoria and I met in 2017, and — or '16 — And yeah, South Lake Tahoe is really kind of one thing. It's just that it happens that there's a state line in the middle of it. So we found ourselves on the Nevada side, but there's nowhere in South Lake that's more than a 15 or 20 minute drive from any other spot. So it's still one small community. I think we have maybe 20,000 people, which is maybe the size of Mill Valley.

0:57:35.0 Abby Wasserman: I rock climbed for six months in my early 30s with a boyfriend. So I did go to the Shawangunks, and I was tickled that you started at Princeton and climbed in the Shawangunks and decided that that was not the kind of climbing that you were interested in.

0:57:53.9 Chris McNamara: Yeah, yeah. I was a very un-diversified climber. All I wanted to climb was El Cap. And I realized pretty quickly the Gunks are amazing, not El Cap. [chuckle] And most other people are much more balanced and diversified, but I was like, I just wanna climb El Cap. I wanna spend every second of my life on El Cap. That was then. Maybe now, I — that — I wanna develop the community around there, and instead of trails, it would be climbing. But yeah, it is a beautiful zone.

0:58:32.0 Abby Wasserman: I did want to ask about what it was like to grow up with a newspaper publisher as a father, and a mother who was handling the business side of the Pacific Sun.

0:58:42.5 Chris McNamara: Yeah. It was great. I think it really instilled in me that you could create your own destiny through business, that — So I feel lucky in that I always thought being an entrepreneur was not only on the table, but probably the preferred path. And so that was cool, seeing the community they built was super cool. And it was also — One of the things that we miss is the physical part of like, it was cool to see them actually lay out the whole newspaper physically, and then go to this really cool plant up in San Rafael where they actually printed it and had all the big rolls of paper and ink and all that. And so to this day, I think I always try to look for ways that I don't just stare at a computer all day because I appreciate how cool it is to see something actually get created, you know, physically.

0:59:50.6 Abby Wasserman: Do you have more writing projects in line?

0:59:54.3 Chris McNamara: I'm gonna definitely write books for the trails I'm working on, so I'm working on the Lake Trail, which goes around Lake Tahoe, and I'm working on this trail that goes the whole length of the Sierra called the Sierra Camino. So I'll write books for those, but other than that, writing is really hard. [chuckle] And so it takes a lot of time and you spend a lot of time in front of the computer, which I'm trying to limit these days 'cause I already do so much of it. And so for me, it's really more about the creativity of coming up with projects. And obviously, some writing is always

involved with those, but for me, it's much more throwing 100 ideas against the wall and then finding 10 of them where there is some other really — Some other person that I really respect, who I'm really inspired by, that wants to collaborate.

1:00:55.5 Natalie Snoyman: I think this is probably a good question to wrap up with, because you've touched on it several times, this idea of community. And you've authored or co-authored several guidebooks, and I think these guidebooks — I happen to have one right next to me. [chuckle]

1:01:14.3 Chris McNamara: Alright, look at that!

1:01:15.4 Natalie Snoyman: I'm planning a trip. So the guidebooks, the Touchstone Gyms, coupled with OutdoorGearLab, demonstrate this desire to share the outdoors, make it more accessible. And I'm curious if you can talk about your approach to making the outdoors a friendlier place and establishing community? And can you talk about why that's important to you and your approach to it?

1:01:43.7 Chris McNamara: Yeah, well, I'm a huge believer in sustainable recreation. Yes, a place can be loved to death, but I'd say overall, we're under-investing in having people to get outside and be able to relate to the outdoors in a sustainable way. And probably one of the key moments was a friend made this documentary on David Brower, and I watched a key part of that movie — of David Brower's life — was realizing too late that the Glen Canyon was gonna get dammed and that basically the reason, to oversimplify it, was there was no constituents. It wasn't on his radar; it wasn't on a lot of people's radars. And that there was gonna be a lot of other amazing public resources, and just the environment in general, that wasn't gonna get saved or was gonna be mined or flooded if there wasn't a group of people who loved it and who got to use it in a sustainable way, and so — That was a big moment, and then the other big moment was just seeing the trail building community, where the climbing first ascent community, it's much more about yourself and then you go and put up a route and then you hear it later like, "Oh, someone actually enjoyed it."

1:03:09.3 Chris McNamara: Trail building, it's all about coming together to build the trail, then there's ongoing maintenance of the trail and it's all happening with a group of people, and I saw that in Tahoe, that was really kind of one of the backgrounds of the entire community, was all these people coming together to build sustainable recreation together. So combining those two things — that David Brower moment, and seeing sustainable recreation creation in front of my eyes — it just got me totally passionate about being a part of that, and to me, it's just the ultimate winning combination. Sure, there are some challenges to it that arise here and there, but overall, I've seen more or less nothing but positivity that's come from building an outdoor community, through educating people on how to responsibly use the outdoors, and then actually making trails and routes. I think back to my friend who was like, "All you need to do to revive a community is trails and brew pubs," it is in a sense that simple, 'cause the whole process brings so many people together, and I think — There's a lot of challenges in the world,

but I think for sure top of the list is people not being able to really collaborate and seeing each other as adversaries, and so I'm always looking for those things that bring people together.

1:04:50.4 Natalie Snoyman: Yeah, yeah. I have a lot of respect for what you do as a community builder and what you've accomplished over your career. It's really amazing.

1:05:00.9 Chris McNamara: Thank you.

1:05:04.6 Natalie Snoyman: Is there anything we haven't touched on that you would like to share? Either about growing up in Mill Valley or —

1:05:13.4 Chris McNamara: No, I just felt really lucky to grow up in Mill Valley, it's just surrounded by year-round beauty, which today I always try to escape Tahoe in the snow — It's — [chuckle] So I love going back to Mill Valley in the middle of winter and just being like, "Oh my gosh, it's so nice and warm here." But beyond that, just the people, the opportunities — from Boyle Park to the whole trail system there — I just felt so lucky to be just kind of inundated in that, and so, and that's kind of — And of course, felt so lucky to have my parents, who not only were amazing loving people, but then sent me on this whole trajectory of, "You can create your own business, your own future." Were very supportive of that, even when I was doing crazy things like taking my brother at El Capitan, they just hung in there, and crazy things like learning to BASE jump, and so — Yeah, I've said it before, it wasn't cool when you're in high school to be like, "My parents are my best friends," but they always were. And so I felt like between them and growing up in Mill Valley, it kinda set me up on my trajectory, and things would have turned out a lot different had those not been there.

1:06:38.9 Natalie Snoyman: Yeah, I guess now you're a dad, you're gonna be dad a second time around, do you have ideas for how to introduce your kids to the outdoors and enjoy nature and be adventurous?

1:06:53.2 Chris McNamara: Well, to be honest, that's why I love Tahoe so much, as it's 90% open space. Not that Marin doesn't have its share of open space, but literally behind me, you can go — You could backpack for a week and never see anyone, and so it's just so immersive being outdoors with my daughter and my wife, and I'm sure with my son, and it's just — That's what's so great about this community, is everyone's doing things and has their different day jobs, but then you're just always outdoors. And because it's a small town — which I've learned, I just love small towns — you just are always running into friends, and those two things are, I think, just kind of the daily magic of being here. And that's what's magic when I go back to Mill Valley is running into people I've known for 30 years now.

1:07:58.0 Natalie Snoyman: Well, I think that's— Those were all my questions. Abby, do you have anything you'd like to ask before we part ways?

1:08:09.2 Abby Wasserman: No, I just have — It has just been such a pleasure, and I know your parents and I have worked with your father —

1:08:15.5 Chris McNamara: Oh, cool.

1:08:16.1 Abby Wasserman: — as editor to writer, and I have great respect for them. And thank you so much.

1:08:25.6 Chris McNamara: Yeah, my pleasure.

1:08:26.2 Abby Wasserman: My very, very best wishes to you and to Viktoria, and to your boy-to-be and your girl.

1:08:32.6 Chris McNamara: Thank you.

1:08:34.1 Natalie Snoyman: Thanks, Chris.

1:08:34.4 Chris McNamara: Alright, well, this has been wonderful. I am excited. And we'll talk soon.