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Section 2  
PLEASANTON WEEKLY

# Living

INSIDE

Real Estate . . . . . 33  
Open Home Guide . . . . . 37

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## Moving forward, one step at a time

A father's journey through grief benefits other teens



Courtesy Joe Goulette

Joe Goulette prepares to summit Mt. Shasta during a three-day trek in June. The trek was a way for Goulette to commemorate his son Cameron Mitchell-Goulette who died in a car accident last November.

by Elizabeth Campos Rajs

On his 49th birthday, Pleasanton resident Joe Goulette was 200 feet from the summit of Mount Shasta, perched on an incline aptly named Misery Hill, when he momentarily doubted whether he had enough strength left to make it to the top.

Although it was only mid-morning, he and his climbing partners were fatigued from rising at 2 a.m. for the eight-hour climb straight up the west face of one of California's highest peaks. The odor from a nearby sulfur plume, combined with the lack of oxygen, didn't help.

"There was not enough ice for the crampons to hold and the wind was gusting at 75 miles per hour," said Goulette, a life-long backpacking and camping enthusiast.

"Above 13,000 feet, there's not a lot of oxygen to help out your enthusiasm."

But after a brief pause, memories of his oldest son gave him the motivation he needed to forge on. Cameron Mitchell-Goulette, who died in a single-car crash last November at the age of 17, was tough and "would have been there every step of the way," Goulette said recently, recalling his three-day climb in June.

Reaching the 14,162-foot summit a short time later was bittersweet. His elation at summiting Mt. Shasta was tempered by grief for his son, who had intended to join him on the climb. Stepping away from his climbing group for a few moments, Goulette commemorated his achievement and honored his son by scattering a small amount of Mitchell-Goulette's ashes. At the same time, he found

a souvenir—a small rock—to bring home to his youngest son, Ross, 14.

"There were no secrets waiting for me up there. No knowledge that I couldn't find at my kitchen table," Goulette said. "But what this climb did do for me is remind me that this is how I have to go forward, one deliberate step at a time."

When Goulette, a licensed general contractor who specializes in home remodeling, initially signed up last fall for the organized climb up Mt. Shasta, it was to raise money for Big City Mountaineers, a nonprofit organization that provides outdoor experiences for at-risk, urban teens. Backpacker Magazine's "Summit for Someone" is a series of guided climbs throughout North America supporting Big City Mountaineers.

As he read about the effort, Goulette

fondly recalled a six-day, 40-mile journey through Yosemite he had made several years earlier with 12 middle-school children from Harvest Park Middle School. Only his son, Cameron, and two others had ever been backpacking before that trip. The experience of seeing teenage boys, separated from all their electronics and their friends, enjoy nature was a memorable experience.

"The kids liked hiking. Kids we had to peel away from their cell phones and computers, were asking to hike on trails no one else was on," Goulette recalled. "It was a really cool transformation. That's why this attracted me."

With that in mind, last October he pledged to raise \$3,500 to Summit for Someone and signed up to climb Mt. Shasta. When

(continued on page 22)

## Climb

(continued from page 21)

Cameron heard about his dad's benefit climb, he was eager to join him. Goulette has been taking his boys hiking and backpacking since they were preschoolers, teaching them to respect and enjoy nature.

"Both boys would always go camping or fishing with me. It's always been common safe ground for us," he said, adding that his wife always joined them for one hike a year. "You can't extract them from the web of computers and phones until you get in the wilderness."

That his oldest son wanted to climb Mt. Shasta with him was particularly significant because Cameron's teenage years, starting at the age of 15, had been turbulent. Too smart for his own good, according to Goulette, his son started getting into trouble in all aspects of his life. He passed the high school equivalency exam at 16 and left home. The ensuing year remained difficult.

"Throughout those two years, we always ended our conversations with 'I love you,'" Goulette said. "It wasn't hatred (that made him act out). It was teenage angst in conflict with parental concern. He had to go out and do these things."

Shortly after he turned 17 last July, however, Cameron was ready to start fresh and came home.

"In the fall, things started mellowing out. He was working with me and another contractor, he had a girlfriend and he was living at home. He started talking about taking classes at Las Positas to become a mechanic," Goulette said.

The family had a joyous Thanksgiving together, but just two days later, Cameron was driving home from his girlfriend's house in Discovery Bay when he was killed in a single-car crash on Vasco



Courtesy Joe Goulette

Joe Goulette and his sons Cameron (left) and Ross (right) enjoyed hiking in the outdoors together. Here the three hike through Yosemite with the view of Half Dome behind them.

Road. There were no witnesses and no explanations for the accident. "Why?" is the unanswered question that haunts both his parents.

Grief-stricken, Goulette understandably lost interest in the three-day climb. He planned to skip the climb and write a check to cover his pledge, but after sending out a few emails to friends and colleagues about the Summit for Someone program, he was taken aback. While he had hoped to garner \$3,500 in pledges, he actually received \$4,755.

"I was blown away," he recalled. "Customers, people at the gym, family and friends started donating and almost all of the gifts were in excess of \$100. I was very humbled. Much of the donating was done as a condolence or in memory of Cameron. That's when this became a memorial hike," Goulette said.

He started training in February and was prepared for the challenge when he left Pleasanton on June 14. After he descended the mountain on Father's Day, Goulette called home to share his news with his wife and son.

"Ross asked me if I made it. I told him yes, and he said he was proud of me," Goulette said.

He's now considering climbing Mt. Whitney next year.

"If I exert myself as hard as I can, that's what gets me through the day. Idleness is very tough for me still," he said. "The climb was refreshing because it's very deliberate." ■

### Summit For Someone

Visit <https://ssl.charityweb.net/bcm/summit07/joegoulette.htm> for more information on Joe Goulette's climb.

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