

INTO THE TRIBE

Joshua Tree lifers establish new roots at a lost soul's earthly home

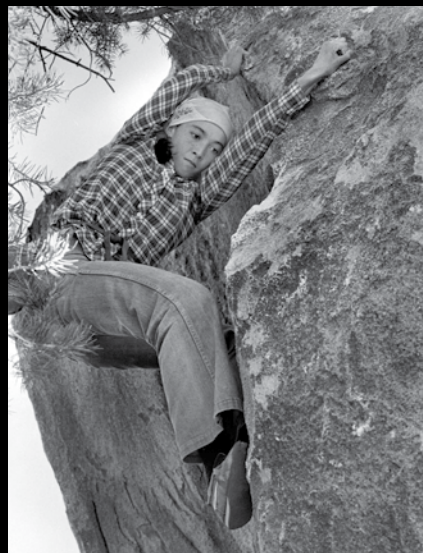
BY EMILY MEG WEINSTEIN
PHOTOS BY DEAN FIDELMAN

Howard cut the power. He chopped the lines and left two live wires in the sage.

Howard wasn't well—hadn't been for some time. He'd long ago cut off the water. He dug up 500 feet of waterline from the road to the house, cut it into perfect three-foot lengths, and stacked them neatly across the road. He uprooted and dumpstered the neighbors' cacti, believing it to have been planted by aliens. Cut off from power and water, he locked himself in the house and lived on instant oatmeal—until he couldn't.

When I asked one area climber if Howard took his own life, he replied, "I think he just-expired."

Opposite page, from the vault: Mike Lechlinski (top left); Mari Gingery (top right); Gingery on a Bachar Ladder (middle left); Lechlinski and John Bachar (middle right); Roy McClenahan (another peer, on left) and Lechlinski goof, and John Long (on right), so-called "scribe of the tribe," ponders (bottom left); Gingery bouldering (bottom right).





Gingery and Lechlinski tried to help their neighbor Howard. After his death, they infused life into the old house.

And that's how the lifelong climbers Mike and Mari came to own Howard's house, in Joshua Tree, California. Over the next few years they would breathe new life into the house, turning it into a place where climbers—a group that has always harbored its fair share of lost souls—congregate, rally and find their kindred.

OUT THE HASH

I often refer to Mike Lechlinski and Mari Gingery as my Jedi Stonemasters. The Jedi part, I added. The other name, Stonemasters—that band of visionary Southern California climbers from the 1970s, documented in the writings of John Long—they already were.

When I met Mike and Mari six years ago, they were living the dream, homesteading on the edge of a lifetime of climbing. Since Mike retired from his job as a dockworker in 2005, and Mari from her job as a microbiologist in a UCLA lab in 2014, they have lived full-time in the house they bought in 1988, on five acres in a subdivision between the town of Joshua Tree and the West Entrance to Joshua Tree National Park.

Mike and Mari met in Glendale, a suburb of Los Angeles, in 1972, when Mari was 16 and Mike was 19. Mike's friend was supposed to take Mari to the prom, but changed his mind and asked another girl. The friend asked Mike to take Mari. As Mike says, they've "been hanging out ever since."

Mike and Mari have never married, but they've been together far longer than most married couples. They wear no rings, but

The many links in climbing history between adventure and tragedy made me ponder the fine line between genius and madness.

their climbing gear is engraved with the letters M & M.

Prolific first ascensionists in Southern California and beyond from the late 1970s well into the 1980s, they mostly developed routes in Joshua Tree, where one of their many FAs is the bold, sustained classic *Black Diamond* (5.12a), done with Tom Gilje, and another is the 5.11 R *Big Moe*, with Bachar (tr'd, then Bachar later soloed it). In the Needles, they put up routes like *Terrorvision* (continuous 5.11 PG13), with other FAs at Tahquitz, where they passed the slick Stonemaster entrance exam *Valhalla* (5.11a). They made early pilgrimages to Hueco Tanks, Red Rocks, American Fork, City of Rocks and the then-deserted Canyonlands. In Yosemite, they bagged one of the first *Nose-in-a-day* ascents. Among many other routes on the Captain, Mike climbed *The Shield* with John

Long, and Mari and Lynn Hill completed that route's first all-female ascent.

Long says: "Mike and Mari were a force—together and individually. They were part of a core group of Stonemasters who climbed everything from grainy Josh highballs to multipitch. Both had freakish talent and world-class lead heads, and they put up many of the routes you read about in trip reports that get 50,000 hits. And they did it by stealth. No cover photos, articles, do-si-do."

They lived in a series of Volkswagen vans, and for a time, a shack in La Cañada Flintridge, west of Pasadena. The house in Joshua Tree was the final upgrade, from the blue Vanagon.

Among the abundance of old stories I've absorbed at their kitchen table is that of the iconic Joshua Tree route *Hot Rocks* (5.11c). According to Mike, the three So Cal climbers John Long, Richard Harrison and Ging Gingrich first aid climbed it in 1973. In 1979 some Coloradans came to try to free it. When they didn't succeed the first day, Long hung a top rope on it. Mike, lacking the era's new sticky-rubber climbing shoes, was wearing Gallenkamp Seat tennis shoes, which he preferred to the old EBs, the era standard. By switching the shoes to the wrong feet, he freed the line on top rope. John Bachar freed it next, also on top rope, following that up, after a few laps, with his famous free solo the same day. But the story doesn't end there. One of the Colorado hopefuls had lost his sticky-rubber shoes, which John "Yabo" Yablonski found and traded to Mike for some hash. The Coloradan found Mike and promptly repossessed the shoes. In the end, Bachar got credit for the first free ascent, and Mike was out the FFA, the shoes and the hash, with which Yabo had already dispensed.

Nonplussed, Mike says, in the end, "It all becomes one giant ascent."

Mari adds, "It all blends into one big bowl of experience."

THE OLD DAYS

The stories of the old days are a roller coaster of glory and tragedy. A tale of improbable adventure often ends with the phrase, "That guy's dead now"—some by natural causes, but many tragically early, and a number by their own hands. Tobin Sorenson, one of the great all-around talents of the era, died soloing the North Face of Mount Alberta in 1980.

"Tobin was the first to master the stone," said Mike.

"He climbed *Valhalla* first?" I asked.



The Joshua Tree
fixtures Mari Gingery
and Mike Lechlinski.



Lechlinski establishing the mega classic *Black Diamond* (5.12a), done with Gingery and Tom Gilje.

Mike said, “He climbed everything first.”

A memorial to John Yablonski, a tormented soul who survived many bold solos but committed suicide in 1991, stands on the mesa behind Mari and Mike’s house. John Bachar died in 2009 while soloing, on a route he had done many times before.

The many links in climbing history between adventure and tragedy made me ponder the fine line between genius and madness. Maybe that’s why Mike and Mari were able to tolerate their unhinged neighbor for so long. They were acclimated to the brilliant and unstable.

I met the Jedi Stonemasters in my first California spring, in 2011. That summer, having lived my first three decades in New York, I visited Yosemite and then abruptly moved West, to change my life. Six months later, when my New York friend Joni visited her retired parents in Palm Springs, I picked her up and drove out to explore Joshua Tree, arriving just in time to snag the last empty campsite in the Hidden Valley Campground. As I was setting up, a man wearing granny glasses and a tie-dyed headband paused while striding past our picnic table, and asked if we wanted to go on an adventure.

The man was John—Mendo John, from Mendocino. He outfitted us with shoes and harnesses and took us to a parking lot and picnic area across the main road, where we met up with a few other guys of indeterminate age. John looked like he could potentially be 40 (he was actually about to be 50). There were some younger guys, who somehow looked ancient, and another possibly older

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guy, who also looked weirdly young. The latter was Mike Lechlinski.

They led us down a trail into a maze of rocks, until we arrived at a shady spot where Mike placed a speaker on a boulder at the base of a 5.10b called *Run for Your Life*. The boom box was playing speed metal while one of the younger guys led up, but when Mendo John tied me in, the music changed abruptly to the 10,000 Maniacs song, “These Are Days.”

I had played that song, and the album it was from, “Our Time in Eden,” obsessively in junior high school. On summer nights I would lie down on the asphalt of my dead-end suburban street and dream of a world beyond.

*These are days you’ll remember
Never before and never since, I promise,
will the whole world be warm as this*

*And as you feel it, you’ll know it’s true ...
you are touched by something that will grow
and bloom in you.*

I hadn’t heard the song in almost 20 years, but as I touched my fingertips to the warm monzogranite, it was like being hypnotized, or pulled outside of time.

Trust the system, Mendo John said. *You’re safe.*

We couldn’t really climb it, but for a few moments, we hung on. The group next took Joni and me to the Thin Wall, so we could top something out, and that night we sat around a fire to which we contributed our six-pack of Corona Light.

“Next time,” John said, “bring Sierra.”

“We are conquistadores of the useless,” Mike said with a grin. “Some people waste their whole lives climbing rocks.” The way he said it, it sounded like the opposite of a waste.

The next morning, Joni said we had to go. “We have to leave immediately,” were her exact words, “or I will lose touch with everything else in life that matters to me.”

I thought she was being dramatic, but now, six years later, she has a husband, two children, and an apartment in Brooklyn, and I have—a van.

WE FIND OUR TEACHERS

I kept coming back: to Joshua Tree, Yosemite Valley and Tuolumne Meadows, where Mike and Mari took me solo-scrambling across Lamb Dome looking for the start to *On the Lamb*, a 500-foot traverse that we ended up climbing backwards.

I never knew why they took me in. Once, when I tried to thank Mari for teaching me, she just said, “We find our teachers.”

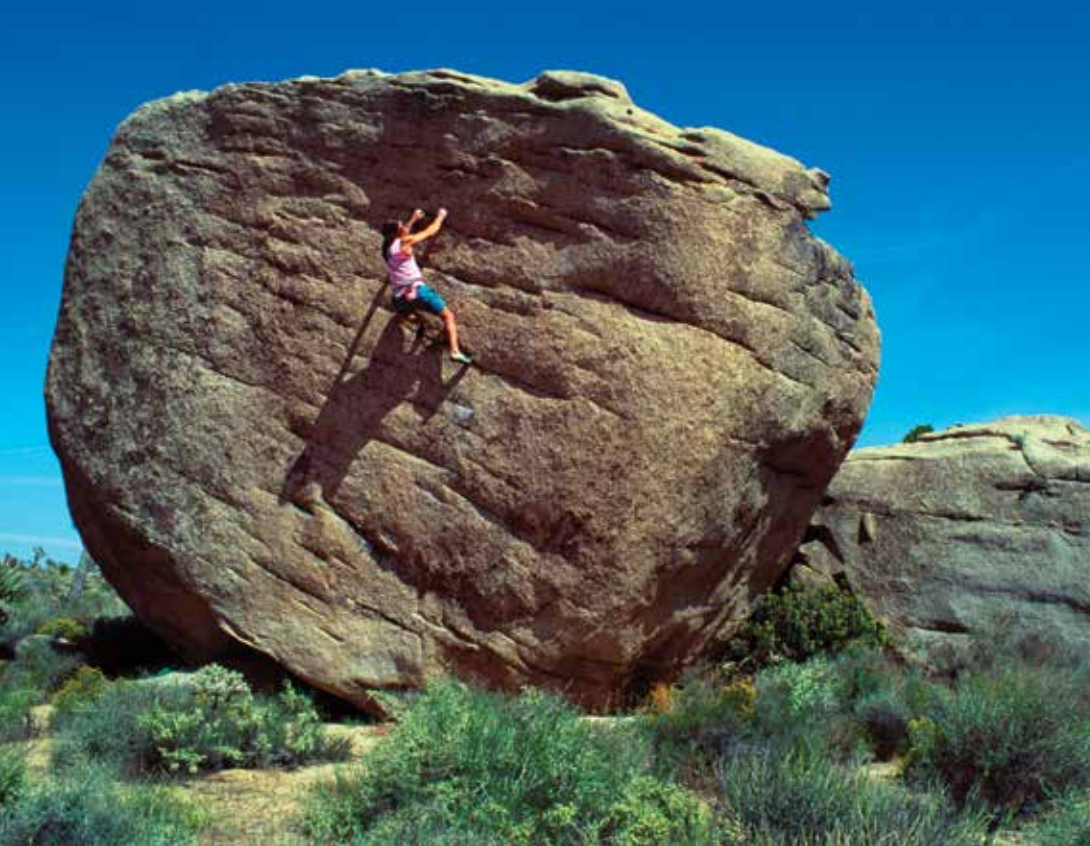
She said later, “When it’s all said and done, you’ll hardly remember the climbing. You’ll remember the people.” But Mike has told me many times, “I climb to escape society.”

For me, it turned out to be both—escaping and seeking at the same time.

ALIEN SPORES

Howard sought. When they found him, Howard had laid out three old magazines on the kitchen counter, open to articles about “The Universe,” “The Multiverse,” and “The Myth of God.”

Authorities found a locked safe in the bedroom. The county sheriff wanted to bring in a crew to crack it, but Mike, who builds and sculpts out of metal, wood, stone, glass



Archival shot of Lechliniski on the 26-foot *Slashface* (V3).

and concrete, has plenty of tools. He told the sheriff, “I’ve cut through some pretty rad metal,” got out his Sawzall, and was in the safe in minutes.

According to Mari, the safe contained records of numerous bank accounts, some containing millions of dollars; ledgers with records of property Howard owned; handwritten GPS coordinates of artifacts and petroglyphs in the national park; a roll of silver dollars; and a stack of hundred-dollar bills.

The will was executed, and Howard’s brother became a rich man. Eighteen months later, Mike and Mari bought the whole property. If they fixed the place up and rented it out on Airbnb, their neighbors could be more carefully chosen—and temporary.

Howard wasn’t always such a difficult neighbor. As of 1992, when Howard built his house, Mari observed him to be a horseman, neat and meticulous. His decline began with the passing of his mother in the late 1990s, after which Howard gradually became erratic. Around 2005, Mari says, “He first began pulling up plants in the neighborhood and burning piles in his yard. Then he started yelling at no one.” By 2010, he looked wild, “like Howard Hughes.” In 2012 he started dismantling the utilities. He died in 2014.

Mike and Mari had tried to help him. They called social services, offered to help Howard pay off the fines that had led to his car being impounded. Howard refused all help. He claimed he had government approval to dig up the cacti because of the “alien spores.” He

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ranted from his house, screaming obscenities and, repeatedly, “Liars!” Someone from county social services was due back to help—the week after Howard expired.

When Mike found the live wires lying on the property line, he almost started to coil them up, thought better of it, and called SoCal Edison. It took two callbacks, Mari says, before the company sent someone out who disconnected and removed the wires from the nearby lead-in pole, which, a week later, Howard chain-sawed down.

A HOUSE REBORN

I’ve learned a lot from just watching, listening to, and imitating my Jedi Stonemasters. Be kind. Think big. Try hard. Share your snacks. “Make the gear good” (Mike) and, “Make a plan for your feet” (Mari). “If you’re scared, place a piece” (Mike), and pay attention, because accidents are “pilot error, every time” (Mari).

“We all fear the unknown,” Mike once said, kindly, while I was struggling for patience with an angsty friend. Another time, he told me, “California is a big place, and there’s room for all of us to be ourselves.”

Now I may add to that collective wisdom: Before you touch any mystery wires in the desert, call the power company.

After Howard’s death, his house came alive.

Mike and Mari installed solar panels on the roof and a battery and a generator in the garage, and Howard’s house went off the grid. They re-wired the place, replaced all the plumbing lines and fixtures, repainted the walls, refinished the floors, and remodeled the kitchen. They tested clay paint colors on an interior wall to see which ones went best with the desert light. They stripped the popcorn ceilings, replaced the window frames, and changed all the lighting fixtures to LEDs. They installed a propane tank and supply lines, and swapped the electric range for propane and the water heater for a tankless version. In the backyard, they built a hot tub out of a knee-high galvanized steel horse-watering trough heated by a submerged, patented Scuba Stove, with a wall of floating beer bottles for a privacy shield. Mike replaced the native plants Howard had dug up with his own sculptures of rusted found metal and locally sourced granite.

When I heard how Howard had let himself go, I wondered if the salvation of communion with nature, man or woman could have brought him back to life, though he sounded pretty far gone. To me the saddest thing about madness is the way it cuts its victims off from others and, eventually, the world, trapping them inside themselves. We are all seeking the right balance between solitude and community, but we need to stay connected—and to want to live. That was the other thing climbing taught me.

“You’d be amazed by how much you want to live,” Mike once mused. “*So just hold on!*”

Just hold on, I will myself, when I am slipping off an edge either real or imagined. But Howard let go.

Howard’s house became part of a

community that spanned the whole world, especially our corner of it. The crew had always congregated at Mike and Mari's on days too rainy or windy to climb. We'd sit at the kitchen table and swap stories, check out climbing gear Mike and Mari had devised, pore over climbing magazines from the 1970s, ask advice on routes, or wander the property admiring the koi pond or the greenhouse or the orchard. Local crushers with names like "the Fish" would stop by.

Now we all started hanging out at Howard's house instead. We placed our beer offerings (Sierra, always Sierra) in the new solar-powered Frigidaire, and piled the empties in Howard's old garage. We chatted, snacked and drank beer around the table in Howard's living room. Instead of paying to shower at the Coyote Corner in town, we took Howard Showers. I like to think we were changing the energy of the place, making it new and breaking it in for the paying guests.

On a cold afternoon between Christmas and New Year's, Mike filled up the hot tub, and we all took turns soaking. As everyone

else headed into town for pizza, I got in last.

I lay in the tub in the dusk, watching the lights of the crew's vans and trucks as they crossed the round bowl of the little valley. Howard's soul had been troubled to a degree that could not be soothed by a hot bath, a cold Sierra, a starry desert night, a buddy's wisecrack, or the promise of pizza.

The clouds parted to reveal the first fingernail of newly waxed moon, pale and sharp as a scythe.

"Are you out there, Howard?" I asked the dark.

SAVIOR OF MYSELF

One day in the spring of 2013, I took a half-dozen whippers on a 5.8 called *The Flue* on Chimney Rock. Mike held the rope and talked me out of the cave below the crux. It took me the better part of the afternoon, so long that they switched belayers. The peanut gallery grew as the day progressed. John's girlfriend at the time made and served them all guacamole. Finally, I trusted the slippery foot and tipped my weight over it to pull the crux.

I was 33—it was my Jesus year. That day, I learned to be a savior. Not of the world, but at least of myself. What happened 20 or 500 feet off the deck was solitary, but not lonely. You shared it with people—the friends and teachers who gave belays, advice, encouragement. You faced the unknown alone, but with a strength you drew from connection.

That night, by the fire, the Jedi Stonemasters raised their Sierras to me. The trust and camaraderie that flowed through the small circle were what Howard didn't have or couldn't allow himself. Howard had gone out still trying to make sense of The Universe, the Multiverse, the Myth of God. But those elusive concepts were somehow all there, in the fading desert light and the flames of the fire, in the faces of my friends and heroes. Howard was beyond salvation, but I still had a chance.

Emily Meg Weinstein lives on a houseboat in the San Francisco Bay, and roams in her second home, the Free Ford Freestar.

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