

Missing Mom of 4's Remains Discovered 20 Later, and Now Her Nephew Is Helping Give Back to Those Who Found Her

"It was very, very brutal to lose her," says Ethan Whitson

By

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Michelle Vanek.Credit :

Colorado Bureau of Investigation

NEED TO KNOW

- Ethan Whitson, a 26-year-old software company founder, is running a 100-mile race in the Rocky Mountains in honor of his aunt
- In 2005, Michelle Vanek went missing while hiking the Mount of the Holy Cross in Colorado and her remains were found almost two decades later
- "It's a very complex relationship, knowing the dangers of it firsthand," Whitson says of his love of the outdoors

A young man is running a 100-mile race in the Rocky Mountains in honor of his aunt, whose remains were found almost 20 years after she went missing on the Mount of the Holy Cross.

On Saturday, Aug. 16, Ethan Whitson will join the Life Time Leadville Trail 100 RUN to fundraise for the Vail Mountain Rescue Group, which [discovered his aunt Michelle Vanek's remains](#) long after the family

had lost hope that she would be found when she disappeared while hiking the 14,009-foot mountain in Colorado in 2005.

“She was an unbelievable woman, just extremely kind,” Whitson, who was 6 when Vanek vanished, tells PEOPLE in an interview. “It was very, very brutal to lose her.”

Not only does Whitson want to raise money for new rescue gear for the organization, through a [GoFundMe](#) page, he also hopes to spread awareness about how to stay safe while engaging in recreational activities.

“The outdoors is kind of like my personal church. I've always loved spending time outside,” says the 26-year-old founder of [The Guide Network](#), a company that provides software solutions for outdoor guides.

He adds, “It's a very complex relationship, knowing the dangers of it firsthand.”

Vanek was 35 when she set out to hike the Mount of the Holy Cross with a partner on Sept. 24, 2005. A mother of four children, whose ages ranged from 1 to 16, she began to feel ill, prompting the pair to separate.

Her partner continued to the summit while she was supposed to turn back, [CBS News](#) previously reported.

Her loved ones never saw her again.

“It was probably the most jarring experience to have happen as a kid — definitely for not only myself, but my cousins, her kids,” recalls Whitson, who remembers watching his family on TV as an extensive search effort was underway.

About 800 people looked for Vanek for eight days, according to the GoFundMe page. Despite that “massive” effort, there was no sighting of her.

Since 2005, the local Eagle County Sheriff’s Office had kept the search map for Vanek up on a wall. “It’s always in the back of people’s minds,” says Whitson of the impact of his aunt’s case on local law enforcement and other hikers.

Almost two decades later, a father and son found a boot in a different local area that hadn’t been as extensively searched all of those years ago, Whitson says. “[That] kind of reignited the search that had been dormant.”

A DNA test confirmed it belonged to Vanek.

After the discovery of the boot, Scott Beebe, the board president of Vail Mountain Rescue Group, had a dream in which Vanek told him she wanted to be found by a group of women.

That prompted Beebe to organize an all-female search team.

In September 2024, [the sheriff’s office announced](#) that items believed to belong to Vanek — a backpack, pieces of clothing and hiking poles — were found on Mount of the Holy Cross.

“These personal belongings, though weathered by time, offer a glimpse into her final moments on the mountain,” the Eagle County Sheriff’s Office said at the time. “Each item serves as a reminder of the strength of the human spirit, the unwavering dedication of these volunteers, and the enduring hope of a family waiting for answers.”

Vanek’s remains were discovered and, later that September, positively identified, her nephew now says.

Whitson learned the news through a family group text after he regained cell service while at a ski resort. He remembers “bawling” his eyes out.

“It was honestly just incredibly shocking,” he says, emphasizing his gratitude for organizations like the volunteer Vail Mountain Rescue Group.

"Aunt Michelle will live in our hearts forever," he says of how he and the rest of her family felt after learning that she'd been found. "We're just all very relieved that there's an end to the story."

Over the past 20 years, the memory of his aunt has stayed with him. In 2020, when he was just 21 years old, he recreated the hike Vanek went on with the help of an experienced guide.

“Looking around at the whole entire landscape from both sides, I just thought there’s endless possibilities of what could happen to a human being in here,” he told [The Vail Daily](#) at the time.

Now, five years later, as he prepares for the ultramarathon race, Whitson hopes people will continue to enjoy the mountains that he — and his aunt — love so much. But he urges hikers to take safety precautions and stick together, too.

“Mountains don't move, and it's always okay to turn around,” he says. “There's always going to be another day when you can go summit a mountain.”

<https://people.com/missing-hikes-nephew-honors-those-who-helped-find-her-remains-years-later-11788942>