

Julie Brown:
the strong woman behind
the late Dixie Dansercoer.

Julie Brown is the wife of the famous Belgian polar explorer Dixie Dansercoer who died on June 7, 2021 during an expedition in Greenland. Julie has participated in polar expeditions herself, mainly as a project manager, and founded the company Polar Circles/Polar Experience with her husband. She also writes and gives lectures. Now that the love of her life is gone, she is looking for ways to honor his legacy in a meaningful way.



Julie Brown

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Society needs that.”

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We head to hilly Huldenberg for an encounter that will always stay with us. Julie is disarming in all her openness. During the conversation she switches between Dutch and English. Her Dutch is excellent, but she is someone who weighs her words and chooses the language that best expresses her thoughts and feelings.

You are an American, but you have lived in Belgium for a long time.
I have lived in Huldenberg for 26 years and now have dual nationality. I was born in Detroit in 1964, but lived in Perrysburg, Ohio since I was 9 years old. For me, that is my hometown. We were a typical, traditional American family: my father sold car parts and my mother managed a household of five children. I studied to be a teacher and stood in front of the classroom for three years. I taught English and history to first-year secondary students. I loved teaching and the children, but I couldn't get used to the system. Through a friend who worked at Delta Airlines, I got a job as a flight attendant, something that suited me much better. I worked at Delta Airlines for ten years and then at Sabena for three years.

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Dixie Dansercoer and Julie Brown

At Sabena, you met Dixie.
That's right. He was a steward. We first met in 1997 during a briefing. We got on well immediately. He was recently divorced, I was recently divorced, so we were kind of in the same boat. Love grew from that friendship. A month and a half after our first meeting, we were a couple. I didn't know at the time that Dixie was such an adventurer. He had told me casually that he was going to take a trip to Antarctica, but I didn't really realize what that entailed exactly. It wasn't until I saw him and Alain Hubert give a press conference and heard them talk about their South through the Pole Expedition that I realized that it was a lot more than just a little trip. The two of them were instantly famous. From then on it became clear that Dixie would continue to focus on expeditions. He took a five-year career break starting September 1, 2001. I went on maternity leave the same day. Two months later Sabena was bankrupt. A shame, but it gave us the space to further shape the expedition story.

So his adventurous spirit didn't scare you?
No, on the contrary. I admired him for his enthusiasm, his courage, his pure zest for life and his boundless energy. We were both very curious about life, albeit in slightly different ways. With Dixie it was of course much more extreme. In 1999, I accompanied him on an expedition to Antarctica. I wanted to get to know that white world of his. That trip was life changing for me. It was the challenge of my life, for Dixie it was just a vacation. (laughs) That pretty much indicates how things were between us in that area. The trip was also important to me because I wanted to find a way to assist Dixie, to add value to his life. Just being 'the wife of'... that's not my thing. I had more ambition than that. I was very proud of him, but we were partners. I discovered that I had a natural ability to explain to others that Dixie's expeditions had added value for society as a whole. Adventure and discovery make

us grow as people. We need that. Not everyone is cut out to explore unknown territory in harsh conditions and continually push the boundaries. But Dixie had that passion and that talent. You have to let someone like that do their thing. Together we looked for sponsors to finance his exploration trips.

You also started a company together.

Yes, Polar Circles. We focused on two elements: the organization of expeditions, both those of Dixie himself and those in which Dixie took clients along, of course after they had been properly trained and were ready for it, both mentally and physically. In addition we gave lectures and led interactive workshops. We were mainly asked by the business world to come and talk about themes such as motivation, perseverance and mental resilience.

“Dixie always said, “It’s the days when it was hard that led to the success of the expedition.”

Those words are now a kind of mantra for me.”

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And then the tragedy that no one had seen coming happened.

On Monday, June 7, 2021, the satellite phone rang around half past eight in the evening. A completely devastated Seb Audy, Dixie's partner at the time, told me that Dixie had fallen into a crack in a glacier, a so-called crevasse. That is a deep cavity in a glacier hidden under a thin layer of ice. I never thought for a moment that things would end badly, because Dixie was trained to get out of those. That first night I monitored the rescue operation. A few hours later I was told that rescuers had found pieces of Dixie's sled about 150 feet deep, but that he himself had fallen even deeper. The gorge was estimated to be 300 to 900 feet deep, and it was impossible for them to descend any further without endangering themselves as the passage became increasingly narrow. International rescue teams suggested we try again the next day, but I knew they had already gone as far as they could and there was no hope. Nobody could grasp it. It was so unreal. The hardest part was having to tell the kids and Dixie's parents. (Dixie had three children from his first marriage and a daughter with Julie, ed.)

Dixie seemed invincible, someone who would live forever.

It was a bolt from the blue for everyone. The press and some people said harsh things such as: 'Yes, but it had to happen eventually' or 'He sought it himself'. That hurt me enormously

because it wasn't right. Anyone who knew him knew how well prepared he always was and that this was an accident, the way accidents happen. This was no one's fault. I really tried not to let those words hurt me. On the other hand, I have also received thousands of messages from people all over the world mourning his passing and writing to me about what Dixie had meant to them. The boxes are still here. I can't possibly answer all the messages, but they have helped me a great deal.

Dixie was known for always preparing his trips very well.

Absolutely! Down to the smallest detail. He trained in summer and winter and was always in top condition. Sometimes he would go and sit in a large freezer somewhere to get used to a temperature of -25 degrees. This meticulous preparation also included his materials. They always had to be perfect, and he came up with systems that others hadn't thought of. Sometimes people called him MacGyver. MacGyver was an American television series from the 1990s featuring a man who could fix and solve anything. Dixie was one of those people too. He always had all kinds of things with him, so that expedition members wondered: where on earth did that come from? What he could conjure up from his pockets was unbelievable. Dixie had an infectious laugh, a kind of giggle. I loved that. That was such a contrast to his deep, masculine voice. And that giggle kept appearing when people called him MacGyver.

Wasn't there always the fear that something would go wrong?

No fear, just awareness. Dixie had a deep respect for the forces of nature. He felt fortunate that he had been able to gain so many experiences, but he also knew that every trip carried a certain risk. He never sought danger. In some ways, Dixie was always prepared for death, and he was not afraid to die. Everything had been discussed between us. But even so... (Julie lifts her shoulders slightly). Dixie loved life in all its facets so much. He was so looking forward to becoming a grandfather, he still had so many plans and still wanted to experience so much and share it with us.

Dixie's achievements aroused so much awe in many people that they considered him a hero.

That's true, but Dixie didn't like that word. He didn't see himself that way. I think mentor suits him much better. Because that's what he was to many people. An example of when you really want it, you can make your dreams come true.



What do you think has been his greatest achievement?

(Thinks for a moment) In the past I would have said: his Arctic expedition in 2007, when he and Alain Hubert walked from Siberia across the North Pole to Greenland, a journey of more than 1,100 miles that they completed in 106 days. But now that I know the impact he has had on other people, I think his incredible ability to be authentic and genuinely care about others is his greatest achievement. He really touched and inspired so many people just by being who he was. He wasn't perfect, no one is, but he was always himself: pure, generous and always positive. I think that's great.

How have you been coping with the sudden loss of Dixie up to this point?

It has been a long and intense process. I'm actually just now coming back to life. The first two years after Dixie's death I was in survival mode. Literally surviving. During the first few weeks I rarely went outside. For the first few months I didn't even do any shopping around here. I avoided places where people knew me. Until one day I realized that was absurd. I was also hyper-aware of my responsibility to the children. I had to be there for them. I couldn't hide, I had to keep going. It was like being on an expedition: waking up in a cold tent, knowing you have to open that zip and head out into the unknown. Every day is unknown anyway. I never realized that so clearly in the past, but now I do. Of course I have days when things are difficult, when sadness weighs on me, but then I think of Dixie. During his expeditions he also had days when things did not progress, and everything went wrong. But Dixie always said, "It's the days when it was hard that led to the success of the expedition." Those words are now a kind of mantra for me.

"If I'm lucky and stay healthy, I'll have the rest of my life to do Dixie justice."

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Is Dixie still here for you?

Definitely. He is still in our lives every day. Both with me and the children and his parents. Physically he is gone, but I feel his energy is still here. I am not religious, but I am spiritual. People talk so categorically about life and death, but I don't think a person's energy can just disappear. There is a continuity of energy that we as humans cannot yet grasp and I believe love is the key. It sounds so beautiful in Dutch: 'de liefde blijft' (love remains). That was on some cards I received after Dixie's death, and I thought that message was very poignant.

What are you working on now?

I am continuing Polar Circles/Polar Experience. I am able to count on a fantastic team of talented and experienced guides. It feels good to organize trips and expeditions again. I also work with Expeditions Unlimited. This is a French company that also specializes in polar travel and expeditions in the high mountains. I also still give lectures. I notice that there is a need for positivity more than ever at the moment and that people are very interested in resilience, bouncing back, how do you move on after a setback? For the last two years I have worked for an insurance company that provided training to their employees in dealing with people who had to deal with trauma.

Isn't that very personal? Doesn't everyone deal with trauma differently?

Yes, but I can tell my own story in the most authentic way possible. It's not that I'm selling my soul, some things remain private, but there is a general trend in the lives of all people. Everyone lives, loves and loses. I realized immediately after Dixie's accident: we are not the only ones affected by tragedy. A lot of people have to go through that. I said that to the children too. Not to disguise what had happened, but to put it in a broader perspective. 'This is terrible, but there are still so many good things around us that will help us get

through it. We have shelter, food and incredibly nice people around us.' Much of what happens to us is so overwhelming, but in the end, it is just part of life. You have to move on, and you have to keep dreaming, have goals and bring some adventure into your life because what is that life if you don't?

You find it very important to shape Dixie's legacy in everything you do now.

Keeping Dixie's legacy going is in my opinion something that the world needs. It is important to experience that Dixie has not been forgotten and that his life has been inspiring. There are some great projects in the pipeline. There will be a television program 'The Expedition' in which 8 well-known Flemish people undertake the Arctic Circle Trail, a 100-mile journey in Greenland from Kangerlussuaq to Sissimut. It is not a competition or a game show, but it is really about exploration that challenges both body and mind. The children and I agreed with that concept. I never decide anything without consulting the children and Dixie's parents.

There has also been some brainstorming around a documentary about Dixie. But I think I can give myself time for those things. It really shouldn't be done in haste. It has to be relevant. I bear a great responsibility in this because Dixie himself can no longer say what he likes and dislikes. If I'm lucky and stay healthy, I'll have the rest of my life to do Dixie justice. This is how I'm going to approach it. ♦

That is a wonderful thought. Thanks for this conversation, Julie.

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Dixie Dansercoer