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February 26, 2010

Inside out

BOB KEYES

— By

Staff Writer

For this interview, Brian Irwin is standing on a mountain in New Hampshire. It's his day off from his day job as a family physician, which means he is skiing. But for Irwin, skiing is also work. He's a member of the ski patrol at Cranmore Mountain and in Mount Washington's Tuckerman Ravine.

Every Wednesday, he pulls duty as medical director on the ski patrol, and Wednesdays often are busy. It's a community ski day, which means there are plenty of accident opportunities.

"People tend to crash into trees on Wednesdays," he says, apologizing in advance if he has to cut the conversation short and attend to a casualty on the slope.

Irwin, 35, is an avid outdoorsman. In addition to his love of skiing, he is an accomplished mountaineer and fisherman. In addition to his work on the ski patrol, he is active as a search-and-rescue volunteer on two local rescue teams.

Irwin is also an accomplished writer. He's just published "Recompense: Streams, Summits and Reflections," a compilation of essays that explores the fragility of life and the inner stirring of the soul that drives and inspires us.

Irwin, who lives in Manchester, N.H., will sign copies of the book at Borders in South Portland from noon to 2 p.m. Feb. 20.

Maine figures prominently in "Recompense." Irwin spent a lot of time on this side of the border during his medical residency, and he continues to visit because he appreciates the state's outdoor opportunities.

Q: Why was it important for you to write this book and to bring this collection of essays into a tidy bundle?

A: Writing a book has been a prospect I have wanted to do for years. Looking back on the essays that I have written, I realized I have published enough magazine articles that they have common themes. I found that writing for magazines was very rewarding. However, I wanted to try to push myself to produce something more substantial and see if I couldn't springboard my career to the next level.

Q: I'm curious how your interest in medicine twines with your love of the outdoors. Did one necessarily lead to the other?

A: I think they do go logically together. Both are challenging. Both are exceptionally rewarding. My experience in the outdoors; these are areas that cause me to push myself. They are just like medicine, aspects of life that require a lot of study, a lot of practice and a lot of potential for failure, and also a lot of potential for great reward. They are the hardest things that I could find to do, and I wanted to see how well I could do it. In addition, the reward that comes along with the experiences I have in the outdoors parallels the type of reward I gain from my job in helping people.

Q: Do you recall your earliest experiences with nature as a child?

A: Absolutely. I was born in Morgantown, W.Va., and my first memory of the outdoors was playing in a stream in the woods behind my parents' house when I was 4. All my family vacations were outdoors-related experiences. When I was young child and my parents didn't have resources to go to the national parks, we went to state parks and local campgrounds. Later, as my parents became more financially stable, we took long vacations across Canada and the American West, visiting all the national parks.

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Q: Explain the thrill of climbing, and contrast that with your love of fishing.

A: I climb primarily to challenge myself and to experience nature and outdoors from a perspective from which you cannot otherwise see it. The view of the mountains, the view of the ground from high on a cliff or high on an alpine ridge is a perspective or feeling that cannot be gained from any hiking trail. Similarly, looking at the river from far away, you cannot gain the same perspective and appreciate the beauty of a stream as you can while standing in it and watching the fish move among the rocks and the water flowing around your feet. So it's a different way to gain perspective. For me, climbing is not so much about the thrill as it is challenging myself and gaining perspective. Fishing is the same thing. Both are challenging and technical.

Q: There is a lot of Maine in this book. Tell me about your love affair with Mount Katahdin.

A: That's easy to answer. Mount Katahdin is the closest thing to a giant western peak as anything we have in the eastern U.S. It's sharp and striking and dangerous. It demands more respect, more preparation and more care. It's unlike anything else in the East.

Q: It was reported recently that Mount Washington has lost its 60-year hold on its claim as the windiest place on earth. Does that disappoint you?

A: I think it's likely that higher wind speeds have occurred on plenty of places on Earth. They just haven't been measured. But I have just as much respect for Mount Washington today as I had yesterday. It is just as hard-core as it was yesterday.

Q: What drew and held you in New England?

A: I initially moved to New England because it was the most alpine wilderness-rich area still in the East. I wanted to stay in the East, because my parents were in the East. If my family was out West, I would have moved there years ago. But I stayed because when I moved here, I realized it is superior to the American West. The mountains aren't as big; there aren't any glaciers. The rock climbs aren't as long and rivers aren't as plentiful. Everything is here on a smaller scale, but closer together. Only in North Conway can you rock climb, kayak and ski in the same day. It's hard to find that kind of condensed collection of outdoors opportunities anywhere.

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