

Interviewees: The Hilleke Family: Tommy, Polly, Kelly, Daniel, Dax, Bodie

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Tommy and Polly Hilleke and their four sons describe their experiences growing up as a kayaking family and kayaking the Grand Canyon including Pearce Ferry Rapid.

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TM: So this is...?

Polly: Do you want the kids or no kids?

TM: Oh yeah! No kids?!? Are you kidding?!?

Polly: The kids are the best part, aren't they?

TM: Don't let those kids get away!

Tommy: Gonna bring them all in.

TM: So this is Friday, October 30th, 2020. This is a Grand Canyon Oral History Interview with the Hilleke family. Tommy and Polly and Kelly and Daniel and Dax and Bodie. Is that right?

Tommy: That's right!

Polly: Yeah!

TM: Okay! Cool! My name is Tom Martin and may I have your permission to record this Zoom meeting with my little recorder?

Tommy/Polly: Yes!

TM: Thank you. So, Tommy and Polly, how did you two get into kayaking?

Tommy: I started kind of right out of high school, I got a job—I'm from Alabama originally—and I started right out of high school, because I went up to the Ocoee River in Tennessee, kind of on a raft trip and it ended up, "I could be a raft guide." I thought that. So I started raft-guiding on the Ocoee and as I saw people kayaking, I thought, "Oh, I need to do that." So I got into the paddling there, and then I went to college in North Carolina and had some really good rivers close by and it just kind of took off on me. I really liked it. Got along with the sport the whole time, as Jim Snyder said.

TM: And Polly, how did you get into kayaking?

Polly: Yeah, I went to the Colorado Rocky Mountain School for high school, it's a small private school, but they do a lot of outdoor stuff. And I learned to kayak there when I was 16.

TM: Did you meet Roger Paris?

Polly: I don't know Roger Paris.

TM: He's old school! Old school. He just recently passed away, but he was an early fiberglass, 4 meter kayaker and Walter Kirshbaum, who passed away long ago, but the Colorado Mountain School has a long tradition of that. How did you meet Tommy? How did you guys meet?

Polly: Yeah I met Tommy at the Oh Be Joyful Kayak Race in Crested Butte, Colorado. I was taking pictures and he was racing. We had a mutual friend.

TM: Cool! That's fun! And then eventually you're here as parents—how did you come to the decision that you wanted your kids to be boaters?

Polly: Well I'd say that all of their names have a river theme, like Kelly's middle name is Rivers, Daniel's middle name is Calder, it's Celtic, it means from the wild water. So we're river people. Like we knew that we would raise our kids on the water.

TM: Very cool! And so, is that Kelly in the background there?

Polly: Yeah!

TM: Kelly, what do you remember about your earliest experiences kayaking?

Kelly: I didn't like it. They would take us to the pool before I could roll my kayak and I wouldn't like it. They would have to bribe us with ice cream and stuff.

TM: [Laughs] Smart parents! And then when did you have that moment when you thought, "Oh, this is kind of fun!"?

Kelly: Maybe summer of 2016 or 2017? I don't know, once I got my roll, I was suddenly like, "Wow! I like doing this, this is fun."

TM: Okay! And then Daniel, did you kind of look to your older brother and say, "Well you know, he's doing it."

Daniel: Yeah. We were always going anyway and it was a lot better to make it fun than...

Tommy: Better to roll than to swim, right? [Laughs]

TM: Do you remember when you had your "Aha!" moment, this is going to be fun?

Daniel: Pretty much a year after Kelly did.

TM: Cool! So now, Polly and Tommy, you have two kids hooked, was it easier for Dax and Bodie to get them going as well?

Polly: You know, I don't know. They both...like Bodie, there were times that I was like, "Are we doing the right thing?" He wants to go, you could tell he wanted to go, but then he'd get upset and he'd cry and I'm like, "Oh, I hope this works out!" But I would always ask him, you

know, “Bodie, do you want to go? Do you want to do this?” And he’d be like, “Yeah, I want to go!” And now he loves it. It was a little tricky there, especially with him. I think Dax picked it up pretty quick. He never complained about it, or anything. The older two boys went back to Pennsylvania, we sent them to a kayak camp.

Tommy: Riversport.

Polly: To Riversport, which the Wells, I don’t know if you know John and Cara Well. They own Immersion Research, which is a paddling company. Anyway, they got great exposure through that, with their friends. So these two just have kind of had to keep up. What do you think, Bodie? What do you have to say?

Bodie: Um, I don’t know! I didn’t like kayaking until the beginning of this year. When I learned how to roll.

Polly: You knew how to roll! You just weren’t rolling consistently. When you got your combat roll.

Bodie: I got it last year and then I swam.

Tommy: He took a swim at Warm Springs Rapid on the Yampa. At the beginning of this summer. At that point I was not really thinking he was ready for the Grand Canyon [chuckles].

Polly: Yeah and that was in June, but then the next day—so Tommy actually had to go to work, so he paddled out of the Yampa, like 25 miles or something to drive home and go to work that day. And so it was just me and the boys on the river with everybody else—you know, everyone was in rafts, but I was with the kids in the kayaks. So we had two more days on the river and he didn’t swim—it was like game on, for whatever reason the switch flipped and then that last day of rapids was pretty big—it was high water, it was June 7th.

Tommy: Split Mountain Canyon, you know...

Polly: Yeah and the kids were all over the place, I mean all four of them. They used to follow me like little duckies and now their all over surfing and in the eddies. And I came home and I told Tommy, “Oh it’s on! I need your help, because the kids are all over the place.”

TM: Cool! So I’m scratching my head here, because I’m looking at names—Kelly’s in a black hat, and I’ve got Dax in a green hat...”

Tommy: Dax is in the yellow hat.

TM: Dax is in the yellow hat, alright! So that’s where I’m confused. And then Daniel is in the green hat.

Tommy: Yeah!

TM: Alright, alright, so now I’ve got it figured out!

Polly: Dax is the smallest, not the youngest. That throws people off a lot.

TM: So then my question goes to Bodie: you’ve got three older brothers that are kayaking and Mom and Dad are kayaking, was that a real draw for you to go ahead and get into it or were you still just, “I don’t know...”

Bodie: Yeah, it was. [All talking and giggling at once]....I didn't want to swim.

Kelly: Yeah, we'd be kayaking Shoshone and he'd be paddle boarding with a kayak paddle.

Tommy: Yeah, we did that. I think that's a pretty good way to get kids into kayaking, actually. Have them sit on a paddle board and use a kayak paddle instead of the standup paddle board paddle.

TM: Dax, do you agree with that?

Dax: Using a paddle board?

TM: Yeah!

Dax: That's how I got into kayaking.

Tommy: Yeah, they learn about how to lean and leap water and ferry and stuff like that.

[Polly and Tommy talking at once]

TM: Not being a real paddle board...listen, you put me on a paddle board and I'm going to be a swimmer immediately! But I would assume that with a kayak, I stand a chance. [Chuckles] And if a paddle board was easy, a kayak—until I got my roll figured out—might be kind of easy too. Is that right?

Tommy: Yeah, probably. But the thing about the paddle board is you're not stuck inside...you fall off, you just get back on, you know? Versus the kayak, where you're upside down and if you swim, it's a big deal. Whereas a swim off of the paddle board is not that big of a deal.

TM: That's very smart, very smart. So let's go through this summer. Did you guys start with the Yampa high water or did you get up to the Salmon River first?

Polly: The Yampa was first.

TM: Yampa, okay. So this is going to become a rotating current theme and once I do it first, you guys will have it all figured out. I'll start with Kelly first. Kelly, it's the Yampa—had you run the Yampa before?

Kelly: I had not, no.

TM: So tell me the coolest thing you remember from the Yampa trip.

Kelly: Big waves! That was like—I had been to the Ottawa, but that was my first real experience with the big waves here out West. So it was cool, I loved it. Big eddy lines, whirlpools.

TM: Cool! And then I'm going to go to Bodie, just cause I'm not going to go down the age line, I'm going to jump to Bodie and go—Bodie, what was the coolest thing you saw on the Yampa?

Bodie: Well, I think my favorite part of the Yampa was when I learned to combat roll consistently.

TM: Nice! How long is your boat?

Polly: Seven maybe?

Tommy: The Remix? Yeah.

Polly: Now it's the Rerun.

Tommy: Yeah.

Polly: We don't know!

Tommy: Less than seven feet.

TM: Okay! So six to seven.

Tommy: Yeah, yeah. They also have—we did a lot of playboating this year, so Bodie paddles an extra small Jackson Rockstar. That thing is probably five and a half feet, or six feet, super short. But for the run in the rivers, we started him with a Logic Remix 47, which is probably a little under seven feet. And then we got—for the Grand—we actually hooked up with some Dagger Rewinds, which are just a little more playful, they have a lower volume stern and a flat hull, so a little better for surfing and kind of playing on the eddy lines, turn squirts and whatnot. So yeah, that's what we took down the Grand.

TM: Cool! So Dax what was the coolest thing you saw on the Yampa?

Dax: Probably the—there was this one canyon that was kind of like the Grand except there was a side height, where there was a big pool and you could climb around in the canyon.

Polly: Was that Jones Hole? I don't remember that. I have no idea!

TM: Cool! That's cool! Excellent. Alright, and let's see...Daniel, is that right? I haven't asked you, what was the coolest thing you saw?

Daniel: When we camped at Warm Springs Campground, right below the rapid. There's a giant cliff wall that was like 1,000 feet tall!

Kelly: Yeah, the tallest one in the canyon...

TM: Cool! Across the river? Yeah...beautiful, very cool! So from there, Tom and Polly, what was the coolest thing you noticed about that Yampa trip with your family?

Polly: It's just so fun...I guess I'll start, it's just so fun to be on the water with these guys, they really support each other and help each other and everybody gets along great. For me that's what it's all about. Having these shared experiences with our kids on the water and then we just see this progression in their growth and their confidence and the type of people that they are. For me, I guess that's—I mean, I just say that's with all river trips. But the Yampa, we almost didn't go, because with COVID, it was shut down June 6th. So our permit happened to be for the 7th, it was actually Tommy's mom that got the permit. And we weren't going to go—two weeks before it was kind of like, should we go? And I said, “Yes! We should go! We should go! As long as they let us go, we should go.” And that's why—because Tommy had to work, so he could only go for a couple days. But, yeah.

TM: And Tommy?

Tommy: Yeah no, I think the progression from that trip, which—when we got to—the boys were definitely paddling above what I had seen the previous year. I said, “Wow, they're really

feeling it this year!” And then just I think Bodie was super excited to run the Warm Springs Rapid. But I was kind of like—you know, it was big! It was—I can’t remember what the flow was, but I think it was 8 or 9,000. But he really wanted to run it. I was actually rowing a raft for a lot of that trip, but for that rapid, I got in the kayak and paddled with him. So that was one of the cooler things, and even though I swam, it was still like going to that place where you’re scouting the rapid and looking at the line and committing to running it and feeling out, performing. That was pretty fun for me.

TM: It’s very frustrating because you only have one shot at a lot of this stuff, and so maybe you’ll be there next year for the next 15 seconds of your life to paddle through, so you know, you do it and you get kicked off your horse, you swim back, you climb on again, and off you go. So more power to you! And then so from the Yampa, you guys headed up to the Pacific Northwest. Was that to the Main Salmon first or the Middle Fork?

Polly: Main Salmon. That was another one where our friends invited us to go, but we thought we were going to be buying this property to build a campground. And that fell through at the last minute and so I called my friend and said “Do you still have room? I now have the time, we could go!” It was like two or three days before the trip and they had room for us. So yeah, I think it was June 23rd. But it was pretty high water up there too, I think it was maybe 14,000 at Corn Creek. But it was amazing. Just another opportunity—so this time it was just me and the kids in kayaks, all five of us kayaked the whole thing and our friends rode our gear in the rafts. But yeah, it was awesome.

TM: So Daniel, on the Salmon, on the Main Salmon, what differences did you see, did you appreciate between the Yampa and the Main Salmon?

Daniel: The Main Salmon at the bottom had so much more water, all the side creeks were just flooding in—there was no flat water, it was all huge. Some of the rapids that were class three were blown out, but other ones that didn’t exist on the map were big.

TM: Because you guys are going to spend the rest of your lives boating—and I’m an old man—what you just said, Daniel, is true for Grand Canyon before the dam. It would do the same thing. It would do this spring runoff and rapids disappear and other rapids would show up in other places. That’s a really good thing to learn about real rivers that aren’t dam controlled. Very, very cool. Very cool. I’m trying to go backwards now, so I’m going to ask Kelly last. I’m going to go back to Bodie, what did you notice between the Yampa and the Main Salmon?

Bodie: That I could do a lot more than I used to before I could roll.

Tommy: You can roll now!

TM: Nice! So you could see your skills building.

Bodie: Yeah.

TM: Very sweet! Kelly, what about you?

Kelly: Like Daniel said, there was just an abundance of water. Every side creek was flowing, there was so much water. And yeah, it was just—the water was clear, so it wasn’t brown and mucky like the Yampa, it was amazing. It was great.

TM: Cool, cool. And then Dax? What was different for you between the Yampa and the Main Fork of the Salmon?

Dax: The Main was a lot—I feel like there were rapids on the Main than the Yampa. And it was—there was this one spot below Black Creek Rapid, I think is what it is called, and there were these big whirlpools that were super fun.

Tommy: Big whirlpools. Like a lot of whirlpools on the Grand, pretty fun! No shortage down there!

TM: And before the dam, those whirlpools would take your boat and they would just draw you down. And then they'd spit you out! The history of that is kind of terrifying! So how did you end up on the Middle Fork then?

Polly: So we did another Main trip in July—we did two Mains. And then we did a West Water in there too, we had a really fun summer. We had just gotten back from the Main, which was the end of July.

Tommy: That was our family trip that all of us went on together, I took off work, we did seven days on the Main.

Polly: Yeah, and I had been looking for cancellations on the Middle Fork all summer. So I was on the computer, it was our homepage, every time I would open up the computer, the Middle Fork permit was there and I saw the permit. And I called Tommy and I said, “Can we go?” It was a Tuesday and it launched on a Thursday. I really wanted to make it happen and he couldn't go.

Tommy: Because I had just gotten back to work the day before. Just had ten days off, got back to work one day—I said, “I cannot go!” [laughs]

Polly: But I was off, so said, “Well I want to take the kids and we're going to try to do a self-support kayak trip!” So I was super nervous about it, because I'd never done anything like that. Like paddling a heavy boat—and the kids hadn't either.

TM: I was going to say! Wait, I'm really curious—so you kids, did you understand the concept of a self-support then and what that would mean with your chances of having fun in a light little boat versus paddling a pig?!?

Polly: Yeah Kelly and I—tell them about that!

Kelly: So they wanted me to paddle a big boat, I said no way, I wouldn't do it. So I tried to fit everything in my play boat and it worked out.

Tommy: A little short play boat that weighed about 90 pounds!

Polly: Then he learned that it couldn't really play because it was so heavy, so hopefully we learned something! But I paddled a big long boat with a hatch in the back, so we could fit a lot of the food and the required equipment and stuff in my boat. We had done the Middle Fork as a family last year, so I felt like I knew it well enough that I knew when the big rapids were coming up and we could handle it.

TM: Yeah, cool! So then we'll go Bodie to Kelly, same question. On the Middle Fork, what was the coolest thing you saw? Now this is a self-support trip, so you've got a boat that is full of junk. What was the coolest thing you saw?

Bodie: I think that the water was super clear and there was a lot of fish.

TM: Cool! Dax?

Dax: The Middle Fork—so I liked the, yeah there was a lot of fish, a lot of fish in the Middle Fork. And the water was clear so you could see the bottom of the river the whole time. And it was just so cool because you could look down and see fish. Oh yeah, and then we hiked up this creek called Big Creek with Kelly...

Tommy: It's a tributary to the Middle Fork.

Polly: You probably rode the boat...

Dax: Yeah, well anyway, we hiked up that and ran Big Creek, which was fun.

TM: Cool! And Daniel?

Daniel: Yeah it was really cool to see the fish—I hiked up and filmed Kelly and Dax.

TM: Cool! Very fun. And Kelly?

Kelly: Probably...yeah, probably hiking up Big Creek with Dax was a really fun experience. We emptied out our kayaks to run the creek so we didn't have to hike up with all that in there.

TM: [Laughs] Cool, very fun! And then so, how did the Grand Canyon trip come about?

Polly: So after we finished the Middle Fork, it just clicked, I just thought, "Oh my gosh, they're ready for the Grand! We should try this fall!" I mean, we've been putting in for permits for a long time, but I didn't really want to go until I knew the boys were ready. And so this starting in August, I thought, "Every cancellation, we're going to put in for." And two weeks before, I want to say it was September 18th, maybe? On a Thursday afternoon, they had a call-in lottery for the next day, for Friday. And so we got all the kids lined up on the couch—got them up early—everyone has their phones and we're all sitting there, just calling over and over again. And we didn't get through! I mean, we were on the phone—well, we messed up the time a little bit...we thought it was...

Tommy: Yeah, Arizona doesn't do daylight savings time!

Polly: Yeah, so we'd been calling for an hour and nobody was there.

Tommy: Took about 45 minutes to figure that out.

Polly: We were going, "I can't believe nobody is getting through!" But Tommy's mom got through and she called us—she couldn't get ahold of me because I was still calling—but she got through on Daniel's phone and said, "There's a permit! Do you guys want to go?" And I said, "Yes! We definitely want to go!" And they knew who I was, because I had been asking them, you know, "How does this process work?" I'd been sending emails, we want to try to get on this year. Because Bodie is only going to get older. You know, "Is there anything we can do?" And

there really wasn't. Except for just getting a permit. And so we ended up getting one for the 5th of October. And we had two weeks to pull it together.

TM: Wow! So, the Grand Canyon is more of a gravitas than an actual technical river—and you guys will set me straight as kayakers. Did you have a little bit of fear and trepidation about that? Or was it like, “Yes! We’re going to do the Grand Canyon!”

Polly: I think it was like, “Yes!” It was so exciting—I mean Tommy had been there before, he’d done the self-support. And I didn’t know, I mean I definitely was nervous because I heard it was big water, I thought, “I hope everything goes ok and our kids are really ready.” But we were excited, like so excited.

Tommy: From a kayaking perspective, it’s definitely like you said, it’s not as technical obviously. But I was concerned because I really wanted to bring my parents down there as well, so I was kind of concerned about the rafts. My brother in law has rowed quite a bit—he’s done half a dozen trips as well, so he was one of our oarsmen. And then we actually had two other family friends who have quite a bit of time on the oars that have done trips down there, so they rode. We had three rafts for our 16 people, which was a little tight, but we made it work.

TM: Yeah, but you had this awesome safety team, you had six kayakers to go rescue the rafters when they go flying out of their boats! I wouldn’t be worrying at all!

Tommy: No we definitely were planning that, especially between myself and Kelly and Daniel, we actually had seven kayakers—my sister is a big kayaker as well, so she paddled. And most of the time we were perfect—but there definitely was one rapid where we were kind of—I paddled it first and got out and was going to film the rafts coming through, film the kayakers coming through, but for whatever reason, the rafts went ahead. They were going to stop, but decided not to stop—what rapid was that?

Kelly: Deubendorff.

Tommy: Deubendorff! Yeah it was the Deubendorff. And I had to have a pretty good talking to about making sure that the kayakers were down first, in case somebody fell out, like my mom. Mostly what I was concerned about.

TM: So to be clear, this is three generations of boaters on one trip right there.

Tommy: Yeah, totally!

TM: That’s pretty cool, that’s pretty cool!

Tommy: I mean, Bodie being the youngest was pretty cool, but just the whole trip was the best. It was the trip of a lifetime for all of us.

TM: So I’m going to start with Kelly and go to Bodie. Right down the line, and then we’ll go to Polly and Tommy. The coolest thing you saw on the Grand Canyon trip?

Kelly: Probably the amazing side canyons—I’ve never been in a true grotto before. The Silver Grotto was the first one that really blew my mind. It was really cool.

TM: Cool. Nice. And Daniel?

Daniel: The Little Colorado was perfect turquoise and warm. With white sand, it was awesome.

TM: Nice, nice. Dax?

Dax: I liked the Silver Grotto, that was my favorite one. Just because it was a really high canyon and it had pools of water and me and Kelly could hike up and run around in there. It was really cool.

TM: Cool! And Bodie?

Bodie: I liked the Elves Chasm hike a lot—cause we hiked up to the fourth wall and jumped off from the side and that was fun. And I also liked the Little Colorado because of the blue water and it was warm and white sand.

TM: So I've got another question for you and then I'm going to back up through your brothers again. What was the hardest thing about the Grand Canyon trip for you?

Bodie: Probably the flat water.

TM: Yes. Were you aware of that? Did anybody tell you it's like 90% flat water?

Bodie: Yeah! I wasn't expecting it to be that hard though, I was expecting it to just be paddling for a long time, but then I realized that it's hard!

Polly: Yeah, the last couple days, I think, when the water turns brown and the silt banks, yeah that was tough—I think—for all of us. There's no place to get out and hike, like really, you're not seeing a lot of wildlife because the silt banks are so high. Yeah, we were all kind of like, "This is pretty boring!"

TM: Yeah, it's miles of flat water down there!

Tommy: It was still beautiful.

Polly: Yeah, it was so beautiful.

TM: Dax, what was the toughest part for you?

Dax: Flat water. Or—yeah probably flat water, and there weren't really any hard rapids, but there was this one, Pearce Ferry rapid, below it, which was kind of hard. Like getting your mind ready for running it—it was like this little pocket thing that was apparently super gnarly.

TM: Okay, well I was going to leave Pearce Ferry for last, so I'll come back to that in a minute. I'm going to go to Daniel now—the hardest thing you had on the Grand Canyon?

Daniel: I don't know. We saw a lot of spiders and scorpions and I did not want one of those in my kayak. That was kind of scary.

Kelly: Daniel has arachnophobia!

TM: I'm with you man, I don't need those things! Cool.

Tommy: Do you remember that one day when you got bit by that ant on the toe and it was in the dry suit? That was a pretty tough day. He was...there was a lot of words going on about that.

TM: Those are wicked little bites! Those little guys, those little ants, they pack a wallop!

Tommy: Yeah, that's for sure!

TM: And Kelly?

Kelly: I don't know. The hardest part might have just been keeping sand out of my pack. It all was pretty smooth for me. I really enjoyed it, it was so much fun.

TM: Cool. Same question for Polly and Tommy—what advice would you give to other parents who want to bring their kayaking families on the river, their children on the river, what did you not have that you wished you did have?

Polly: More days!

Tommy: More time, yeah! I would definitely do—next time I'm going to do 21 to Diamond. That's the way to do it.

TM: Yeah, yeah it's racing through paradise.

Tommy: Yeah, totally...

TM: So the take out...I'm sorry, go ahead!

Tommy: I was just going to say we had one of our rowers kind of—we had a late exchange, so instead of getting to Phantom in five or six days, we did our exchange on the 8th day. Which made the top part of the river super chill, super mellow down to Phantom. But then we had a reality check after that that we had to do some huge days. Really, we had to average about 20 miles a day below Phantom to get out of there in 18 days. We did—the last couple days weren't 20 miles, but we had some—we had a 30 mile day one day and quite a few 25 or so.

TM: Yeah, and blisters?

Polly: Not really—Dax had to wear gloves because he started off with some blisters.

TM: Yeah, yeah...gloves, good idea! And then below the takeout at Pearce Ferry, that million dollar highway is there to bypass a little rapid downstream—which started out fairly mellow, a little riffle and then got a little worse and a little worse and then I flipped my dory there. You can't how embarrassing it is to flip a dory in Lake Mead National Recreation Area!

[All laugh]

Polly: Oh no!

Tommy: But I can see how it happens in that rapid, for sure!

TM: And then the rapid has recently necked way in and it's this jet of water, with this weird curler in the middle. Kelly, I'll start with you: what was your line through there?

Kelly: I tried to—I started right and went to the left and I tried to stay on top of the curler to avoid that little bottom hole. I think that was...

TM: What did you do with all that eddy water coming back at you past the little hole?

Kelly: Paddle hard!

TM: [Laughs] Yeah! And Daniel, you? What was your line, same?

Daniel: Pretty much the same, except the second time Kelly and I and Tommy ran it, the eddy line just back ended me and I wasn't ready, which was kind of weird.

TM: Wow! Very fascinating. And Dax?

Dax: That rapid at the bottom...my first time when I came through, I came into the bottom hole and went a little more right than I thought I did and I almost flipped—I didn't think I flipped, but I almost did.

Tommy: Really low brace!

Dax: Yeah. And then in the bottom, we just paddled hard out of the whirlpool.

TM: Cool. And Bodie? How was your line?

Bodie: Well I went a little bit more right than I thought I was and I kind of hit the current and almost went up against that wall, but then I made it through without getting up against that wall.

TM: Cool, cool. And then you had to carry your boats back, did you do that on river left?

Kelly: River right.

TM: River right...

Kelly: Yeah so at high water, the river goes through a channel on the right and we hiked up through that dry channel.

TM: Great! What a cool idea, it's kind of a little shortcut!

Tommy: Then we just paddled back up to the takeout.

TM: Nice, nice, awesome. This is just so wonderful for me as an interviewer to get a chance to spend some time with four brothers and their parents, who are all kayakers and ran the Grand Canyon—and then just a little icing on the cake there with Pearce Ferry Rapid. It's a wonderful thing. What's next in your future, what are you looking forward to now? Free for all, open question!

Kelly: There was talk of the Rogue and South Fork of the Salmon, so.

Tommy: Yeah, I think those are kind of the hit list for next summer, for sure.

TM: Sweet!

Polly: We'd like to go to the Futaleufu someday, go to Chile. That's on the list.

TM: There's a world of rivers out there!

Polly: Yeah!

TM: I'm curious, Kelly, what year are you in school now?

Kelly: I'm a freshman in high school. 9th.

TM: What are you thinking you want to do when you get out of school, I'm just curious?

Kelly: I'm not sure, I'm thinking maybe I'd like to raft guide down in the Grand in summers maybe and then ski patrol in the winter...I'm not sure yet. I'm still figuring it out.

Tommy: Professional dirtbag! That's kind of how I did it.

TM: Yeah! Following in your father's footsteps. That's very good. Daniel, what year are you in school now?

Daniel: 8th grade. I don't know what I want to do.

TM: Good, that's the best answer!

Polly: We'll see what Kelly does!

TM: And Dax, what about you? Any thoughts about the future?

Dax: I want to probably—well for my first job I have no idea—well actually, I kind of want to be a ornithologist and study birds. Or sell paintings and paint stuff. Or make a Youtube channel and be a pro skier.

TM: Cool! What year are you in school?

Dax: I'm in 6th grade.

TM: And Bodie, you? What year in school?

Bodie: I'm in 5th grade. And I think I'll be a ski patroller.

Tommy: Ski guide.

Bodie: Ski guide? Ski guide!

TM: Well it's a little early to be asking you and you have a lot of options in front of you, so it's a wonderful thing. Anything else you'd like to add to this before we wrap it up?

Polly: No, thank you so much! Thanks for talking to us and giving us the beta before we left.

TM: Don't thank me, I thank you! Gosh, this has just been a lot of fun.

Tommy: Back to your question about other families, do it! And do it sooner than later, you know? And take your kids down there because it's...the world—yeah. It's life changing and I want to see it protected, but it's stressful, man. There's a lot going on with the tram going down there, there's a lot of things in the works that could seriously impact it that are not good.

TM: The cool thing is the Park Service is all about "in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." And I'm staring now at this Zoom at the future generation. And you as parents are doing an incredible job of raising stewards for our National Parks. And I want to thank you for doing that.

Tommy: Thank you for saying that, that is the plan.

Polly: Absolutely, that is the plan, that is what we want to do.

Tommy: I get—I definitely get aggravated and frustrated with the permit system, but I fully understand the need for it. There was hardly anybody down there when we were down there, a handful of people. It was pretty amazing.

TM: Cool, cool. Well with that, today is Friday, October 30th 2020, this will Grand Canyon Oral History interview with this wonderful Hilleke family. My name is Tom Martin and just hang on a second, I'm going to push this button...