

Interviewee: Mike Hurndon and his son Max

Interviewer: Tom Martin

Subject: 12 year old Max just finished kayaking the Grand Canyon with his dad and others

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Tom: Today is August 28, 2017, this is a Monday. We're in the offices of the Canyon Rio offices here in Flagstaff. This is a Grand Canyon Historical Society oral interview and today we are with Mike Hurndon, and his son Max and Rick Thompson. My name is Tom Martin. We're here today because Mike and his son Max along with Rick have just returned from taking a whole bunch of kayaks through Grand Canyon. That happens you know often, especially in the summer here, except that Max happens to be twelve years old. So Max, what's your birthday?

Max: My birthday is May 5th, 2005.

Tom: Cool.

Mike: May 19th.

Max: Oh yea, May 19th.

TOM: May 19th. It's a good thing we have the voice of reason here.

Mike: He's just a little nervous, it's all good.

Tom: Nervous, aw forget it. How long have you been kayaking?

Max: Well, I got my first boat, the Dagger Dynamo, whenever I was five years old. So I've had it for a good bit. That's whenever I started flatwater kayaking. But it wasn't really until last year I started doing whitewater kayaking.

Tom: So the Dagger Dynamo when you were five. Now I'm looking at your dad, going was this something you were thinking hey this might be cool for my son to get into?

Mike: Yeah Tom. I had been into whitewater kayaking for several years prior to Max's 5th birthday. I'm very focused on things we can do not singular but more as a family. Max had his 5th birthday and I was able to find a Dagger Dynamo which is basically like a kids RPM. Which is very popular. A slicey boat but a great river runner. It obviously was big for him when he was only a mere five years old. But now, move fast forward to him being 12, it's his absolute favorite go to A boat for river play/river fun.

Tom: Cool. At what point did you think, Max, hey there's a wave over there or something a little more than flatwater that I want to get into?

Max: Last year I went to the NOC kids camp and I learned a lot there. I was in the advanced group and they helped me work on my roll 'cause I didn't really know much about rolling and I wasn't very good at it. At that point I was very comfortable in my little Hero because it was very stable and I strongly disliked

my Dynamo. After the kids camp I learned a little bit more about edging. Then after that I thought my Dynamo was much more stable. So that's what got me to start liking it.

Tom: What's edging?

Max: Like ferrying, peeling out, peeling in, making turns. Like if I were to make a turn downstream I would lean into the turn so I'd be edging my boat over.

Tom: Cool. Before this trip now through Grand Canyon, what was the longest river trip that you've done in your boat, in your kayak?

Max: It'd probably be a flatwater trip camping somewhere. I think we did like a ten mile thing one time, a ten mile paddle whenever I was like 8 maybe. It was with a few other friends and I was in long sea kayak kind of boat, a Dagger Vesper. It was really big for me, but yea that's probably the longest paddle I've been on.

Tom: And then Mike, when did you know this trip would come together?

Mike: Tom, I applied for the lottery February a year and half ago. Beginners luck first time. The first date I selected I was selected for a August 15th launch of this year, 2017. I was very probably surprised but also grateful, obviously. Initially we were going to do a kayak only self-supported trip. Rick was in on the trip at a very early date in the planning. He had done a January trip that year with Woody Callaway and the Liquidlogic group. When he asked me what date and I said August, his eyes got very large. He was in at the immediate next response. "August, heck ya," was his response. So glad to have him along. Initially when I got the permit, Max was a good kayaker but obviously not to the point where he would be considered viable to come down the Grand Canyon in his own boat. As time progressed, we started building the team, there was some discussions and somewhat input about bringing some rafts. Wanting to be kind of open to input from everyone on the team, we finally opted to bring three rafts. That immediately brought, from my perspective instead of being singularly self-focused on doing something for me, if I can do anything with my family, especially my children, that makes it not only worthwhile but also much more fulfilling.

The challenge at that point is Max's skills were increasing over the last year and I knew that he would likely be able to handle the Grand Canyon, or at least partially because we had the rafts as an option. The challenge was convincing his mother, my beloved wife, to allow or support that decision. It took about 12.75 months to convince her to finally agree to let him come down. I think she at this point knows and has seen his skills and is very confident and comfortable, so it's all glorious at this point.

Tom: Well, having gone through childbirth, your wife does not want to lose your child.

Mike: Exactly.

Tom: There's a reason why the women in the relationship are called the "voice of reason".

Mike: Sure, certainly.

Tom: So Max, you're gonna thank your mom when you get home for letting you go. 'Cause it's a big deal she did and she didn't come along with you. That means a lot.

Mike: And I was share too, Tom, when I processed this initially, coming just by myself would be very easy. I retired from the Army eight months ago after 30 years. So, a fifteen day trip down the Grand Canyon, hey that's a vacation. When I wanted to add the fact that not only responsibility but also the enjoyment in the end of my 12 year old son doing it and substantial unknown additional amount of concern or not stress. But obviously when you did the equation and here as we're sitting at the end of the trip it was really much well worth it. We'd do in one half a second given the chance again in the future.

Tom: And did you get a chance to see the change in Max in his boating through his summer camp last year?

Mike: No doubt Tom. His skills through the Nantahala Outdoor Center... He's been to now three camps there. Two standard summer camps. Then he did a advanced-only week long camp there which is in Bryson City, North Carolina. I worked there as a part-time kayak instructor for the paddle school now that I've retired from the Army, 'cause my wife told me I needed to get out of the house. But as I've seen his progression not only through my training, if not browbeating, about his kayaking skills, but also the coach teaching mentorship of the other instructors at Nantahala Outdoor Center, he has moved from a intermediate to I will say a upper level advanced paddler. Not just only for a twelve year old, but as I said many times as we were leading this trip and the people would learn we were going to the Grand Canyon, who you are going with? My standard statement was myself, my twelve year old son and twelve other arguably mature men. Meaning I wasn't worried about my son. With his paddling skill or his abilities to mesh with the group dynamics. He far exceeded the standard.

Tom: So Max, if you go on YouTube you can see a lot of horrendous YouTube videos of people crashing and burning in Grand Canyon. Did you do that before the trip at all?

Max: Like crashing or watching the videos?

Tom: Both, no not you crashing but watching videos of someone else crashing.

Max: I had only really watched one video of someone running Lava. It was a group of people and it was a very cool video. Most people went left of the ledge hole but there was one raft that went right in the ledge hole. So the raft got flipped and the guy swam. But that was the only video I had seen of the Grand Canyon.

Tom: Did that give you some trepidation or a little worry ahead of time?

Max: It did because... I mean it can change but it'd still be big because it was the hardest, it was named the hardest rapid on the river. I was very worried because it was the biggest water I had ever done but it was very exciting as well.

Tom: Well let us talk about that and backup. What was the hardest rapid for you?

Max: Personally I would think Crystal or Hance would be the hardest. Because Crystal I hit that big hole by accident. On Hance it was very technical if you didn't want to hit a certain hole or go a certain way. So I thought Hance was very technical but Crystal is very big and wide so it was harder to miss it. It snuck up on me so I hit the hole and I got flipped but I ended up rolling up. We had one person swim Crystal but we had no one swim Hance.

Tom: Well let's back up a bit because the reality of Grand Canyon is a little different I think than the YouTube phenomenon might be. Did you find that the fact that you had a way to kind of start at Lees Ferry and go through the Paria Riffle and then do a lot of flatwater and then Cathedral Wash and then more flatwater and then Badger is like the first big thing and look at that. And then more flatwater and then Soap Creek and then more flatwater and then you get into the Roaring Twenties. Did that build you up a little bit and help you ease into where you were?

Max: Yes, because whenever we went through Paria Riffle, for a "1" it was pretty big to us 'cause we had never been through anything. That was just like big waves. So it was pretty like weird feeling because we had never really experienced anything like that. We were like, "This is a "1"?" at first. I think that after a while we started to realize and get comfortable doing the bigger waves. I found that the Grand Canyon, compared to the Ocoee River, it doesn't have as many holes but the holes are different if there are. The holes at the Ocoee are like ledge holes, they're very deep. But the holes here are different from what I'm used to. It was just different 'cause the waves were huge as well. I'd never been through big waves except Double Trouble which isn't very big compared to the waves like at Hermit.

Tom: Where is Double Trouble?

Max: Oh, that's on the Ocoee. It's one of the rapids about half way through the middle of the Ocoee River. It was just different.

Tom: Cool. Is Grand Canyon like more flushy, does it have more water, is it more of a bigger volume type river then?

Max: Yes, as I saw it was a lot bigger volume. But some of the holes on the Ocoee were a lot more sticky and they could hold you longer. That was one of the things that helped me get through it. As worried it kind of let me know that if I got in a hole I wasn't going to stay there as long as I would be if I was like in Broken Nose or on the Ocoee or somewhere like Godzilla or Humongous.

Tom: Ok. That would make sense. So Hance, entrance at the top and a bunch of big stuff at the bottom kind of hard to miss. How did that go for you?

Max: We had picked out a line. My dad went kind of where I wanted to go at the top, it was more to the left. I went too far to the right and there was a deep hole. It looked pretty retentive, but I was just barely to skirt it to the right. Then I made my way hard left and my dad made a hard right into the holes and the Land of Giants. My bottom line was pretty smooth but my top line wasn't.

Tom: Okay, so were you able to watch your dad kind of get churned up a little bit over there and go, "Gee, I'm glad I'm not over there"?

Max: Yea. In the Land of Giants, one of the holes broke right on top of him. He called it the Bat Cave when he got flipped over. I was kind of glad I didn't go over there but it seemed pretty fun as well.

Tom: Were you able to look at the rapids and go, "You know, there's a little quieter line over here. I can go for the meat over there," and then go according to how you felt you wanted to deal with the rapid at the time?

Max: I could 'cause I could see where there wasn't as big of a hole or more holes or there's more waves that are long and not as breaking and less likely to flip you over. I generally took the smaller routes

unless there was something that looked fun like a big wave like in Hermit. So yes, that's mainly what I would do.

Tom: Did you get on the train in Hermit? Did you...

Max: I did. I heard that the fifth wave was the biggest so I counted four waves and the fourth wave was huge so I'm like, "This must be the fifth wave." Then I went over the fourth wave and realized that the fifth wave was after that. It was huge and I'd already angled left so I hit it at a left angle and it flipped me under. I dropped my paddle with my right hand but I held onto it with my left hand and then I grabbed it underwater and rolled up right before the hole at the bottom.

Tom: So by the time you ran Hermit, before you got to Crystal, did you get a sense that your boating skills from launch day at Lees Ferry had changed?

Max: I did get a sense that they had changed because I felt very comfortable running the big stuff, like on Granite towards the right and the big waves in Hermit. So I could definitely tell that my boating skills had definitely adjusted to the bigger water.

Tom: Cool. So as you went along, did things look more comfortable? Were you feeling a little more, you know, just...

Max: Somewhere like the Ocoee, if you go over a big wave there's normally like a hole at the bottom. But here it's just more like another wave is behind it. So every time I went over a wave I'm like, "Oh no, there's going to be like a huge hole behind it." But there never was.

Tom: Cool. So Crystal's got a series of big holes there, big walls of water. Did you try that right run then, work on the right or left, how did you go?

Max: I hadn't really looked at it too much so I tried to go right. But I realized I wasn't right enough so I ended up hitting this hole on the right, it's kind of towards the bottom. I hit it and I got flipped under and I rolled back up. Then we had one swimmer there so we had to go reconsolidate him. Then I had to grab his paddle and then we went to the bottom and just got everything together.

Tom: Great, nice. So below Crystal you gotta run the Jewels, run the Gems down there. That worked out alright? That was fun?

Max: Yes, I don't really remember any of the Gems in particular because I mean like compared to Crystal or Granite it wasn't as much as big water. Those rapids I didn't really recall.

Tom: Ok. Then let's talk about Lava. How did that work out?

Max: The video I saw and whatever I saw in person it looked completely different. Like the ledge hole, it looked like the line on the left was much more open but it wasn't. There's a huge hole after this wave and then there's the ledge hole right next to it on the right. So we went in four waves. First it was me, my dad and Mason. Then we had Reid and Keith. Then we had the rafts. Then we had Rick and Matt. My dad led first and then I went behind him. Mason followed me. We wanted to skirt the ledge hole and then work our way right. Oh yeah, work our way left, my bad. I didn't really see what my dad did too much, but I remember I totally turned my boat to the left almost upstream but I never got anywhere. I got pushed right into the V-wave so I hit that backwards. Then I had to high brace 'cause I almost flipped over and I was like sitting there bumping up and down while I'm high bracing. Then I saw Mason was far,

far left. He had probably the best line. Then we worked our way left and then we took video of the other people going down.

Tom: Fun, great. What were your thoughts at the top of the rapid and then what were your thoughts at the bottom of the rapid?

Max: I didn't think Lava was all that bad as long as you missed the ledge hole. I was thinking at the top, I mean I was nervous because you can't really not be nervous.

Tom: Welcome to the crowd.

Max: Because you hear all these stories about Lava and it just freaks you out. But as long as you miss the ledge hole you're pretty much good. At the bottom me, Mason, my dad were all cheering and celebrating and then we got out. Reid and Keith took a long time to get in their boat but they eventually did it. Keith and Reid both ran far right and they hit the V-wave and they hit the hole and the big wave at the bottom. Then that's how we fell. Then the rafts took a pretty good amount of time. Dylan and Russ went first. They hit the V-wave pretty straight on and they hit all the other stuff. Basically all the rafts did the same thing. Jimmy had probably the most straight forward clean line. He did lose an oar with one hand at the bottom but it wasn't a big deal. Rick had to go drop his camera stuff off in the raft and then go because he was taking pictures up on the rock. Matt also had to go do that and Matt ran it by himself. Matt got flipped in the V-wave and he carped about two times. A carp is where you go to roll up but you bring your head up so you fall back over. After the second carp usually people pull the skirt and swim but Matt stayed in for one more roll and he rolled up. That was really good because I was like, "Oh no, Matt's going to swim and it's going to be so bad." But it was all good. Then Rick did it and he hit the V-wave and he got straight up and down like this and then fell backwards. He rolled up. He rolled up backwards and he was surfing this giant wave right in front of the hole behind it at the bottom. That was mostly the emotions I was feeling. I just wanted everyone to get down because it was like 5:00 and we were all tired of the flatwater. We had a terrible headwind that day.

Tom: Let's talk about how many nights was your trip actually? How many nights were you on the river?

Max: We had 13 nights. Right?

Mike: 13 nights and 14 days.

Max: 13 nights and 14 days. We were going to do 15 days but we took out a day early. I'm happy that we took out a day early because after Lava there wasn't really much to be excited about. So I was ready to get off the river.

Tom: Then you guys did a night-float out from Separation is that right? And then where did you guys wake up in the morning?

Mike: We floated straight to Pearce Ferry takeout. It took us exactly twelve hours. We left at 7:15 from Separation Canyon and arrived at Pearce Ferry landing at 7:15. So we went straight in.

Tom: Okay. So let's forget about the rapids for a bit. What was the funnest thing you saw apart from the rapids?

Max: It'd probably be Elves Chasm 'cause we got to jump off the waterfall over there and that was really cool and it was really deep and there's another little ledge you can jump off of. The water was clear and

it wasn't cold. So it was pretty cool to go check out Elves Chasm. And Deer Creek was also pretty fun because there's that waterfall you got to go under. That water was pretty warm and the wind would blow in your face from the water splashing down. So that was a lot of fun.

Tom: Cool. What troubled you, what worried you the most? What was the hardest thing for you on the trip? It could have been just cracks on your hands or the sand, I don't know.

Max: Ahh, well I got chaffed really bad, so it hurts really bad to walk. But I think rapid-wise it would be upset because there's that huge hole. I almost hit it by accident because I wasn't... I thought I was clear of it but I wasn't. I got a little bit of the right side of it. I started far left and I worked my way hard right and I got a little bit of the right side of the hole. My dad went... He was the only one who went left. Then Jimmy, who has all my stuff, I got scared to death. He went right into the middle of the hole and I was like, "Jimmy what are you doing man. You got my stuff." [laughing] But he made it out. We didn't have any raft flips out of the whole trip so that was good. I'm glad that happened, that no one flipped.

Tom: That's great. Chaffing, what would you do next time so that didn't trouble you so much?

Max: Wear more underwear.

Tom: It's simple. Or talcum powder or any of that kind of junk. Everybody has that problem. When you're wet, your butt's wet day after day after day. That's a normal thing. For the next twelve year old that comes along, what would you recommend?

Max: Um, if you want to take Mountain Dews make sure that you have them separate from everyone else because someone took some of mine. I was a little upset because I had one for every night but then I didn't have one for every night. Keep your stuff separate because some people think it was kind of community stuff in the coolers so they take...if you don't have your name on it. I just threw my Mountain Dews in. Just make sure you have all your stuff. Maybe grab like... If you're going to take a zebra cake like we did, make sure you have one for every night 'cause we could only have so many every night. Since we did that, we forgot to have some some nights so we had to eat like two packs the last night, which was very good though. Make sure you try out the food before you take it because there's some food that you might not like but you just take it.

Tom: What food didn't you like?

Max: We brought salmon and pesto pasta. It's a backpacker fancy meal, it's very expensive. I thought I would like it but it wasn't very good at all and I'd never had it. I liked most of the stuff that we ate, like the beef stroganoff. I'd never had that but my dad said it was good. I liked the granola and blueberries which I had tried before and I liked it. That's what I'd recommend. Just make sure you like the food. Make sure you have all of your equipment and make sure it all works.

Tom: Keep your soft drinks away from the adult ravens.

Max: Yes.

Tom: Okay, it's late in the evening. You haven't had dinner yet. You haven't been off for a shower which you haven't had for umpteen days. What do you want to tell somebody 50 years from now that might listen to this recording?

Max: Uh, like what I would have done differently?

Tom: These adults will ask you open-ended questions. Open-ended questions you make up what you want.

Max: I would tell them that like if they have the chance to do it or at least try to get the chance to do it that they should because it is a really great experience and it was a lot of fun. But I have a lot of school work to make up now so make sure that you have your school work done or you have it ready. Or if you can get your work done before you go down the Grand Canyon go ahead and do it because I'm going to have a lot of stuff to do before I get back or whenever I get back. So that's one thing I would recommend.

Tom: Do you think it's worth it to have that backlog of school work and get away from school for a while to do a trip like this?

Max: I do because it was a great experience and you can't learn something like this at school. I really enjoyed the trip and I learned a lot of stuff. I saw a lot of land formations, I saw how the water could change in front of you. I saw a lot of different stuff and I learned a lot of history behind the Grand Canyon, as well, so that also counts as school work.

Tom: So now I'm going to ask a question for your dad. What's your vision of parenting?

Mike: Vision of parenting? First and foremost I think is role modeling. Doing the right thing when perhaps no one is watching. But we should always know our kids are always watching, they never forget anything. But also ever since my kids were infants, we have provided them exposure to things that I learned and perhaps even my wife learned much later in life that we wish we'd learned earlier. So we do a lot of outdoor family events. We went kayak camping for New Year's Eve and other events. My eight year old daughter, Max's sister, she's an 8-year-old whitewater kayaker that we hope to get back down here maybe in 18 months to do the exact same thing her bigger brother did. We just talked with her on the phone a few minutes ago and she is so incredibly proud of him. Her words unprompted. When we told her that we were going to meet with Tom Martin, she was like, "Is Tom Martin famous?" We go, "I think he certainly is." Then she realized seeing your name on the river map book, she just got ecstatic. But I will share with you, I'd probably been away from Lees Ferry 4 miles and I immediately realized the parental and also spousal obligation that I now have to get my wife and daughter back down here. That is something that I will work diligently and feel confident we can do as a family again and perhaps with other families. From the perspective of, once you've done the Canyon one time I think everyone knows that they want to share it with others through experience because you can't describe it with words or pictures even closely. They have to come themselves. The fulfillment of bringing others to things that we know are truly therapeutic and also educational but also maturing. Max, being a twelve year old with a group of men from 22 years old to 61, he was not the kid of the group, he was one of the team members. As a father, his paddling skills were absolutely extraordinary out of this world. The thing that makes me most proud is he pulled his own weight and he was a contributing member of the team. I think the other members to a "T" valued and enjoyed him being there with them. So as big papa, I couldn't be more proud.

Tom: I can't thank you enough for doing what you're doing with your family. It's terrifying, it's dangerous so it seems today. But there was a time when young men were empowered early in life to do things. So I thank you for doing this. I know it must not be easy but thank you so much for taking the time to try.

Mike: Thanks for your sentiments, Tom. That means a lot hearing that. The labor of love comes to mind. While it's a labor, it's something new. As a parent I know it's part of the things we should do. I totally know where you're coming from. With the way we were raised, a different generation, we were put in these challenging, perhaps risky situations. In today's culture it's not as prevalent. I think we as male parents have an obligation to get maybe back to that at least in a partial sense. So I agree with you Tom.

Tom: Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview as we wrap things up now?

Max: Yea, if you just get the chance to ever do the Grand Canyon I suggest you don't waste it because it's an awesome thing to do. Not many people get to do it in their lifetime. It's an awesome experience.

Tom: Cool. Mike, you?

Mike: Kind of similar. I think again the experience of doing it is something that can't be described with words or pictures. And, I think, in varying ways is life changing once you enter the Canyon. As many people say, they don't want to leave. We all have to leave but you want to come back. But I'll also share with is I want to be known in my legacy, if nothing else, as a Christian man. I found it very interesting, if not almost expected, there weren't a lot of overt members of the faith community in our team so much. But I'll tell you, before we ran Crystal...me and Max do a daily prayer every day...almost every member of the team came and gathered around and we circled in arms and there was a prayer of gratitude, a prayer of thanksgiving and a request for oversight. The same was done as a group before we ran Lava. To me, wanting to be known as a Christian man, that was the most fulfilling thing of the trip. There was a lot of other things, too. That's how I'll end it, Tom. Thanks for your time. I just really appreciate it.

Max: We also did prayer before Hance, after Keith's swim because there was big water that day and we were all scared.

Tom: This is interesting because wilderness I think is about humility.

Mike: Amen.

Tom: It helps us realize we are very small people in a very big world where there are powers beyond us that we do not know and comprehend. And to seek their blessing. We are stupid not to do that.

Mike: Amen.

Tom: Max and Mike and Rick, thank you very, very much. This is a Grand Canyon Historical Society oral interview. Today is the 28th of August, 2017. I want to thank you all so much for participating in this.

Max: Thanks for having us.

Mike Thank you Tom. God bless you. That was awesome.