

# The Mayor of Adventureland

*Dodging bullets, crevasses, and avalanches, John Warner governs Breck—and rules the mountains.*

AS TOLD TO DEVON O'NEIL

**John Warner's** history in Breckenridge dates to 1962, when he and his brother drove up from their Denver home and spent a day exploring what was then a fledgling ski area. Seven years later, Warner and his wife-to-be, Carre, had their first date at the old Peak 8 movie theater. They settled here for good in 1980, and Warner opened his dental practice the following year. The 61-year-old, mustachioed ski mountaineer (he co-founded the Summit Huts Association and has summited Denali and Aconcagua, among other peaks), currently in his second term as Breck's mayor, talks about sleeping in snow, managing risk, and the random shooting that ultimately led him to Summit County.

**I graduated from dental school** in 1979, and the University of Colorado had a tuition policy that mandated you leave the urban corridor—basically Fort Collins to Pueblo—or you'd pay 100 percent of your tuition costs. I was either going to owe the state \$50,000, or I'd get out of dental school with no debt.

**Six years before that, I was** trying to get into a bar in southeast Denver with some friends. I was 22, married for about a year. We were in line around midnight when it started snowing, and the crowd surged forward. I got pushed into the guy ahead of me, and he said, "If you touch me again, you'll get a .38 between your eyes." I apologized and said it wouldn't happen again, but the crowd surged a few minutes later, and I bumped into the guy again. He just turned around, pulled a gun out of his waistband, and shot me. I fell, and he shot me again. Then he took off. They never caught him.

**That really affected me.** Both shots were flesh wounds, but I'd hear a door slam or a car backfire, and it would scare the crap out of me. So having to leave [Denver] after dental school was not difficult for me.



**Adventure is a big part of my life.** Last year I got probably sixty days of climbing and skiing. Typically I like to climb and ski until mid- or late June, but we skied Peak 2 on May 5 this year, and the snow was going fast. ... I'm not risk averse—I ride my bike on the highway, I used to race motorcycles, I ski in avalanche terrain a lot—but I do it in contexts where I have a lot of experience. It brings me joy.

**My friends and I have taken 21 trips to Europe and Canada**—we've been to the Alps almost every winter since 1989 to go ski mountaineering. I climbed Denali in June 2001. That was the highlight of my mountaineering career. It's huge, unforgiving, and you're in snow all the time. I actually like sleeping in snow. If you have a nice pad and sleeping bag, it's pretty comfortable. I did Aconcagua in '97, and that was cool, too, but it didn't have the ever-present danger of crevasses and avalanches.

**I've also been to Guatemala** three of the last five years to do dental missions. It's a good experience as an American to move into a third-world country and try to do some good, because you also gain perspective on how the rest of the world lives. Clean water is a huge issue in those places, and when I come back from those trips, I don't run the faucet while I'm brushing my teeth.

**The mayor thing is fun** and flattering. The fact that I've run unopposed both times, I don't know if that's because people think I'm great, or if they really don't want to do it because it's a fair amount of work.

**Breckenridge's biggest challenge** in the future will be not killing the goose that laid the golden egg. People love coming here; it's a beautiful, safe town; and outside of twenty days a year, it's not very congested. But I think if we aren't careful with our selection of events and development, we could end up with a town that's overrun by people and with buildings.

**I would agree to a certain extent** that Breckenridge's growth has created a feeling that it's not a little town anymore. You walk into a restaurant, and you don't know everybody like you did twenty years ago.

**But I still rejoice in where I live** and what I get to do. I'm very lucky to live here.