

Getting to the Top: Lessons Learned from the Himalayas and Kilimanjaro

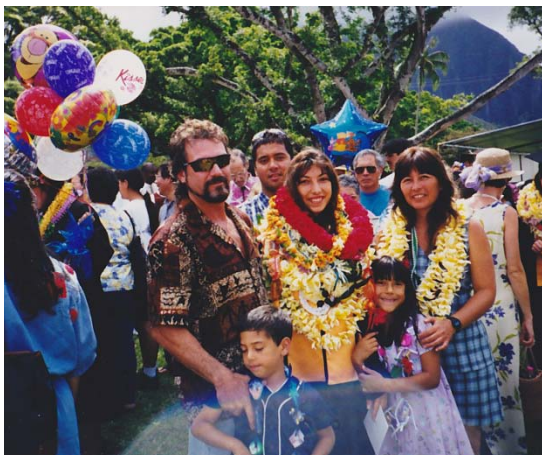
Getting to the Top: Lessons Learned from the Himalayas and Kilimanjaro

Windy K. McElroy

Background

My talk today is about my experiences in the Himalayas and Mt. Kilimanjaro. But first I want to give you a little background on myself and the path that led me to climb mountains. I grew up on the windward side of O'ahu, in Waimanalo. I went to public school all my life and got into a lot of trouble in high school and ended up dropping out when I was 15. By the time I was 16 I was pregnant, and by 19 I was a single mom on welfare with two kids.

So here I was at home with a two year old and a newborn with no hope for the future, no dreams, no goals, aside from just getting through the day. It was at that point in my life that I decided to enroll in college. I had no idea what I wanted to do, I just knew I wanted to do something. But I had no money, and my kids had never stayed with a babysitter. So I started out with a distance learning course at HCC. Back then they didn't have internet classes, so I took a telecourse, where you watch the class on TV and send in your tests. It worked out really well for me because I didn't have to leave my house at all. I continued taking one telecourse a semester until my kids got a little older, then I started taking one class a semester at night at Windward. When my youngest child started preschool, I finally was able to enroll full time.



It took me 6 years to get my Associates Degree, but after that it was pretty quick. I transferred to Mānoa, where I got my BA in 2 more years, my MA in another 2 years, and my PhD in 4 years. When I was here at Windward I never imagined I would continue on for the PhD or that I would be in college for 14 years. At that time I didn't even know I wanted to be an archaeologist or that archaeology was a viable career option. But going to college opened a lot of doors for me, and with hard work and determination, everything came together.



I graduated with my PhD in 2007. By that time I had been married for many years, my kids were just about grown up, and my career was in full swing. I accomplished everything I had set out to do, but I still didn't feel satisfied, there was still something missing in my life.

That year the movie *The Bucket List* came out, and watching it was a turning point in my life. It made me realize that life is too short to not be happy, to not live your dreams, and I didn't want to grow old and wish I had done something when I had the chance, like the characters in the movie. So I got a divorce, traveled the world, and started my own archaeology company.

I've done a lot of traveling since then:



Cambodia



Thailand



The Philippines



Alaska



Mexico



Belize

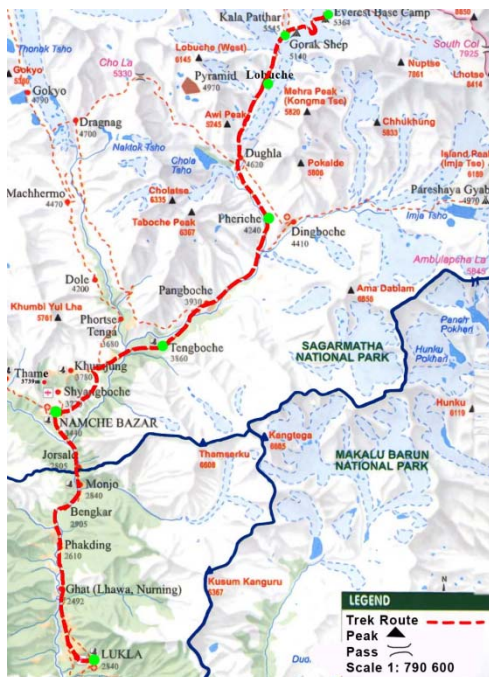


Guatemala



Italy

...and much more. My own bucket list is filled with exotic travel destinations and other frivolities. I've ridden elephants, held a tiger, and gone dogsledding. But some of the items on my bucket list were more meaningful and I wanted to start out by checking off the most difficult, physically demanding things first. So I began with Everest.



Everest

Don't get me wrong, I know my physical limits, and I wasn't proposing to actually climb to the top. I just wanted to get to Mt. Everest Base Camp. Now, even this is not an easy feat. Base Camp lies at 17,598 feet in the Himalayas of Nepal. To get there and back is a 15-day, 80 mile-long hike at high altitude.

I started training in 2008, working out religiously 6 days a week, alternating cardio and weight lifting. I hired a personal trainer to help me with technique and keep me on track. And I did several training hikes on Mauna Kea to test out my gear at altitude.





In April 2009, in the best shape of my entire life, I set off alone for the trip, which would last 22 days. I made my arrangements through an adventure outfitter, who would provide local guides and sherpas to carry our gear and arrange for us to stay at tea houses along the trail. I would be hiking with 6 other clients from Australia and New Zealand, whom I had never met.

In Kathmandu we went to a famous Buddhist temple where I spun a giant prayer wheel and was presented with a ceremonial *kata*, a white silk scarf, and blessed by a monk before my journey. From there it was a short flight on a small plane to Lukla, the starting point of our trek at 9,383 ft.

Touted as one of the most dangerous airports in the world, landing in the tiny airstrip was terrifying. The runway is angled upward between a cliff and a mountain, so you land at an incline and race up toward the mountain where there's a huge stone wall at the end of the short runway. Departing is equally exciting, as you take off toward the cliff.



we need it, and other gear. There are two very young ones, probably in their teens, one middle-aged one, and my favorite was this tiny smiley-faced old man who gave me a toothless grin every time I looked at him. Although the sherpa porters are carrying huge loads, they beat us to the tea houses every time, so our bags are waiting.

But it was fantastic to finally be in the mountain region, where the air is clean and the landscape absolutely spectacular. Our group now consists of 14 people – the 7 trekkers, Gourav our main guide, Nima and Puri, our two sherpa guides who take turns either leading us or taking up the rear, and then there are our four sherpa porters who carry our big bags, oxygen if





On our first day of hiking we trekked through high mountains and deep gorges, terraced villages with farm plots, ancient stone carvings, stupas, and prayer wheels, with a raging turquoise river below. The trail was busy with yaks, mules, and sherpas carrying insanely large loads on their backs fastened by a strap around their heads.

The next day was one of the hardest trekking days, even though we were only at about 10,000 ft. I really thought I had trained enough, but at that point I realized I was sadly mistaken. The first part of the day wasn't too bad. The scenery was amazing, with the trail winding in and out of villages and over the milky Dudh Kosi river, with towering mountains on both sides, and an occasional waterfall spilling down to the river. I lost count of how many suspension bridges we crossed.



But the afternoon hike is what killed me. Up and up, and up continuously. Almost vertical switchbacks in some sections. Stone stair after agonizing stone stair. The steep ascent dragged on for only a few hours, but it felt like a lifetime. I lagged behind in the group, huffing and puffing, heart racing, thighs on fire, sweat dripping down my face in the freezing cold. I was definitely humbled.





Finally we reached Namche Bazaar. The whole village is arranged vertically on the cliffsides, with more stone steps connecting the shops and tea houses. And everything is terraced. I feel great after completing such a hard hike, but a bit scared of what is to come. I settle in to my tea house, where we will stay for two nights, as we have to do an

acclimatization hike the next day - climb high and sleep low. This will help us to get used to the elevation and reduce the chances of getting altitude sickness, a condition caused by lack of oxygen, where symptoms range from headaches, nausea, and insomnia, to death. Once afflicted with altitude sickness, a medication called Diamox can help, but the only real cure is to descend to a lower elevation.



We continue hiking for a few days, stopping for the night at different tea houses along the way. The tea houses are small, family-run establishments, with a common room with a stove in the center that burns yak dung for fuel, and tables for eating around the warm stove. The guest rooms are small, with just enough room for two beds and a place to put your backpack.

As the days wear on, the trail gets more rugged. Stunning high peaks surround us on all sides. An entry from my journal reads:



“One false step and I fall to my death, but my eyes are not on the trail. I can't tear my gaze from the giants that rise before me; jagged white peaks towering above the clouds. Everest, Lhotse, Ama Dablam. I now understand why people die to climb these mountains.”



through the ornately carved entrance and remove our boots to enter the inner sanctum, where we are so fortunate to witness one of the ceremonies. Monks dressed in deep red robes sat cross-legged on benches sipping tea, refilled by the young boy



another acclimatization hike.

By the time we reach the next village of Dingboche I am very sick. We are at 14,800 ft., that's a thousand feet higher than the summit of Mauna Kea. I've been waking up every morning with a bad headache & sore throat and after drinking a liter of water it would go away. But today I have a runny nose, coughing, and an upset stomach, which had been going around in our group.

Soon we arrive at Tengboche, the highest monastery in the world. At 12,687 ft., the monastery sits on a high plateau surrounded by snow-capped peaks with sloping fields and yaks grazing everywhere. We pass



monks. We sat on carpets to the side, colorful tapestries hanging down all around us and golden statues and offerings in the front of the room. Soft light filtered in from the open windows, and the whole place was dim and smoky, almost suffocatingly so, with incense. All of a sudden the head monk entered and sat on a higher bench, a drum started beating, and there was sonorous chanting and horn blowing and cymbal crashing. It was the experience of a lifetime. I sat there in awe and reverence, as the chanting continued, but soon we had leave for



The plan is to be at Everest Base Camp in two days and then to summit the small peak of Kala Patar the next day, to experience the best views of the mountain. So we hike to the next village, Lobuche, which lies at about 16,500 ft. I was still sick and it was a desolate walk though rocky, barren hills, as we have long passed the tree line.

We continue up a steep, tall, rocky hill, and with my stuffy head and hacking cough, I fall to the rear of the pack again. I struggle up the mountain, one foot in front of the other, lagging farther and farther behind. Two sherpas flank me like lionesses on the heels of the weak gazelle, and their presence goads me forward. Finally I crest the ridge to see scores of stone shrines, monuments to the climbers who have died in these mountains. I wander around, reading



the inscriptions, and realize that most of these are for sherpas, with only a few European or Asian names here and there. I glance at my favorite old sherpa, and for once he does not smile. The mood here is somber indeed.

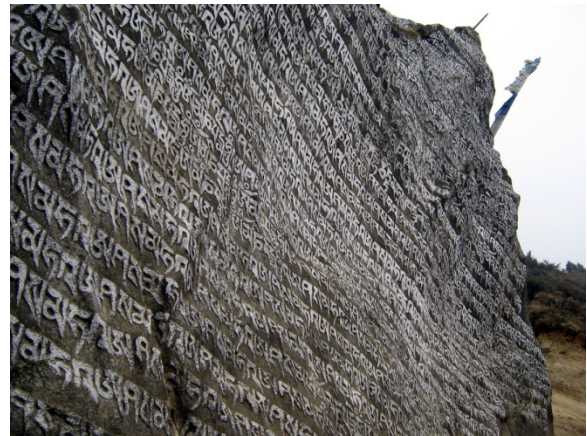
We continue a long, long way, and I feel myself deteriorating as we push higher. My head is pounding, nose dripping, unable to clear my ears with all the congestion. But once we reach Lobuche we have to do another acclimatization hike. I was literally seeing stars as I huffed and puffed my way up the steep little hill behind our lodge. Blackness clouded into my peripheral vision and specks of brightness twinkled here and there. Sharp pains stabbed me like needles or electric shocks in random places. I could barely breathe and it was all I could do to keep from fainting. I eventually made it to the top, to be rewarded by a light dusting of snow on my nose, but I didn't have the energy to lift my hands to shield my freezing face.





I woke up at midnight shivering violently with the worst headache you could imagine. My head was pounding, pounding, as if my brain wanted to escape through my eyeballs. My heart was racing erratically and I couldn't breathe. I thought I was going to die. I fumbled for my water in the pitch blackness but hydrating didn't help. Altitude sickness is a serious threat here, at 17,000 ft. and it often kills at night. I woke up my guide, who said that my brain was beginning to swell, but that taking Diamox should help.

The next morning I was still coughing and now running a fever. The guides gave me medicine for my headache and encouraged me to continue, as this would be the day we would reach Base Camp. I couldn't see myself completing the hardest hike of the trip in this condition, but I started out anyway with the rest of the group. There was snow covering the rocky ground and the little river in front of our tea house had frozen over during the night. As I stumbled over boulder after boulder, I soon found myself weak and dizzy, fighting for every step. It was time to make a decision. I had to turn back.



Was I devastated that I wouldn't get to Base Camp with only one day left? Surprisingly no. Not at the moment anyway. So why did I turn around? Was it the mind-numbing cold, the days of being filthy, the complete physical exhaustion, the terrible sickness, or the stigma of holding up the rest of the group? Those factors all came into play for sure, but the ultimate reason behind my decision is that I could not fathom spending another sleepless night, at an even higher altitude, thinking I was going to die. I was not going to have one of those stone monuments built for me. I was not going to get helicoptered out of there. I would walk on my own two feet, no

matter how painful. So I did not get my picture taken at Base Camp with the rest of my group. I did not summit Kala Patar. I did get to see Everest in all its splendor, witness things I couldn't have dreamed of, push myself to my absolute limits, and above all, I will live to tell about it. No regrets.



It took another three days of hiking to get down to Lukla, and the next day we were back in Kathmandu. Looking back, I have to say that the trek was much, much harder than I expected. I'm not sure what I thought it would be like, but I definitely didn't

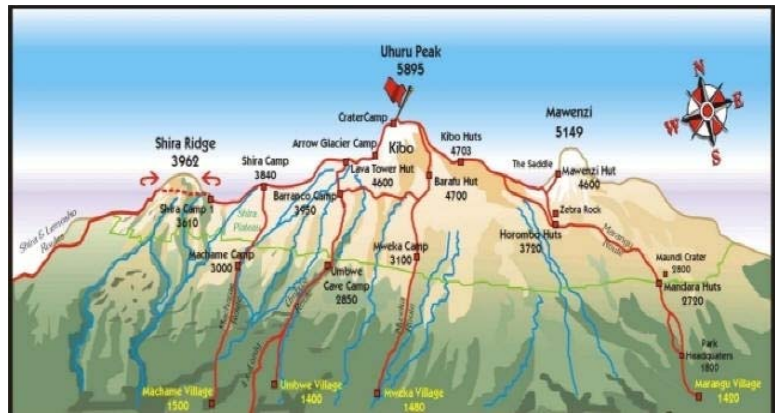


realize how all the various factors would magnify the exhaustion - altitude, steep ascents, bitter cold, sickness, and a complete change in diet. There was no technical climbing, but it was so much more than just a long hike. Roughly 140 km in total and I completed about 125, turning back without finishing the last day. I stand by my decision, but can't help thinking about what it would have been like to complete the journey.

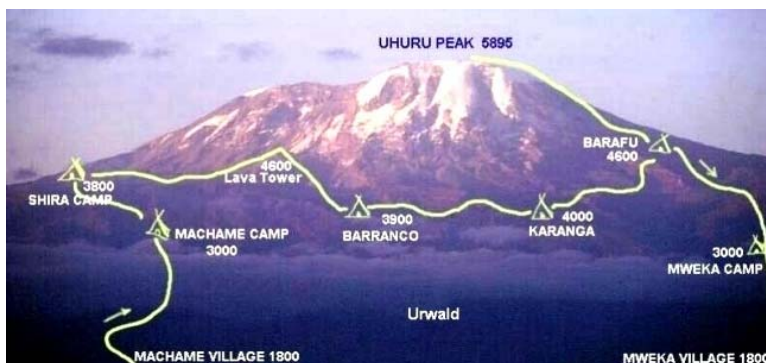
That was in 2009 and over the next two years I kept thinking about the hike and wanting to try again. Instead of doing the same trek, I decided to try something different and even more challenging. I wanted to summit Kilimanjaro.

Kilimanjaro

Kilimanjaro is located in Tanzania. At 19,340 ft., it is the tallest mountain in Africa. There are six established routes to the top, and I narrow my choice down to the two most popular



– the Marangu Route, also known as the Coca Cola Route, and the Machame Route, known as the Whiskey Route. The Coca Cola Route is supposedly the easiest and fastest way to the summit, but also has the lowest success rate. The Whiskey Route is harder, takes longer, but is more scenic and has a higher success rate. The Coca Cola Route has huts along the way to sleep in, but if you take the Whiskey Route you have to camp.



I ended up choosing the Whiskey Route. It will be 33 miles round trip over 7 days. Seems like a piece of cake compared to the Everest Base Camp trek, which was more than double that in distance and time. But the summit is about 2,000 ft. higher than Base Camp and the conditions will be much more difficult. What worries me the most is summit day,

where we will set out at midnight and hike continuously for 14 hours in the steepest, coldest, highest part of the trip. Ultimately I chose the Whiskey Route because it is an hour shorter on summit day, even though the rest of the hike is harder, and an hour at 19,000 ft. can make all the difference.



to climb a mountain in Africa on the same day and with the same trekking company? We had a relatively easy first day, hiking through lush green rainforest, with giant trees slathered in dripping moss. It was an elevation gain of about 5,000 ft. to get to the first camp at 10,000 ft.

I started training in the beginning of last year, then in October I finally set off for Africa. I met with my group of three other hikers and was surprised to find that one of them was from the Big Island. What are the chances of that, for two Hawaii people to choose



Astoundingly, we have a team of 19 support staff for our little group of 4 hikers. There are guides and porters and cooks and people to get our water and a guy who takes care of our toilet. Our porters beat us to the camp, and everything is set when we arrive. I share a small tent with the other girl in our group. We also have a large tent for eating and a bathroom tent with a portable toilet inside.

Day 2 was pretty rough. It was only a half day hike and we went slow, but it was a steep, constant, rocky uphill. It began to rain, not hard, but a cold, biting rain. By the time we reach Camp 2 at 12,600 ft., I am already freezing cold, and we prepare for more rain.

On the third day we did an acclimatization hike to the lava tower at 15,000 ft. then descended down to the



the freezing cold anyway. About an hour into our ascent, hail began to fall and it got heavier and colder so I decided to put on my thick gloves. I held one in my mouth as I put on the other, and when I took it from my teeth there were bright red blood stains on my white glove. I was bleeding from the mouth. Our guide said that this is a side effect of the altitude medication and I would have to stop taking it.



next camp at 13,000. This time I decided to take the altitude sickness medication ahead of time as a preventative, and this was the day I would begin. I took the Diamox in the morning and immediately felt nauseous, but started out in



It hailed almost the entire day as we continued uphill through barren terrain, with heavy, white mist sweeping low and fast over the ground. Finally we reached our lunch spot, the lava tower, a vertical stone formation rising above the lunar landscape. We sat shivering in our dining tent as we waited patiently for lunch. The cold was almost unbearable. We were all so, so freezing and tired, but the hot soup and burgers gave us the energy to get down to the next camp. It was a difficult descent, steep, rocky, and wet, past trickling waterfalls and giant plants that looked like they belonged in the age of the dinosaurs. Soon the camp came into view, with



the massive Barranco Wall looming above, which we must climb in the morning. From camp we can see the summit in the distance, beckoning, daring us to come near. I crawl into my down sleeping bag cold, dirty, sore, and exhausted, apprehensive of what lies ahead.



The next morning our lead guide Ema gave us the option to summit in five days instead of six. I am tired of being cold and sleeping on the ground, so I'm all for getting out of here a day early. But this would mean a double hike that day, with a stop for lunch where we would normally camp, then continuing on to our highest camp and waking up at 11PM to begin the

summit attempt. So we set out to climb the Barranco Wall, which was my favorite part of the trip. It was a near-vertical scramble the whole way up, over loose rock. I was amazed at how the porters could do it with their heavy loads. This is the view from the top of the wall; you can see how tiny the camp is (photo at right).





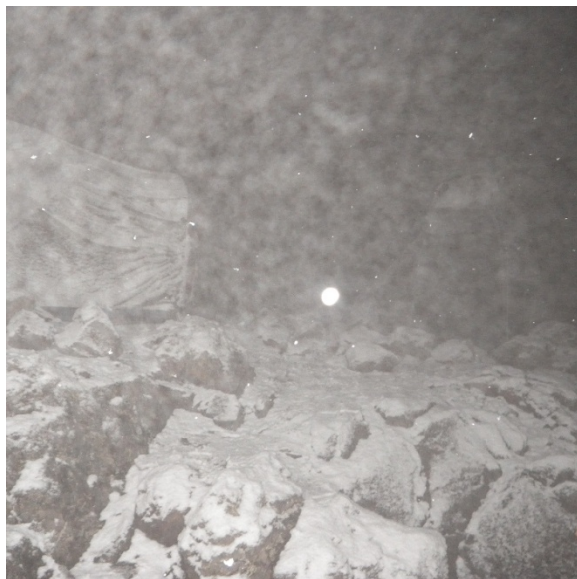
numb, and tonight will be the hardest hike by far. My only consolation is that no matter what happens, tomorrow we will be heading down.

We were awakened at 11PM to find the entire ridge and camp blanketed in snow. After a light breakfast we set out at midnight into the darkness and falling snow, for our summit attempt. The trail was steep and icy, and I still had an upset stomach, but I kept



I was left in the hands of our most experienced guide, Damien, who has summited more than 250 times, once in only two days. If anyone can get me to the top, it is Damien, and he takes my pack and encourages me slowly forward. Hours pass and I concentrate on placing one foot slowly in front of the other, in Damien's footsteps, trying to take in a deep

At lunch I started having bad stomach problems. I didn't eat much and felt weak during our afternoon hike, which was a steep uphill through mist and rain. We finally arrived at the highest camp, perched precariously on an exposed ridge at 15,200 ft. It is the coldest, most inhospitable camp yet, and I start to question why I ever wanted to do this. My body is completely physically exhausted; my mind just feels



climbing slowly, sometimes slipping back a step, sometimes nearly falling from dizziness. There were hundreds of others on the mountain trying for the summit, some of them collapsed on the side of the trail. Soon I became very weak and the rest of my group moved ahead as I stumbled and gasped for breath.





breath with each step. Music on my iPod keeps my mind occupied but my body is completely drained.

In my full winter gear I am completely useless and Damien stops me every so often to pour water into

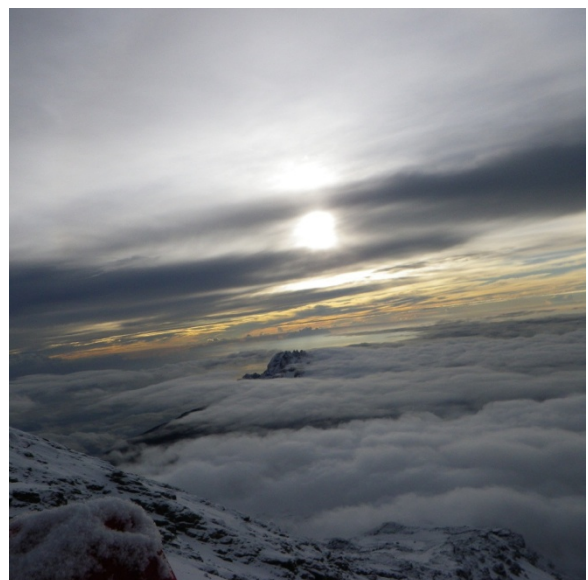
my mouth and feed me nuts from my trail mix one by one. I want to stop so badly, but every time I sit on a rock to rest, I start to shiver violently, and I fear that my fingers and toes are getting frostbite, even with the warmers inside my gloves and boots. My choices are to sit and freeze or to continue walking. So I walk. After five hours of this, a sliver of bright pink sunrise



streaks the sky and I think that I must be almost there. Soon it's light enough to see the trail ahead and I am absolutely mortified. We are about three-quarters up the steepest slope I have ever seen, with much, much more to go. If it had been light when we set out and I had seen the trail I would never have attempted it. It is time to dig deep, to reach down into my soul and give everything I have. I asked myself if I wanted to remember this as the day I gave

up or the day I accomplished something of my dreams. And I kept repeating that thought with every painful step.

The view was breathtaking though, high above swirling clouds, pink and orange streaks in the sky, the jagged Mawenzi Peak in the distance, and ice blue glaciers on both sides. Soon we were at the top





time. As soon as I saw the summit marker I collapsed to the ground and cried with all my heart. Damien picked me up off the ice and held me steady while I bawled like a baby. We took a few pictures at the summit then turned to face the descent.



forever into the abyss below. After an hour at that incline, my knees and ankles are in serious pain and my toes are being crushed in the tips of my boots. Every step is agonizing. The downhill part was brutal and it seemed to last forever. I was happy to not have altitude sickness, though, as I passed people vomiting on the side of the trail.

of the switchbacks and I thought we were almost done. Damien sat me down on a rock and began to feed me again, and said it was only an hour and a half more to the summit. I didn't think my body could endure even five more minutes. But the trail from here was less steep and we made the summit in good



There are a lot of stories of how difficult an ascent is, but no one really talks about how hard it is to come down. Our route is the most difficult of the descents, and I am already completely spent. My legs feel like they are not working properly, and every step is torture, so I slide part way down instead of walk. Looking down, I can't believe what I had just climbed. Steep, steep switchbacks that seem to continue





I finally stumbled into camp at 11:15. We had been hiking for 11 hours but the day was not yet over. We still had another camp to make before dark. After a short rest and hearty lunch, we packed our things and headed down to the final camp at 13,000 ft.

I collapsed in my tent but had trouble sleeping. My mind was wide awake and my body was in a lot of pain. As you can see in this picture I was also suffering from peripheral edema, which includes swelling of the face. But I was thankful that I didn't have swelling of the brain like last time.

In the morning we had a long downhill hike to the Mweka Gate. I went very slowly down the thousands of muddy, slippery stairs, every step excruciating. I was last of our group to make it to the gate, but thankful it was all over and my goal was accomplished.



Conclusion

The climb has changed my life and the experience both in the Himalayas and Kilimanjaro taught me some valuable lessons. First and foremost to dream big and follow those dreams with everything you have. Whether your goal is to finish school or get the ultimate job, or travel the world, it all starts out with setting a goal, then taking steps every day to reach that goal. I really believe that to get a college degree you don't have to be the smartest person out there, you just have to be motivated and work hard. And the



same is true for climbing mountains or achieving any success in life. Passion, drive, and determination are what will get you to the top.

Another lesson that hit home for me was the old adage “if at first you don’t succeed, try again.” I didn’t get to Everest Base Camp, and having to turn back was a hard blow for me. But that fueled me even more to summit Kilimanjaro. In the darkest time of the climb, when I was at my weakest, I thought of how I’d had to turn around before and that I wouldn’t let it happen again. There will always be obstacles and stumbling blocks to success. No matter what your situation, going through college is not an easy process. But the more difficult something is, the more

rewarding it is once you accomplish it. If going through school was easy, everyone would have a college degree, and it wouldn’t mean anything. So no matter how life tries to kick you down, get back up again and keep going. It’ll be that much sweeter in the end when you accomplished your goal.

I want to close with a quote from Walt Unsworth in his book *Everest*, and I believe that this applies as much to mountain climbing as it does to education:

Everest has attracted its share of men... [whose] mountaineering experience varied from none at all to very slight—certainly none of them had the kind of experience which would make an ascent of Everest a reasonable goal. Three things they all had in common: faith in themselves, great determination, and endurance.

