

Overcoming All Odds To Reach The Summit



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon
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AT 9 years old, Tyler Armstrong is the youngest person to successfully scale Mt. Aconcagua (6,961m), the highest peak in South America, on Christmas Eve, 2013. Earlier the same year, Tyler also climbed Africa's highest peak, Mt. Kilimanjaro (5,895m).

This reminds me of a 13-year-old American boy I met in September 2007 when I was climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro with my wife, our younger son and two other couples.



Our group of 7 started our climb up Mt. Kilimanjaro from Marangu Gate at about 1,900m a.s.l. We made it to Mandara Hut at 2,720m in about 3½ hours, trekking mainly through tropical rainforest. On the second day, we soon left the rainforest behind and entered alpine moorland, and after 5 hours of pleasant trekking we reached Horombo Hut at 3,720m.

We stayed an extra day in Horombo Hut to get acclimatised. Six of us left with one of our guides for Mawenzi Hut about 5½km away at 9.00 a.m., but eventually only my wife, our son and I made it to the Hut (about 4,600m) some 3½ hours later. We started to backtrack after a little while and got back to Horombo Hut before 2.30 p.m.

On day 4, we took 5 hours to cover 9.3km from Horombo Hut to Kibo Hut at 4,700m. It was at Kibo Hut that I first noticed the American boy. Despite the fact that he had only one leg, he was climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro with his father.

We had an early dinner at 5.00 p.m. and went to bed at 6.30 p.m. as it was going to be a long and arduous day ahead.

Day 5 was our moment of truth. At 00.01 a.m., we started the steep climb to Gilman's Point at the rim of the crater. We dressed up for the cold and our headlamps supplemented the moonlight in lighting up the way.

The trail was not only steep but it was also covered with loose scree that did not provide good foothold at all. With every step forward, we invariably ended up sliding back half a step, and we became really tired. On top of that, the air was so thin that whenever we paused to catch our breath, we would doze off. The tough going soon saw its first victims – a couple decided to give up before even reaching the half-way mark.

Five of us eventually reached Gilman's Point at 5,685m, after 6½ hours of relentless struggle against gravity. But that was not the highest point of the mountain. Only my son and I had the mental tenacity to push on and the two of us, together with our chief guide, reached Uhuru Peak at 5,895m after 2 more hours of struggle.

I met the American boy again during our descent from Horombo Hut. I sincerely congratulated him and his father on their conquest of the mountain. Only persons with great courage, strong will power and indefatigable perseverance could overcome all odds to reach the summit. ■

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.