

Albion man climbs Kilimanjaro to assist literacy

By Bill Rea

Some people have a party to celebrate turning 50. Matthew Certosimo marked the occasion by taking part in a climb of Mount Kilimanjaro.

The Albion resident was one of 14 people taking part in the effort in support of the work of the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE).

The group planned the expedition to raise funds to support CODE's literacy programs for children and youth in Africa.

Although he said he had some experience hiking, the likes of the slopes of Kilimanjaro was something Certosimo had never tried taking on before.

The nine-day trek began July 1.

There are a number of routes that can be taken to get up Kilimanjaro, and the expedition chose the one known as Lemosha, which approaches the mountain from the west, through a rain forest that he said was "quite misty."

The trail they used for the approach was "surprisingly well kept and clearly well travelled," he said.

They camped the first night at a spot about 8,000 feet above sea level (the highest peak of Kilimanjaro is about 19,340 feet above sea level). He recalled the terrain there was flat and arid, a "very Arizona-like setting."

The next night was spent at Shira Camp, which was about 13,000 feet up, and the next four days were spent basically getting acclimatized to the heights, as they made their way to Moir Camp about 13,500 feet up, and then up a lava tower to roughly 15,500 feet.

"It's quite spectacular," he said.

After stopping at the Barranco Camp, said the next challenge was climbing the Barranco Wall; an 800-foot vertical ascent.

"It's real three-point climbing," he said, explaining that three points (hands or feet) had to be touching the wall at all times. "It's quite exciting climbing."

Once that was accomplished, Certosimo said they really had to get used to the reduced oxygen at that height. "At that altitude, your body and mind either handles it, or rebels," he explained.

The next goal was the first peak, known as Stella, and while it wasn't particularly steep, he said his body was dealing with the reduced oxygen.

"This is the hardest physical activity I have ever experienced in my life," he observed, adding they started off for Stella at 6 a.m. and arrived at 2 p.m. with short rest breaks along the way. "It takes everything that you have, in terms of physical and mental discipline."

From Stella, they were able to see the ultimate peak, known as Uhuru.

"They call it "the Roof of Africa," Certosimo said, adding that sight gave everyone a shot of adrenalin, because they knew they were going to make it.

But it was still slow going, because of the lack of oxygen. He said the guides kept urging them to take things slowly, lest they overdo it.

"You have to manage the altitude," Certosimo said, adding it's often the most fit people who have trouble on these climbs.

"It's not because of their fitness," he said. "It's because they go too fast. Going slow is part of the strategy of managing the altitude."

Certosimo was among five members of the party who spent a night in a crater camp at about 18,500 feet, next to a glacier.

"Yes, it's really cold sleeping beside a glacier," he confirmed.

In such circumstances, he said the climbers had to measure their oxygen levels and heart rates twice a day. At the crater camp, three of the five party members had noticeably reduced oxygen levels, but the guides were well prepared to deal with such issues.

Certosimo said they were a "really professional group," from Tusker Trail, based in Colorado.

Certosimo said the glaciers were between 20 and 30 feet in height. His law partner Chris Bredt (Certosimo is a lawyer with the firm of Borden Ladner Gervais) had made the climb twice in the previous eight years and told him the retreat of glaciers had been quite noticeable over that time.

The party reached the Uhuru summit July 7.

The trip down the mountain took two days and was not quite as challenging as the trip up, although Certosimo said it was hard on the hips and legs.

Certosimo said there was no time when he feared for his safety during the expedition.

"I will say I was apprehensive as to whether or not my body would react well," he said. "I never thought that my safety was at risk."

There was naturally some training involved before the expedition.

‘It’s not the sort of thing you just go up and do,’ Certosimo said.

The training involved regular hikes with weights over several months to get his body ready for the effort.

Certosimo said Bredt was chair of the CODE and he came up with the idea of raising funds by undertaking the trips to Africa. He asked him to take part in the other two climbs, but Certosimo said he would consider it the summer after he turned 50.

‘For better or worse, he remembered the pledge,’ Certosimo said. ‘I was quite delighted.’

‘The cause is just wonderful,’ he added.

He also said he’s raised \$26,000 so far, and all moneys raised are matched three-to-one by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

In total, he said the expedition has raised about \$206,000, which means they’re at about \$824,000 with the CIDA contribution.

‘We’re still raising funds in the hopes of getting to a million,’ he said.

The aim is to improve literacy programs for children in Africa, providing them with books in their own language to encourage them to read and helping to create a local publishing industry.

Certosimo said he and his wife had their honeymoon in Kenya 20 years ago, and he remembered they flew over Kilimanjaro. ‘I think the seed was planted then,’ he said.

‘I’m a big believer in setting goals,’ he observed, adding he wanted his twin daughters to know if they want to climb mountains, either metaphorically or literally, they can.

‘If you want to set out and climb any mountain in front of you, you can do it,’ he said.

‘I think that they call it a once-in-a-lifetime experience for a reason,’ he remarked, adding part of him would like to try it again, but ‘it’s a huge time commitment.’

‘I think there are other mountains that are left to climb, metaphorically,’ he added.



Chris Bredt and Matthew Certosimo stood at the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro July 7.



Matthew Certosimo was making his way up the 800-foot Barranco Wall.