

Climbing Kilimanjaro leads this writer to unexpected places.

By Robin L. Flanigan | Contributing Writer

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.” —Goethe

I'd just collapsed onto another rock. The thin air made it hard to breathe. I hadn't eaten in three days, except for a couple of granola bars and a few bites of toast, and hadn't slept in more than 24 hours. I felt like vomiting but didn't want to waste all the pills I'd swallowed.

After a few minutes, my feet were back on the snowy trail, but I couldn't look to the side or I would lose my balance.

“I got ya,” my husband, Patrick, would say from behind.

My journey to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro – at 19,340 feet, the highest point in Africa – was the hardest physical thing I've ever done. Patrick and I signed up for the eight-day trip through five ecological zones to help a group called Journeys of Inspiration raise money and awareness for cancer research.

I had watched friends and family deal with, and sometimes die from, the disease; it has been five years since Patrick left the doctor's office and led me into a fourth-floor stairwell at work to tell me he had cancer.

I spent more than a year buying the right gear and getting to know the area's trail systems so I could help others similarly blindsided by the diagnosis but brave enough to push on despite feeling like giving in.

And in the end, I felt like I was the one who benefited. It's that old saying about how you get more than you give – how you set out to help others and, ultimately, they wind up helping you.

'It's the attitude'

Five weeks before we left for Tanzania, it looked like I wouldn't be able to go. After a frigid winter hike on Stid Hill, opposite Bristol Mountain Ski Resort, my toes swelled and turned colors. I couldn't fit into my hiking boots. Bloodwork showed the possibility of lupus.

“Just begin it,” Patrick coaxed gently, pointing to the quote from Goethe hanging on the side of our refrigerator. “You only have to take that first step.”

So I bought a new pair of boots, one-half size bigger, and broke them in while running errands. My rheumatologist called two weeks later. I did not have lupus, just some auto-immune issues we'd have to continue monitoring.

to the summit... and beyond



Robin Flanigan and husband Patrick decided to climb Mount Kilimanjaro as part of a group called Journeys of Inspiration to raise money and awareness for cancer research. Patrick was diagnosed with cancer five years ago.

her future

What a relief – until the first day in Africa. After 45 hours of travel, my feet were so swollen I had no ankles and I couldn't curl my toes. Luckily, spending the night with my legs perched atop two duffel bags (in a borrowed pair of support pantyhose) fixed those problems, for the most part, by morning.

The altitude sickness didn't strike hard until day four. I was exhausted and nauseous. Patrick carried most of my water and took on more of the daily packing duties.

“My pain is finite,” I mouthed to myself. “My pain is finite, my pain is finite...”

On the sixth day, we left for the summit minutes before midnight.

“Sing me a song,” I implored my Tanzanian guide when I needed to hear something besides the whip of the wind and the crunch of trekking poles on frozen scree. “A slow one.”

He did, in Swahili. It didn't matter that I couldn't understand the words. It was the perfect lullaby. When his voice trailed off I focused on the row of reflective strips along the hem of his pants, gleaming from my headlamp. I pictured the pin I carried in my

pack: “It's not the altitude. It's the attitude.”

But for the most part, I passed those final eight hours uphill thinking about how the way I felt was nothing compared to what cancer patients often go through. How there is no clear end to the agony for many.

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We reached the summit, surrounded by glaciers, just past sunrise. I tagged the bottom corner of a wooden sign welcoming me to the top of the world's tallest free-stand-

ing mountain, turned around to face where I had come from, and fell to the ground, burying my head in my gloves and sobbing uncontrollably.

Be bold and begin

On the way home from Africa, reading the bestseller *Three Cups of Tea* in the Amsterdam airport, I came across this quote from one of the first American explorers to climb Mt. Everest in 1963:

“What do we do when we finally reach the summit and flop down? We weep. All

inhibitions stripped away, we cry like babies. With joy for having scaled the mightiest of mountains; with relief that the long torture of the climb has ended.”

Kilimanjaro isn't the mightiest of mountains, but it's the mightiest mountain I'll ever climb.

This trip made many of us work harder than we thought we could. It taught us that to find the power and magic of the human spirit, we must be willing to be bold and begin it.

Every day.

Just like the fight against cancer.

On the last day of our trek, after descending 6,000 feet in six hours, I stood at the end of the trail and paid my respects to the mountain.

“Thank you,” my voice warbled.

I stood there alone at the edge of the rainforest, wiping my cheeks and glancing from the hydrangeas to the sycamore figs to the wide, muddy path we'd just left.

“I hope we made a difference,” I said, then turned toward the bus. 