



## *“A Journey of Personal Discovery and Human Spirit”*

*Toronto native, Dennis Flaherty, recounts the 14-month effort by a dedicated team to raise funds for ALS and the challenge of climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro for the campaign. Twelve Canadians left for Tanzania, Africa in March 2004 for what would be an emotional and life altering experience.*

**K**LM flight 571 descended slowly into Tanzania, Africa at 10:55 pm. under dark skies and a gentle, tropical rain. After a nineteen-hour flight from Toronto, 12 of the passengers were about to embark on a journey of a lifetime.

Fourteen months earlier, I received a call from Laurie Mackie and Brian Leeming asking my help in raising funds for ALS. Laurie’s closest friend lost her mother to a rare, genetic form of ALS and a colleague at Investors Group had recently passed away from the disease. Inspired by this, and the Elizabeth Grandbois documentary on the Concert of Hope, she was passionate about making an effort to raise funds for ALS research. ALS is a little known disease that can take life quickly and it has a devastating impact on families and friends. ALS - Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, is more commonly referred to as Lou Gerhig’s disease, named after the famous baseball player who died suddenly of a mysterious illness. Two to three Canadians die every day of ALS, usually striking in the prime of life between 55 and 65. And, it’s usually fatal within five years. The number of deaths caused by ALS is more than twice the number caused by cystic fibrosis and multiple sclerosis combined and only 15% less than AIDS.

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ALS reeks a devastating financial and emotional impact on patients and their families, requiring extensive nursing care because of progressive deterioration of the nervous system. Quite simply, those afflicted are unable to control basic body functions to the point of struggling for breath, a symptom that signals the final stages of life. Thankfully, ALS has received increasing attention. PGA golfer Tom Watson, lost his life long friend and caddie Bruce Edwards to ALS, and the recent best seller and movie, “Tuesdays With Morrie”, is a heart-

rending account by Mitch Albom of the passing of a dear friend to ALS. But for Laurie, Brian and I, that cold day in February 2003 was a chilling reminder that raising funds for ALS was not going to be easy. How to raise funds for a disease that has little awareness in the midst of so many other health causes? Causes that had a much stronger giving legacy and frankly, bigger bank accounts for advertising and lotteries. ALS Canada operates on a shoestring budget, and while committed to supporting our cause, advertising and publicity dollars were scarce. For me, it meant that 20 years of marketing experience was on the line. How could I help Laurie and Brian find the fundraising “holy grail”?

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Laurie’s fundraising vision was to assemble a team to climb Mt Kilimanjaro, a dramatic and profound undertaking for anyone, much less inexperienced climbers. Certainly the expedition would capture publicity, but we were under no illusions about the extent of planning and organization that would be required. Now, where to begin! For the team, like so many volunteers, it’s a case of juggling a full time career around every spare minute to develop plans, attract volunteer fundraisers, sponsors and most important donations to the cause.

Laurie and Brian began contacting expedition companies and all of us began an email campaign across our company - Investors Group. Within three months we instantly attracted 7 new Investors Group recruits from across Canada. Each had their own personal experience with ALS. The Climb for a Cure campaign and the team was now in full gear.

Our new friend, George Goodwin, publicized the climb on his web site - [www.alsindependence.com](http://www.alsindependence.com) and the ALS Society soon followed with a dedicated page on

their website. With publicity and media kits in hand, we set out on the long road to raise donations and to find corporate sponsors to cover some of the personal costs – estimated at \$10,000 per climber. John Stewart another early member of the team began using his great sales acumen to capture corporate sponsors and enlisted Columbia to outfit the team.

Berg Adventures in Calgary stepped forward as our expedition company of choice. The founder and owner, Wally Berg, was a highly experienced mountaineer. Having summited Everest four times and each of the other famous 6 continental summits around the world, he seemed the perfect choice. More importantly Wally was personally moved by our quest and offered his personal services and that of his company at cost for the climb. At the time we had no idea what this meant and the manpower involved. Over the next 10 months the climbing team grew in size and stayed in touch through email, and teleconferences. We shared campaign successes and experiences, and began a vigorous training schedule to prepare our bodies and minds for the climb of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa.



**“At 20,000’ Kilimanjaro is the one of the highest freestanding mountains in the world.”**

At 20,000 feet Kilimanjaro is the one of the highest freestanding mountains in the world and the highest point in Africa. Formed over 100,000 years ago through volcanic eruption, it stands majestically alone in the middle of the African landscape. Belying its otherwise tropical surroundings, Kilimanjaro is crowned with thick glaciers and presents a harsh environment of thin air and sub zero temperatures at the summit. It is literally the Rooftop of Africa - a harsh anomaly amongst the flat, dry and parched savanna of the Great Rift Valley and the plains of the Serengeti, Tarangire and Ngorongoro wildlife preserves. Time passed far too quickly for the team. And, by January 2004 we realized that it was only weeks away from departure. With almost \$200,000 in the ALS accounts we were ecstatic with our fundraising success. Through John’s efforts and others

a number of corporate sponsors also stepped forward to help out with our equipment and personal costs. Columbia Sportswear completely outfitted the team with our climbing gear. St. Josephs printing stepped forward to cover printing costs for publicity, Berg Adventures subsidized a substantial portion of the expedition cost and Investors Group represented one of our most generous donations. Locally, many of team members were able to get business support to help underwrite some of the personal costs involved. Local and regional media across Canada picked up the story as each team member began to gain recognition and notoriety within their community for undertaking such an extraordinary cause. Within 10 months the campaign had generated over one million media impressions across Canada through news articles and interviews in print, radio and TV! But now, days away from departure, a lingering question remained with the team – were we ready for the ultimate test and our final goal.



**Airport send off with Actress Wendy Crewson (5<sup>th</sup> from right)**

On February 27 the team arrived at Toronto International airport from across Canada for departure to Africa. For most it was our first face to face meeting after twelve months of emails and teleconferences. The ALS Society was there in force to say goodbye, and to our delight, Canadian actress Wendy Crewson was there for the send off. Wendy is a great long-time supporter of ALS, and the excitement of our team, complete with mountains of equipment, expedition bags and a celebrity attracted unexpected attention across the airport. Nevertheless, the team was still preoccupied with thoughts of what lay ahead and whether nine months of training prepared us for the climb. When our plane touched down in Tanzania this anxiety was a hallmark that would remain for the next six days.

On March 1<sup>st</sup> we awoke in Arusha's Mehru Hotel, where we met Wally Berg for the first time. Surprisingly small in stature, Wally commanded a presence of confidence. His steel-blue eyes pierced through each of us - at once measuring up the collective personality and strength of the team. After a 3-hour briefing on the climb, introductions to the guides and a quick lunch we set off to Machame Gate, the gateway to Mt. Kilimanjaro. The two-hour drive to Kilimanjaro Park went quickly and Wally's final words at the briefing haunted our thoughts. "Experience has shown that all twelve of you will not make it to the summit, and summit day will be the toughest day of your lives!" It was a sobering reminder for a group with no previous climbing experience.

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Machame Gate at 3500 feet was a flurry of activity. Several other groups were preparing for departure, ours being the largest. With twelve climbers our expedition required 50 Tanzanian porters (from the Chagga tribe), 7 guides and 2 cooks! In total a legion of 71 that would spend the next 7 days together.



**Day One: Through the mountain rainforest**

Day one began with a trek that would see us climb 5000 feet through the humid rainforest to Machame Camp. The day began at 75 degrees but at Machame Camp, and six hours later, we arrived in mountain clouds, a light rain and a temperature of 45 degrees. A quick dinner and twelve tired trekkers retired early. The next morning we began to feel the affect of high altitude - puffy faces and nausea that would increase with each foot of new elevation. Despite the use of Diamox for altitude sickness, high altitude would prove to be one of the greatest challenges to face the team. The effects of on the body of high altitude cannot be predicted. For some in our team it was an

annoyance. For others it proved to be a daily struggle to forge ahead. Day two saw us move above the tree line to Shira Camp at 12,900 feet. Shira is a beautiful camp that provides the first glimpse of Kilimanjaro's peak and a reminder of the onerous task ahead. That evening the Chagga men gathered to sing a beautiful, Kilimanjaro mountain song - an experience that for all was heart rendering and the beginning of what would be episodes of spontaneous emotion and tears throughout the next six days. As a group we provided each with one of our signature ALS Climb hats. We later found that, with an average annual income of \$330 US in Tanzania, these hats would be a long treasured gift from the ALS team. It was a highly emotional exchange and one that formed an early bond amongst the expedition team and the porters



**Our Porters (Chagga men) sport their new ALS hats at Shira Camp**

By day three most of the team were now suffering headache and nausea from the altitude - a symptom that would remain for the next three days. To our surprise, we had to trek another 40 miles and 270 degrees around the mountain to reach the summit point! The trail was deliberately designed this way to help acclimatize to high altitude. The next two days were long and tiresome. Many of the trekkers were experiencing hypoxia (a condition caused by loss of oxygen to the body tissue), stomach cramps and nausea, frequently stopping along the way to rest, lose breakfast and gather breath in the increasingly thinner air. Wally warned us in our briefing that there would be little conversation along the way. Talking took precious energy, and each step we took required effort. But there never seemed to be enough air to replenish our strength and our legs felt twice their normal weight. We continued each day for eight hours pacing slowly in a trance, or as Wally would say, "in the zone". Bodies on autopilot, our minds drifted to thoughts of family, friends, life experiences, and the

reality of the summit ahead. It was a time for great personal reflection and personal discovery but most of us were silently thinking, “what the hell am I doing here!” At 52 years old, with a wife and two young children, I had all the more reason to ask this question.



**Day Four: The team takes a break at en route to Barafo Camp.**

Front: L to R – Larry Mallon, Angela Rea, Sharon Babineau, Charlie Miller, Dennis Flaherty (tough old bird II)

Rear: L to R – George (tough old bird) Findlay, Julie Le Boeuf, Paul Lambe, Michel Le Boeuf, Laurie Mackie, John Stewart, Brian Leeming.

The days clouded over each day at 10:30 am as the warm winds from the Indian Ocean perched over Kilimanjaro heights. But by sunset each day the skies cleared and gave way to brilliant starlit skies, and temperatures below zero. As we watched the sunset at the end of each day it occurred to us that there would be a full moon on summit day- another in a series of good omens for the team. Every morning at 6:30 am the Chagga men delivered hot tea and a gentle wakeup to our weary but enthusiastic team - a small token of civility in an otherwise harsh environment. High altitude does strange things to the body. On waking there is a tremendous sense of disorientation, and above 14,000 feet, loss of appetite is common. But food (our fuel) and water is critical, as dehydration is a climber’s worst enemy. Mountain climate is very dry, and combined with hypoxia, each climber needed great discipline to consume food and at least three litres of water a day. By the end of day five we had trekked and climbed over 35 miles around the mountain, in some cases up and down 2000-foot valleys. At the beginning of day four we were confronted with the legendary Barranco wall, a rock face stretching 1200 feet straight up. The “Wall” climb alone takes up to three hours and takes its toll on most climbers. With this behind us we trekked another four hours to our final base camp –

Barfo- at 15,700 feet. At 4:00 pm Wally assembled the team for tea, our final dinner before the summit and then ordered us to bed until 11:00 pm. Rest perhaps, but few slept! (Summit attempts normally take place at midnight so that enough daylight remains after summiting to get to lower altitudes.) As we had hoped, the skies were clear and a brilliant, full moon hovered above. But, by now most of us had been awake since 6:30am that day and knew we had another 14 hours ahead. For me, and many others, the anxiety of a final stretch forced nervous pacing as Wally prepared two teams for departure. Team one with Sharon, Brian, Michel, Julie and Laurie to depart first at midnight. John, Paul, Charlie, Larry, George, Angela and I left at 12:45. Sharon experienced early and unexplainable fatigue but after a short rest, oxygen, and determination to climb on behalf of her husband who died of ALS, she forged ahead with renewed energy. But by 5:30 am Wally’s forewarning at the hotel took on new meaning. This was the toughest day of our lives! Many of the team were desperately exhausted, cold and dehydrated. Despite a climbing pace of one step every two seconds, the thin air, hypoxia, nausea, stomach cramps and lack of sleep was taking its toll.

At this point, many were staggering; weighted on their trekking poles with every step and stealing every ounce of air their strength could muster. Still dark, the summit remained an elusive and perhaps unattainable goal. John, breathless and desperate for a break pleaded with Nicholas our guide for an estimate of time to Stella point. “It’s right ahead of us. Only 15 minutes to go”, he said.

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**Wally Berg, Chief Guide of the Climb for Cure expedition.**

Stella point sits on the edge of the mountain crater and represents the final break point before the last stretch to Uruhu Point and the summit. We forged ahead at Nicholas's urging. At 5:50 am, our first group of seven arrived at Stella Point. The worst was behind us but did we have anything left? We heaved off our 25lb. packs and collapsed in total exhaustion. By now it was minus 20 with 30km. winds. Each of us silently wondered how we would gather the strength to finish the final leg to Uruhu Peak. In fact, many do not and turn back at this point. Angela, the sole women in our group of seven, collapsed on the crater's edge between John and I. Angela proved to be a great inspiration for our group on that final day. A strong, no nonsense Alberta farm girl who grew with seven brothers. Her motto throughout the trek was "just suck it up - and getter done!" She stuck with the lead team all night, but now was too weak to open her pack for water. Swearing at herself and frustrated by her helplessness she pleaded for a hand. Paul and I reached over with barely enough of our own strength and numb hands to help her open the pack. Minutes later, Wally appeared and with him the first light of day stretched across the eastern sky. The summit lit up ahead us. There was Uruhu Peak within sight! We forgot the cold, the nausea and fatigue, and an adrenaline surge pierced the group. Wally ordered us to move but we needed no encouragement. Without a word we all stood, hoisted our packs and set off for the summit, only a 1000 yard stretch but one that usually takes up to 90 minutes. With each step we got stronger and more emotional because we knew the summit was steps away. A sliver of sun was now rising behind us. We were perched far above the clouds and the immense African landscape stretched before us under a cobalt blue sky. It was a timeless moment and one that will be etched in our minds forever.



**Sunrise on Mt Kilimanjaro at 6:35am, March 6. A timeless moment.**

At Paul's urging, and with a few steps remaining, we dropped our poles, linked arms and touched the summit landmark in unison. Huddled with Wally as a group, tears frozen on our faces and surrounded by glaciers, we savoured the magnificence of the moment. At 7:00am we were at Uruhu Peak- there on the rooftop of Africa, peering over immense glaciers and mountains, that a few days ago, towered above us. Today was Laurie Mackie's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

To Wally's amazement and joy, all twelve climbers made it to the summit that day - some as late as 9:00 am and minutes away from being turned back by Wally. By 4:00 pm that day we made our way back to Mweka base camp at 9,000 feet. We had now been awake and climbing for 34 hours! By 6:00 pm most of the team collapsed in their tents and did not wake until 8:00 am the next morning. On average each climber lost over 10 lbs. in six days



**On the rooftop of Africa with the family "Guardian Angel" in hand. A magnificent moment.**

Each team member had their own special moment on the summit and a personal goal that pushed them beyond limits they never before experienced. Throughout the six-day trek I carried my own momento - a Guardian Angel medallion from my wife that had been passed to her from two generations. I carried this with me every day in a small wallet with a picture of my children, Scott and Sarah. Before leaving the summit I spent a tearful, private moment clutching the Guardian Angel and thinking of them, their support and their caring. How truly fortunate I was to be able experience this moment and the amazing accomplishment of our team for ALS.

Life would never be the same!

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If you would like to donate to the ALS Climb for campaign call ALS at **1-800-267-4257**. For more information about ALS go to: [www.als.ca](http://www.als.ca) A complete daily account of the team's expedition is available on the Berg Adventures website at: [www.bergadventures.com/trip\\_pages/cure.html](http://www.bergadventures.com/trip_pages/cure.html)



**Kilimanjaro's glaciers near the summit at Uhuru Peak.**



**The edge of Stella Crater. 90 minutes to Uruhu Peak**



**Our team steps and minutes away from Uhuru Peak.**

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*The Climb for A Cure team was nominated for the ALS Society of Canada's 2004 Exceptional Fundraising Award.*

*George Goodwin awarded by the ALS Society of Canada's in 2004 for his website work and tireless volunteer efforts for ALS.*

*Plans are already in the works by the team for their next fundraising expedition to another of the seven summits.*

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