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News

Summiteers Find Autism Parallels in Climb

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Cassidy, left, and Dickie at the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro

A conversation with Bob Cassidy and Bob Dickie III

This winter, Bob Cassidy and Bob Dickie III summited Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the tallest mountain in Africa. The endeavor was a huge undertaking in and of itself, but the two friends from Flint, Mich., had an even greater purpose behind it – raising awareness and support for autism, cancer and Alzheimer’s. Dickie and Cassidy are the founders of the 7 Summit Challenge (<http://www.7summitchallenge.org/>), and will be climbing the highest summit on each continent over the next three years in pursuit of this goal.

After their return from Tanzania, the Autism Society sat down with

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the two climbers to discuss the adventure. Surprisingly, much of what they learned paralleled the challenges and lessons of living with autism, from taking things one step at a time to learning to draw help from others.

Autism Society: What was the most memorable part of the climb?

Bob Cassidy: I had multiple emotions when I reached the summit -- exhilaration, relief that we're finally at the top and can head back down -- but one of the things that mountain climbing does is that it puts bigger and bigger challenges in front of us. They are difficult to accomplish so we have to take our athleticism to the next level -- it is such a relief emotionally to finally summit, to be able to accomplish something that we had spent months preparing for.

Bob Dickie: I would say that for me the most memorable part of the climb was making the summit and seeing the sunrise come up -- that sense of accomplishment of something you'd been planning on and working toward, and seeing that dream realized. Thinking about all the people back home praying for you, supporting the cause, cheering you on half a world away. It was a really neat and special moment as one by one we hit the summit of the mountain. It was the highlight of the climb. Overall though, getting to spend quality time with a group of people we became really close friends with in those 14 days was really nice. You are living with them; you are putting your life in their hands. You experience a part of Africa that most people never get to experience. We both walked away with a new appreciation for Africa and friendships with the people that will be lifelong.

BC: Bob mentioned this in an interview once before -- in most activities that you participate in, you surround yourself with people who are very similar to yourself. ... In mountain climbing that's not the case -- the extraordinary spectrum of people that you get to spend time with are not part of your life regularly. Bob brought up the point that we climbed the mountain with 12 other individuals -- we had a range of folks from yoga instructors all the way to an astrophysicist who used to work for NASA. We had people from several other countries, and all different ages. It's hard in life to be able to meet these kinds of folks who are not part of your everyday world. It takes a little sampling of all these parts of the world, and it was delightful to hear their perspective.

AS: What did you find most challenging?

BC: For multiple days you're mentally and physically required to do something you don't really do all year long. You are physically pushed on an average day between 6 and 10 hours. For most mountains we climb, on summit day it could be an 18-hour day. Also, physically you're living and sleeping in temperatures that are very uncomfortable, at altitudes so high that it is hard to even catch your breath when you're standing still. Everything is in slow motion for you; you think about doing things you don't normally have to think about, like taking breaths between meals. In camps you're thinking about walking slowly without breathing, like you're

jogging or running. At about 17,000 feet the oxygen level is about half of what it is at sea level. At Kilimanjaro, when we got up to 13,000 feet, although we kept moving laterally around the mountain, we stayed at that elevation because we had to get acclimated to that change in oxygen level.

There is no familiarity to life while I'm climbing to life at home. I don't touch a piece of technology that requires a charge or a battery. You are so far out of your own element. I stare at a computer many hours a day at home; I have lots of creature comforts. During the climb, I didn't experience running water or refrigeration.

BD: You wake up one morning and you're staring at that massive peak and you realize how big, how daunting it's going to be. You think, "How am I ever going to do this?" If you look at the task as a whole, you don't even know where to begin. You have to break down these huge mountains in your life. You think, "What do I have to do for the next 30 minutes?" You take it one step at a time. If you start thinking about tomorrow or tonight, you could slip or fall and hurt yourself. ... When we stood at the top we couldn't believe we had actually done it, but it was a thousand steps to get there.

AS: What are you most looking forward to on your next climb, Mt. Elbrus, in July?

BC: The next climb is taking us to Russia, so I'm excited about the experience that we're going to have being with the local folks there. It will be the most challenging climb we've ever had. It will be a climb where I rope myself to Bob and we won't be unroped for eight or nine days. He'll be on the other end of the rope the entire time we're on the mountain, unless we're in a tent. You might be able to climb Kilimanjaro on your own because it's not extraordinarily technical, but you can't climb Elbrus on your own. You need to have a partner for safety, and this is someone you're trusting with your life. Every day we're there, we're in our own silent ways saying, "I trust you with my life." You might have to take every physical step yourself, but you have to trust someone else to get you there.

BD: One of the things we're very passionate about is that for each one of these climbs, we find a lesson in what we experience that we can bring back and share with people. ... Just like we learned at Kilimanjaro about taking one step at a time, I can envision what we might learn at Elbrus — being successful requires teamwork and having people around you to help you accomplish your goals. A lot of people out there don't have the support network to help them overcome challenges, and charities like the Autism Society, Alzheimer's Association and Lance Armstrong Foundation become the other person on the end of their rope to help them overcome these different challenges.

For more information, pictures from the climb, or to support the 7 Summit Challenge, visit www.7summitchallenge.org.