Mount Kilimanjaro climb
tests endurance of persons with disabilities

Cerebral palsy fails to deter climber’s determination

Climbing Africa’s highest mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro, would challenge even the fittest individuals. For a person whose every step on uneven ground is difficult, the challenge of an eight-day hike over rugged terrain might seem insurmountable. Thirteen stacked Empire State buildings would fall short of being as tall as Mount Kilimanjaro’s highest peak.

Undaunted by challenges, Canadian Matthew Brewer, 32, whose cerebral palsy manifests itself in his legs, pledged with Wayne Tom, 41, to conquer the mountain. Both receive services at Prince George Association for Community Living (AiMHi) in Prince George, British Columbia. The two teamed with AiMHi program managers Marc Lawrence, 30, and Heather Groleau, 22, to scale the mountain.

The journey to Mount Kilimanjaro, in northeast Tanzania near the Kenya border, was sponsored by the British Columbia Association for Community Living to raise awareness about the capabilities of persons with disabilities. The journey brought together 45 persons who receive services and their supporters from 16 of the province’s community living programs.

“The team demonstrated how much can be accomplished by sharing the same goals and desires,” Lawrence said. “Collectively, we believed we could and would climb the mountain.”

Team members hiked through several terrains and climate zones—forest, moorland, high desert, and glaciers. Of the persons embarking
on the journey, 40, including one person using a wheelchair, reached Stella Point, 19,012 feet above sea level. Thirty team members pressed on to reach Kilimanjaro’s highest point, Uhuru Peak, 19,340 feet above sea level.

Brewer walked every step of the climb, including the ascent to Uhuru Peak. “Coming down was the hardest,” he said. “It was rocky at the top but grew easier nearer the bottom.”

“The journey was a test of determination,” Lawrence added. “The climbers individually pushed their personal endurance levels to unimaginable heights, sometimes hiking ten to twelve hours a day over rugged terrain. We faced heat, exhaustion, bitter cold, challenging ridges, and altitudes with only half as much oxygen as our bodies were accustomed to. Altitude sickness became our greatest challenge.

“It took lots of mutual support to keep our spirits up. Often, it would be the person I was there to support who gave me the strength to go on.”

In addition to challenges, the climb brought unexpected moments of delight. “When I came into camp on the third day, 220 porters and guides gathered around me and sang in Swahili,” Brewer said. “It was awesome.”

Lawrence and Brewer recounted the challenges of their mountaineering experience at the CARF’s Employment and Community Services “Aspire to Innovation and Excellence” International Conference in Tucson in March.

Lawrence is AiMH1’s human resources coordinator at present. Aided by AiMH1’s work option and community support team, Brewer lives on his own and has started a business with a friend shoveling snow in the winter and mowing grass in the summer. He included the climb in his person-centered plan and says he was proud to check it off his list of things to accomplish.

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