

A Life Without Limits

by Sandy Struss

So many of our heroes in society are people who overcame devastating challenges and overwhelming obstacles, and who then committed themselves to being all they could be. Perhaps surprisingly, many say that they wouldn't take back the accident, illness or circumstances that were their "low point", as they wouldn't otherwise have discovered what they were made of.

Sebastien Sasseville was a 24-year-old like any other – but in a moment, his whole life changed. He was diagnosed with insulin-dependent, Type I diabetes.

A diagnosis of Type I diabetes means a lifetime of daily insulin injections, constant finger pokes to measure blood sugar, and the mental gymnastics of trying to figure out how to balance the body's blood sugar levels in the face of stress, exercise, food, sleep, hydration and the activity profile of insulin. It is a daily siege that can wear even the most resilient person down, as the way things go in real life aren't always the way they work in theory. And if diabetes is not well controlled, the complications can be deadly.

“Adversity causes some men to break; others to break records.” -William A. Ward

In the face of such news, Sebastien allowed himself to be depressed for only a short while before he started to look for the opportunity in the situation and how he could create a vision for something much larger than himself. He wanted to do something HUGE to show young people that having diabetes doesn't have to hold them back – and to make an even greater impact, it had to be something more than just his own personal accomplishment. His idea was to lead a group of diabetic teenagers up to the summit of Africa's highest mountain, raise money for diabetes research, and film a documentary that could be used to inspire others.

From conception to departure, the trek was over 18 months in the making, with endless challenges and mishaps along the way. Sebastien knew right from the beginning that it was a wildly ambitious undertaking, and he was told time and time again that his expedition was a “suicide mission”. His doctors and

nurses all thought he was crazy and tried to discourage him from doing the trip due to all the risks involved (no insurance, no medical team, the possibility of insulin freezing at high altitude, etc.), but Sebastien would not be denied. Through the power of his passion and sheer will, Sebastien managed to enroll the parents of 9 teenagers into letting their kids go off to Africa with him, and several parents even joined them on the trip.

Mt. Kilimanjaro is known as “the roof of Africa,” rising from the plains at its base through five ecological zones up to 5895 at its summit known as Uhuru Peak. The way up is a physically and mentally demanding hike which can only be completed with extensive training and the patience to persevere, one grueling step at a time.

The team made it to Kibo Hut (4700m) in 4 days, taking time to acclimatize on the way. The final ascent was to be done in one final 10-hour hike through the night to reach the summit with enough time to return to Kibo the same day. With one of the team members suffering an ankle injury already and another sick from the altitude, things did not look good for everyone to



make it. But by some miracle, every single member of the team pushed through their pain and helped each other to reach Gilman's Point at 5681m, an extraordinary victory under the circumstances. Three team members then had to turn back and only 6 of the original 9 would go on for the final summit.

The final 200m took two hours, and upon reaching summit – the whole team fell silent as the realization hit of what they had accomplished, not only for themselves, but for all the other kids out there who share the struggle with diabetes. The Kilimanjaro team raised more than \$50,000 for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation to support research for a cure, and perhaps more importantly – demonstrated what is possible when you dare to dream.



Reflecting back, for Sebastien it was never about "Kilimanjaro". It was about the vision and the metaphor for living an unstoppable life, no matter what your dream is.

He knows that the life of every single teenager who was on that trip has been permanently changed, and for him that was the greatest reward. The ripple effect of their accomplishment will go far beyond what he could have imagined, as each of those kids will inspire others about what's possible while living with diabetes. And for himself, Sebastien says he never would have done something like this if he hadn't gotten diabetes. According to him, the life defining moment for him was not when he got his diagnosis, but when he decided to do something about it.

Nobody had ever taken on an expedition like that before. It's always hard when you defy expectations and achieve something "the first time" – but after that, it becomes possible for everybody else – and suddenly, you're not considered crazy anymore. Here's to all the trailblazers out there!

Sebastien is leading another group of diabetic youth to Nepal this summer to Everest Base Camp as he prepares for his own attempt at the Everest summit in 2008.



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