View from the Top

One HIVer survives his tallest challenge yet

December 1, 2004 As told to Nick Burns

Who: David Randall
What: Climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro
Where: Tanzania
When: 08.29.04–9.3.04

In August, David Randall, 48, joined three other volunteers to scale Mt. Kilimanjaro in a $10,000 fundraiser for Friends Together, a Florida-based AIDS service organization for families and children. Randall was one of the first American HIVers to target the 19,340-foot summit—Africa's tallest peak and one of the world's greatest climbing prizes.

I've hiked in the past, but nothing like this. I signed up with three other Friends Together volunteers—none of us had much hiking or climbing experience. A Ugandan guy (who joined us in Tanzania) and I were the only positive climbers. I wasn't concerned about HIV, since my T cells were steady at 200 after a year without meds. I didn't even tell my doctors I was going.

The first day, Sunday, was on an easy trail, but by Tuesday, we were holding onto the side of the mountain and skirting cliff edges. We made it to the summit camp at 12,000 feet—7,340 feet from the top—on Thursday. It was sleeting and snowing. After five days of hiking and sleeping in tents, we were exhausted. Being run-down probably weakened my immune system, but I didn't worry.

Three of us left the camp with our guides at 11 p.m. that night to attempt the summit. The altitude ruined our headlamps' batteries, but the light of the full moon helped us find our way. Around 3 a.m. and 16,700 feet, I couldn't breathe—I began stumbling and blacking out. My lungs felt raw from the 20-degree air. It was just me and my guide—the other climbers had returned to camp or pushed on to the top. I finally gave up and turned back. It wasn't worth risking my life. I was disappointed, but thrilled I made it that far.

This climb showed me I can do anything without being limited by HIV. I was taking a chance with my life—positive or not. Experiencing life and culture in Tanzania made it a trip I'll never forget—but one I don't need to do again.

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