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A Real Cliffhanger

By Allison Smith

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Joanne Massey of Roswell has taken the act of charity to new heights; 19,340 feet to be exact. In July, Massey and eight other members of ACE Limited embarked on the difficult journey to the highest point in Africa known as Uhuru Point, the summit of Tanzania's Mt. Kilimanjaro. This charitable challenge allowed the climbers the ability to explore the compelling beauty, harsh climates and breathtaking views of the world's tallest free-standing mountain.

ACE Limited, one of the world's largest insurance companies, was represented by nine of its employees who gathered from ACE locations all over the United States. The employees had more in mind than just conquering a mountain; they also wanted to help the ISIS Foundation. This organization, fathered by ISIS Limited, has pledged to help conquer hunger, lack of education and medical problems for children in Uganda and Nepal. ISIS Limited (International Solutions and Investment Strategies) covers all base costs for the foundation in order to ensure that all donations can be used directly to benefit the children.

Understanding the importance of the ISIS mission, Massey said she wanted to help raise money and at the same time knew climbing a mountain for charity was "right up her alley.

"I was going to succeed, and that was all there was to it," she said.

Although making the 55-mile climb to the summit was challenging for the ACE team, Massey said raising the money was by far the most difficult task. She said she put her "heart and soul" into raising \$21,000, and did not stop hosting fund-raising events such as garage sales until she reached her goal. As an example, a music night was held in Decatur, and patrons paid a \$10 cover charge to listen to a variety of local music.

After months of fund-raising, Massey was elated with the amount of money she was contributing to the charity. "I am thankful to all of the people who opened up their hearts and pocketbooks in order to donate to the cause," she said.

The ACE Foundation, ACE Limited's charitable trust, matched her \$21,000. The remainder of the group's efforts led to the grand total of more than \$300,000, a sum that will allow the ISIS Foundation to not only continue its services, but go further in its missions in Nepal and Uganda.

Inevitably, the next step preceding the climb was the necessary physical and mental preparation. Massey said exercise is a natural part of her daily routine. She ran, biked and hiked to maintain her strength. Coping with the altitude is a factor that is nearly impossible to master, or even prepare for, leading up to the climb, she said.

The eight-day challenge on Mt. Kilimanjaro was a strenuous task, but Massey said it was well worth the journey. Ascending through each of the mountain's five distinct climate zones, the group experienced rainforests, moorlands, heath, alpine desert and arctic regions. Each of the five zones occupies around 3,000 feet of the mountain's height.

Although 15,000 people attempt to make the journey to Mt. Kilimanjaro's summit each year, only half succeed, due to the harsh climates and dramatic changes in altitude. Altitude sickness is the main reason some climbers have to turn around and make their descent before reaching Uhuru Point.

Massey said some days were tougher and colder than others, but her thoughts kept drifting back to the ISIS Foundation's children and how she was giving them a chance at a better life. These moments are what she said propelled her to move forward and continue offering support to the other climbers, with whom she felt an instant bond.

Keeping up the team's morale was important throughout the journey. "Everyone was an integral part of the climb, so we found it necessary to stick together," Massey said.

Walt Massey, Joanne's husband, joined the group of ACE climbers to accompany them and offer support on their journey to the summit.

"Everyone tried to make the others comfortable, and there was a general concern of the well being of everyone in the group," she said. While keeping one another's spirits alive and soaring, Massey added, "There was a lot of humor in the group."

As the group reached the summit, temperatures and rainfall decreased and the climate became frigid. Massey and her group layered their clothing and exhausted every resource in their attempt to stay warm. "Near the end of the climb, my water pack froze solid on my back," she said.

The level of difficulty continued to escalate on Mt. Kilimanjaro's upper region as the climbers steadily made their way to the top. Teamwork became increasingly essential, and Massey said, "There was no need for ropes, just sure footing and good hand holds." This togetherness led the group to their destination safely, and allowed Massey and the other climbers to achieve a difficult feat.

Leonie Exel, general manager of the ISIS Foundation, said, "Joanne is a wonderful person with great humor and verve." When times proved to be difficult, Massey did not let the group down. "(Joanne) kept people's spirits up and continued to sing almost to the summit," Exel said.

Massey and the other ACE employees did not lose focus on their goal throughout the duration of their fundraising and climb of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Upon their safe arrival to their homes in the United States, the group could celebrate their victories. Not only had they ascended over to nearly 20,000 feet above sea level, they had also raised a significant amount of money to benefit the worthy causes of the ISIS Foundation.

Recalling the journey to Uhuru Point as well as her part in raising the funds for the charity, Massey said she "felt a sense of elation." It is not likely she will forget that feeling any time soon.

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