



READY FOR THE CLIMB!

Phil Bota's Story

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A JOURNEY UP THE WORLD'S TALLEST MOUNTAIN!

Hi I'm Phil!

My name is Phil Bota and in May of 2011 at 22 years old, I climbed Mount Everest! I grew up here in Red Deer and prepared for two years before starting the climb on April 12th and reaching the summit on May 26th.

I'm really happy to share my story with you and the lessons I learned about the importance of prioritizing mental and physical well-being when achieving our goals!



WHERE IT ALL STARTED

I remember it being around grade eleven or twelve when I started thinking about what my purpose in this world was and feeling pretty lost because I had no idea.

My dad passed away from a heart attack right before my twelfth birthday. Losing him was devastating and completely rocked all of our worlds. It was so sudden and so quick. My dad was a very fit man and always very active; he would play sports with my brother and I all the time and spent lots of time outside on our acreage so none of us expected something like that to happen.

From that point on, I felt very lost.

As a kid, I always felt pretty confident and joyful most of the time, but all of that shifted for me after losing my dad. I had to grow up pretty quickly. I was feeling this huge hole in my heart. I never got to say goodbye to dad and I just wished that I could be with him and tell him that. I also wished I could have gotten to know dad as an adult since I lost him when I was only a kid.

Growing up, I had always enjoyed going out hiking since I loved staying fit and being outdoors, but they were always just simple little day hikes and nothing too difficult or challenging. One day, however, I went out with my brother and some friends and we did an overnighter at Crandell Lake in Waterton which is in southern Alberta. It was a decently challenging hike with some scrambled sections and something I had never really done before.

When we got up to the top of the mountain, we set up our tents and gear with a view of the beautiful lake out in front of us. Later that night, I took my sleeping bag out of my tent, laid outside on the ground, stared up at the stars and I thought to myself "what gets any better than this?"



After dad passed away, I was going into grade seven at that time. Teachers were always checking up on me after he passed and my family had so much support from their incredible community. I was always so grateful to have this community and support, but at the same time it felt like there was always just so much noise around and in me. It felt like everything was always so busy and like I was trying to pretend to feel okay oftentimes. Of course there was a part of me that was happy and optimistic, but there was also a part of me that was really really sad. I would watch someone go play outside with their dad or realize Father's day was coming around and always felt this huge punch hit me.

That night laying on the ground looking up at the stars on that mountain made me feel like all this noise and everything we deal with was gone; I felt at peace. For the first time, I felt like I was with dad again. I actually had a smile on my face as I thought about good memories I have with him and went over things we had done together. It was a pretty amazing moment that lit a spark in me and a passion for climbing. I don't think I had ever really been the type to push the boundaries or a wild child wanting to test the limits. But that hike ignited a fire in me.

The challenge was what made me feel so good. I've never been that great at talking about and communicating my feelings but being able to feel them physically in my body opened up a totally different way to express the pain I was feeling. To put my body through this physical activity actually made me feel better and helped my grieving process big time. I knew that climbing wasn't going to be easy or something that would just be joyful and relaxing. But that's what I liked about it. After years of losing sight of the meaning in my life and the drive to be excited about what my future could hold or what purpose I wanted to fulfill, I realized that I felt a sense of accomplishment and self-fulfillment that I had never felt before. Climbing slowly helped me stop feeling sorry for myself and like the world is over now because I lost my dad.

Every time I got to the top of a climb, I felt this huge sense of accomplishment not only from myself, but also feeling like my dad was so proud. I felt like he could look at me and say "I'm so proud of you, good for you for doing what you love and for pushing past your pain." I know that at the end of the day, he wouldn't want me to sit here and self wallow being sad and thinking "poor me." It's easy to do that, and there's a reason for that. It's hard not to be down when something totally rocks your world and pulls the carpet out from under your feet.

It took awhile for me to get back on my feet, and whether I'm still on my feet I don't know. But I do know that those moments at the top of a climb made me feel accomplished, fulfilled, and like I could have a moment of clarity with dad. That was my therapy. I would sit down at the top and just talk. I'd ask dad simple things like "how's your day going?" and feel his presence with me.

Another important part about climbing is that it was something only I chose to do. I was doing what I loved. Oftentimes, we try and tell people what to do in hopes of trying to help them by suggesting things that work for us, but no one told me to do this. Climbing was my choice. It was something that I found to be the biggest help in expressing the pain I had felt since losing dad. There was so much in my life that people were telling me to do and places they were guiding me to go or things they assumed would help me, which I was always grateful for. I greatly appreciated their attempts to help and their compassion for me and what I was going through; my community always had the best intentions in mind. But climbing was the first thing that was really big for me, the first thing that was all on my shoulders and what I found helped me the most. Climbing was something I had full control of, and that felt really good.

The highest peaks of land on each continent of the world are called the **Seven Summits**:

Asia: **Everest** (29,029 ft) in Nepal/China

South America: **Aconcagua** (22,841 ft) in Argentina

North America: **McKinley** (20,320 ft) in the USA

Africa: **Kilimanjaro** (19,341 ft) in Tanzania

Europe: **Elbrus** (18,510 ft) in Russia

Antarctica: **Vinson Massif** (16,500 ft) in Antarctica

Oceania: **Puncak Jaya** (16,024 ft) in New Guinea

From that point on, I dove in head first into the world of climbing and fell in love with the aspect of being out challenging myself and pushing the limits. I now had this profound drive and ambition to keep doing climbs, asking "what's next?" and wanting to do better and better every time I tackled another climb.

I went to Alaska for my first high-altitude climb on Mount McKinley, the tallest mountain in North America. It kicked my butt! I was that kid that went into the climb with a lot of confidence thinking "oh, this is going to be no issue" and "this will be no problem" but it was really tough.

The two biggest factors that made this climb really hard, at the time, was the altitude and the cold.

The altitude hit me really hard because I had never experienced high altitude before. I'd never been in an environment that was over 10,000 feet and so I suffered on McKinley. I got altitude sickness and for a solid two days, I puked my guts out. As we got to the summit, I was sitting there throwing up pretty much the whole time, just chugging water to puke it back up! Being twenty years old, I was young and resilient so I could bounce back easily but it was pretty rough.

In addition to the altitude, it was *so* cold. McKinley has a few walls of ice faces that you have to climb and on one of them you may even need to camp right there on the ice wall with platforms anchored underneath your tent. Since I wasn't doing too hot at that point, we decided to spend the night at the bottom of this particularly tall ice face and tackle it in the morning so that we wouldn't have to camp out on the side of it. We would need a full eight or nine hours of climbing to get over this wall!

Being on that wall, I struggled and, at times, I didn't think I was gonna make it. It was so cold at - 60 °C with the windchill and I couldn't feel my hands at all. I had both of my ice axes looped around my wrists and secured because I couldn't even feel how tight I was gripping the axes; I didn't know how much I was picking into the ice as I couldn't feel the weight of myself pulling on it. At one point, I fell and got really lucky because I was okay but it humbled me very quickly as to how serious this business was. In one split second I was upside down. One moment I was climbing and the next I was all the way back down wondering what happened. My body was heavily relying on the tools we had and I made it, but I feel like I just barely did.

What hit me the hardest in those moments of struggling on McKinley was the realization that I was the one who was putting everyone in jeopardy. I was the weak link of the group and that really hurt. I felt like I was not only



letting myself down, but also my team down. It pushed me even harder to realize that if these climbing feats are things I want to achieve and go after, I want to make it so that I can do this as part of a team and without someone trying to carry me up or hold my pack for me. I wanted to be able to do this on my own with the independence and control I found ever since feeling the spark that climbing ignited inside me. I wanted to make sure that when I reached the top, I was doing it for myself.

Quite a few years later, I went back and climbed Mount McKinley again just for the simple fact that I felt like I barely made it and wanted to do it better. Although McKinley really kicked my butt the first time, it was also very good because it made me realize that getting into the climbing world in hopes of tackling any of the seven summits was no joke. It's a serious challenge that requires you to put in everything you've got. You have to put in a whole lot of time, energy, effort, and money into these climbs so it's a big investment. It taught me that I need to be better in my preparation for these high altitude climbs which helped me put everything into getting ready to climb Everest later on.

With this knowledge in mind and practice under my belt, I was ready to start preparing for climbing the biggest mountain in the world: Mount Everest!



THE PHYSICAL PREPARATION

The goal of preparing for the climb was to simulate what the environment and experience of climbing Mount Everest would be as much as possible. The physical ability of my body was the only part of the journey that I could have full control over so I needed to be in the absolute best shape possible.

I had an exercise routine of waking up at 5:15 am to do cardio and circuit training from 5:30 to 7:00 am every morning followed by strength training in the local gym later at lunchtime. Then in the evenings, I would basically run a marathon at the Collicutt centre. A key part during all of this training was to do it all with restricted oxygen to simulate the air I would be breathing up on Everest. I would wear an oxygen mask that allowed me to adjust the amount of oxygen I had access to in order to train my body as if it were doing so at a high altitude. I also did this training wearing a heavy weight vest to simulate the feeling of all the equipment and gear that I would be carrying as I climbed up Everest. At the peak of my training, I was able to run up the Calgary Tower with 30% restricted oxygen 25 times in 2 hours with 60 lbs strapped on my back!

In addition to physical exercise, I would not eat much food for up to two days and then run a marathon before eating regularly again to simulate the lack of food I would be able to eat up on Everest. I also deprived myself of sleep and would stay awake for up to 2 days in order to prepare myself for the exhausting push for the summit that I was told would take around 36 hours with no sleep and very little food or water to accomplish.

THE MENTAL PREPARATION

Although all of that would get me physically prepared for the climb, it wouldn't get me mentally prepared. I also needed to train mentally and build mental resistance.

I knew that this would be a dangerous endeavour. There was a significant chance I wouldn't make it back to my family and there were so many ways to see the situation negatively. I could think about all the many ways something might go wrong, or the stories of past climbers failing and suffering, or the negative comments people threw at me for my decision. Preparing for the climb would take a long time and require lots of commitment and exhausting training; days of not eating and hours of endurance exercise with little to no sleep was what my daily life would look like for two years. I knew that if I kept thinking about all the negative thoughts, I would drown in their weight. But in a sea of negativity, I chose to stay afloat by hanging on to the positive buoys that were hard to find sometimes, but always somewhere in arm's reach, like a shining life preserver waiting for me to grab on.

This was my mental strategy. I knew I had to focus on the positive if I was going to achieve my goals. This not only meant choosing to keep my mental energy geared towards the good things in my life, but also reframing the way I viewed things that may have first appeared to be solely negative.

Positivity Power!

At the end of each day, take out a piece of paper or notebook and write down one good thing that happened that day. It can be really big or really small. See if you can come up with one more, or even two more!

One thing that helped me to anchor myself to positive thinking was the kind gift someone gave me years ago.

There was one point in this whole journey, a tiny little thing that still motivates me to this day because of its positivity. On the night of my dad passing away, there was a nurse at the hospital that came up to me holding a little Tweedy bird stuffy. She handed it to me and said "I know that the next little while is going to be extremely difficult and it's gonna be a really rough journey, but I just want you to know that Tweedy is going to be on this journey with you and you can do whatever you need to; if you need to squeeze him, punch him, throw him, kiss him or hug him, you do whatever you need to." This simple gesture of kindness and empathy from a random stranger stayed with me all throughout my life and I took that little Tweedy bird up the mountain with me to remind me of the many kind and compassionate people I've been so grateful to have had in my life along the way. I had this moment with dad holding Tweedy at the top of Everest knowing that that was the day I lost him and I felt reunited with him that day on the summit.

Even in the darkest place that I've been, there was still this light that was still shining and positivity that kept me pushing forward and kept me going. It's little things like that which are sometimes the most important to hold on to. It's the little moments in life that are like that which are huge game changers and really what make a huge difference in people's lives.

Having enough money to fund the climb up Everest was another aspect that I had to prepare well for. In total, it would cost me over \$65,000 so I needed to work with other people to help fundraise and sponsor the expedition. It took a great deal of community to gather enough resources and money to fund the trip and about two years to finish preparing completely.

I had a partnership with the Heart and Stroke Foundation which was a way to honour my dad and my local gym helped me by offering training. Although many people were generous with their money and supportive of my goal, others were not so keen to help. One potential sponsor was that of a big company and I was very intimidated and nervous to sit in front of a panel of CEOs to try and get them to buy into my goal. After sharing my story and dream of climbing Mount Everest, one of the men said he was impressed by my ambition, but that he wouldn't sponsor me because he didn't think I would be able to do it; he told me that he didn't want to give money to a cause that he believed would fail.

Encounters like that one made me feel like I should just give up. It seemed like all throughout the preparation process, there were countless roadblocks and obstacles that I had to get past in order to get closer to climbing Everest. At night when I was lying in bed and had a bit of time to unwind after my intense days of training, it was easy to think about all the negative thoughts and aspects about the situation that I had. Rejections of my goal that people threw at me hit in a lot of directions because it wasn't just me I was doing it for; it was for my dad.

Did You Know?

In 2011, the permit to be allowed to try climbing Everest cost \$10,000. Today, it costs \$11,000 and in 2025 the price will be raised to \$15,000!

I knew that if I laid there and kept going over all of the negative thoughts in my mind, it would be very easy to throw in the towel and give up. But I wanted to stay true to myself and honour my dreams. So I decided to focus on all the positive things in my life, no matter how small they seemed. I decided to turn the negative thoughts into positive ones to keep myself from spiraling. Each time something knocked me down, I used it as fuel to push me harder.

WHAT DID MY FAMILY THINK?

Some of my family members were very supportive of my decision to climb Mount Everest and wanted to do their best to help me prepare. They helped me raise money through sponsorships and gave me moral support when I was doubting myself or getting weighed down by negativity. They understood that I was going to put everything I had into climbing that mountain and that there was no stopping me. They knew that I needed to do this for myself. Others were not so supportive in the beginning. Upon hearing my decision, they were overcome with shock, fear and anxiety. They were very worried about my safety and afraid of losing a beloved family member. Despite initially feeling very nervous and fearful about my decision, they slowly felt better by becoming involved in the preparation process. They got to know the guides, learned how they'd be able to contact me during the climb, and knowing about what would be happening.

At the time, I didn't fully expect the pain and shock my decision would cause for those close to me. It was difficult to balance going after my own goals with being mindful of the effect it could have on others. At first, I was a bit selfish in making the decision purely for myself without considering how others close to me might feel. I had blinders on. That razor sharp focus on my goal prevented me from seeing the way it could affect others. I realized that their fear, anxiety, and pain surrounding my decision was actually an expression of their love for me. Knowing that, I was able to see their reactions as a form of love instead of a lack of faith or confidence in me, or an unwillingness to support me. I learned not to let people's initial reactions and judgements deter me from going after what I dreamt of achieving.

It's important to give people a chance to come around/support you even if it seems like they don't like your decision when they first hear it. Shortly before leaving home to begin the climb, my mom gave me a little book full of motivational stories of people achieving their dreams despite all the challenges they faced. I would keep that book with me as I climbed up the mountain and read its stories before bed in my tent at each camp when I was doubting myself and afraid I wouldn't make it. That little book was a comforting reminder of the support I had.

With my body in peak fitness, all my gear packed, and enough money to fund the trip, I was ready to fly to Nepal and start the journey up Mount Everest.

There was one thing I had to remember though, and that was the #1 rule in mountain climbing: when you're feeling exhausted, never sit down because you might not have the energy to stand back up again.

And with that in mind, I began the climb.



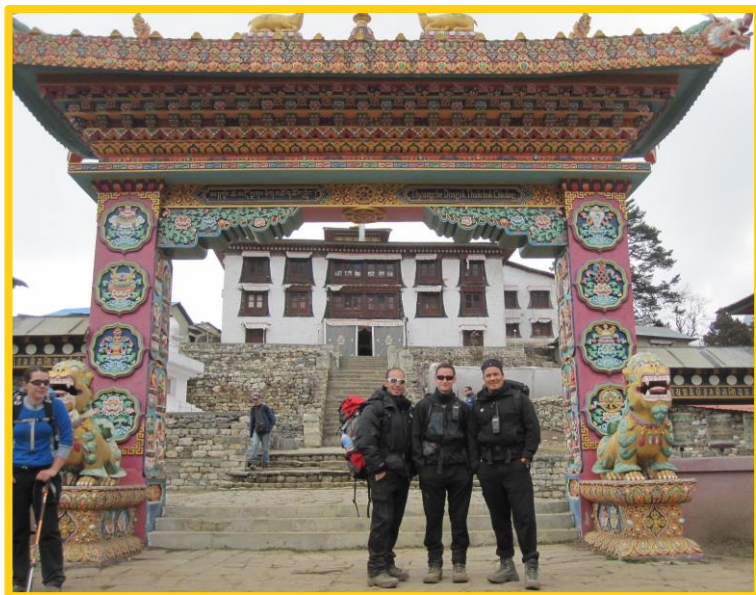
ARRIVING IN NEPAL

I arrived at Lukla airport which is the closest one to Mount Everest and also one of the deadliest places to fly into and out of because of its extreme location in the Himalayas. Taking off and landing is dangerous due to the incline of the terrain and a steep drop off at the end of the runway.

After landing, it was time for the first hike up to Base Camp. As we made our way along this hike, I was immersed in the natural environment surrounding Mount Everest, the culture, and what daily life looked like for the local Nepalese people. Prayer flags with vibrant colours representing the elements of air, wind, fire, water, and earth hung from buildings and monasteries, waving in the wind. In Nepalese culture, Mount Everest is known as the "Mother Goddess of Earth" and represents the core of the world. They believe that if there's a storm on the mountain, it's reflecting a storm happening in the world.



Sherpas required that we climbers get blessed in a monastery before starting our journey up the mountain. This was to ensure that they could trust us to work together and help each other as we climb. It was also an important ceremony of kindness to wish us the best safety and success for our journey. The Sherpas wrapped blessed rice in fabric and folded it up into a little square to give us so that we could have something sacred and protective to hold on to as we climbed. Getting blessed gave the Sherpas peace of mind and showed that we could build a level of trust and respect for each other that would help everyone climb up and down the mountain as a solid team.



I saw some climbers show up to Everest with arrogance. They looked down upon the monasteries we passed and the religious practices we took part in; they thought these religious practices were silly and that getting blessed and taking part in the Nepalese culture was a waste of time. Those climbers could not see the importance and incredible value in having an open mind and respecting the beautiful culture surrounding them. They held the belief that they were better than the local people and were unwilling to work with the Sherpas. However, these close-minded people usually didn't make it very far up the mountain.

Being open minded is crucial for being able to adapt to new situations and hurdles we face along our journey. It is how we learn from others and increase the knowledge, skills, and tools we have to help us in this moment and for the rest of our lives. With an open mind, we have the ability to learn new things from others and perhaps be able to improve both our own life and the lives of others.



GETTING TO BASE CAMP

The first camp of the mountain is called Base Camp and it's where tents for sleeping and eating are fully set up for a more long-term period of time. Moving past this point, we would need to pack up our tents and supplies and carry them with us as we moved up the mountain. When we got to Base Camp, my fellow Canadian climbers and I set up our red tents amongst the group of tents from the other climbers trekking up the mountain. This location is fairly safe, but the weather is still unpredictable and can have dramatic differences from day to day. Here, my team and I would stay for some time to get acclimatized to the altitude and do some practice climbs to continue training before starting the ascent up Mount Everest.

Seeing Everest in all its glory and size for the first time was incredibly intimidating. I thought "there's absolutely no way someone could stand on that summit!" Climbing it looked impossible! Seeing it in a picture is nothing compared to seeing in person.



It was overwhelming.

But instead of letting the fear overcome me, I decided to break my goal down into baby steps and take it day by day. I couldn't know how my body was going to react to certain situations or what the environment and weather would be like as we climbed. At that moment, I realized that the detailed schedule and plan we had made for the climb wouldn't be useful because there was so much out of our control. It was good to be prepared as much as possible, but we realized that we couldn't prepare for everything that would happen. We had to be flexible and ready to adapt to respond to everything the mountain would throw at us, and the first curveball hit us quickly.

Shortly after being at Base Camp and acclimatizing to the new environment, our team's guide collapsed during one of our practice hikes. He was having heart failure and was told by the doctor that he had to turn around and call it quits to protect his heart from further damage. Our team guide was our best source of knowledge and expertise; he



was the person who knew Everest the best and had summited many times before. But now, he had to go home and our plan had taken its first big blow.

Our team had to decide whether to end the expedition or keep going without our best guide.

That night, I didn't get any sleep because all I could think about was what our next steps should look like. Fearful thoughts raced through my mind for hours. Was the our team guide's heart failure a sign that we should stop here? Would something similar happen to others on the team? This happened where it is relatively safe and emergency help was nearby, but what if something like this happened high up on the mountain where rescuing us would be extremely difficult?

I returned to the idea of taking it day by day. I decided to just do the next baby step and tackle this intimidating feat one moment at a time. Breaking down the massive goal of climbing this beast of a mountain into smaller steps was essential to making my goal manageable. I realized that this was an example of us needing to adapt to the changing situation and that we can't control others and what they choose to do or what happens. We can, however, control how we respond to the unexpected when things don't go according to plan.

After we agreed to continue going forward, we started our climb to the summit of the tallest mountain in the world!



MOVING UP THE MOUNTAIN

After packing up our tents and supplies onto our backs and gearing up for the weather ahead, we started our trek up the mountain. Each day we would hike for 10-12 hours, rarely stopping and only briefly to drink water or have a small snack. We were burning tons of energy as we climbed for such long stretches with all the heavy gear strapped on our backs. Every part of the mountain had a terrain that was unique to that spot and presented different climbing challenges that required us to adapt. Every time I saw the next camp, I thought to myself "Oh, only an hour left until we get there!" but being that its size, like everything on Mount Everest, is so extreme, the Sherpas would tell us that it would actually be three or four hours before we got to the next camp!



Each time we arrived at the next camp, we were happy to be one step closer to the summit. After a long day of climbing, we would set up our tents and have a bit of time to rest, eat, and wind down before then going to sleep. Sometimes, a snow storm would hit while we were asleep and we would wake up with our tents being buried in snow! We always went to bed with a shovel in our tent so that we could dig ourselves out in case we needed to when we woke up.



As we climbed higher, the temperatures got colder and colder and there was less and less oxygen in the air to breathe.



With me, I always kept a stash of gummy bears and snickers bars that acted as both my comfort food and as the quick energy I needed to fuel my body and keep going.



PUSH FOR THE SUMMIT

Each camp that we arrived at became more and more dangerous due to it being higher up on the mountain and exposed to even harsher and more extreme weather. They also became more dangerous because getting help in an emergency would be more difficult the higher up we were. If someone suffered an injury high up on the mountain, they would have to climb back down to one of the base camps themselves in order to get medical attention. As we got closer to the summit, my friend Steve would face an injury which desperately needed that medical attention while we were dangerously high up the mountain.

During the push for the summit, a climber has to be ready to stay awake and climb without much water or food for about 36 hours. This is because the environment at that extremely high altitude is too dangerous to allow one to stop and set their tent up to take a break or sleep. Being that this is the most dangerous part of Mount Everest, it's called the Death Zone. I knew it would be the hardest portion to climb and what I had been preparing for the most throughout my two years of training.

As we started making our way through the Death Zone, we got caught in a terrible storm with frigid, strong winds pushing us over and blowing through our snow suits. Our hands were going numb because it was so cold and we relied on the straps around our wrists to keep ourselves from accidentally letting go of the ice picks we used to climb. After removing his glove briefly, Steve suddenly realized that his hand had gone black! Since he couldn't feel his hands anymore, he had no idea they had gotten frostbite. Even his pinky finger shriveled up! We knew that we had to return to base camp immediately or else he might lose his hand.

We climbed back down to Camp 4 and spend the night there before climbing further down all the way to Advanced Base Camp to get Steve to safety. With his hand now in need of emergency care, he couldn't keep going and had to end his climb right there. But he encouraged me to keep going and push for the summit. He looked at me and said "you're



strong, you got this, there's not one question in me that you can do it!" I really appreciated his faith in me but my stomach was in knots. What if I'm the next one who's going to get injured? What if an emergency happens when I'm up higher where it's impossible to get help? Is this a sign that I should turn back now and not take the risk?

After Steve froze his hand, it felt like a domino effect of negativity was falling on me.

My mind started racing with all sorts of worried thoughts. Since Steve had to quit, I would be the last one left on the team to climb. Other than the two Sherpas accompanying us, I would be by myself. The Death Zone is so high up that no helicopter could come to save me if something bad happened. A rescue mission would look like me and whoever I was with trying to get down the mountain. I was nervous after watching everybody else fall. Was it my turn next?

The terrible storm that hit when Steve's hand froze came out of nowhere and was totally out of our control. The temperature was getting down to -72°C and our gear was only suited for -70°C . Again, I didn't know what to do.

The hardest part of the climb was still ahead of me and I knew the storms hitting us would continue to be relentless. I was feeling frustrated as I thought about how many things hadn't gone according to plan and how close we were to making the summit with yet another obstacle in front of us. We gave everything to get to that moment. We were so close to the finish line and now we had to consider turning back. It's so hard to just turn around after giving up two years of your life to get there. We gave all of our energy into reaching that point. It couldn't be over, not yet.

We left to start our push for the summit at night so that by the time we reached the top of the mountain after 8 hours of climbing, it would be morning and we could enjoy seeing the beautiful view. We climbed in the pitch black darkness of the night with headlamps on so that we could see in front of us. As we progressed further and further, we came upon this ridge that looked like a narrow shelf of snow that stretched out for a really long way. Wearing our heavy, stiff, giant hiking boots with spikes on the bottom made walking on this ridge tricky as it was so narrow that I could only get one foot in front of the other. The snow that came down from the relentless storms that hit us before had also buried the fixed line. As I searched for it to stay on track, I was waist deep trying to get my leg up and over the snow one step at a time.



MY TRUE SUMMIT

As the ridge snuck up on us, we were at about 28,000 feet high and it was around four am. We were only about four hours away from reaching the summit. In this pitch dark, I looked over at the neighbouring mountain called Lotse and I could see the headlamps of climbers lighting up its North face as they made their way up.

While I trekked along through the snow in the dead of night on this ridge, I suddenly felt like all the stars had aligned. For the first time during this whole journey of being on Everest, I felt comfortable, safe, and at peace. I finally let my guard down a little bit and wasn't so worried, doubtful and afraid that I wouldn't be able to make it through whatever the next big step in front of me was. What I saw and felt here on this ridge was what turned out to be my true summit, the peak of my experience, and a moment I can still picture clear as day.

It so vividly lives in my mind as if it had happened just yesterday.

As I turned to look out at the view beside me on this ridge, I saw the most amazing image a person could ever see. If you could capture the clearest, best high-definition picture, like one you'd see in National Geographic, it would be like what I saw in that moment. Something that my brother had told me before leaving to climb Everest hit me hard; I remembered that he said to me "during this whole adventure, make sure that you actually take some time for yourself too." He told me "you're doing all of this stuff for all these other people and for this goal which is great, but make sure you actually take in where you are."




For some reason, this little voice just came into my head and hit me so hard. As I looked out at the view, I saw the whole Himalayan Range. I looked up and could see all the stars shimmering. I was so high at 28,000 feet that it felt like I could touch them, like I could grab a star and hold it in my hand. Then I noticed that there was also sheet lightning in the distance and the whole mountain range at times would completely light up and glow. It was the most incredible view.

It was as if someone came, woke me up, and said “look, take this moment; I know you’re focused and I know you’re determined on where you’re going but this is an incredible once in a lifetime opportunity of a moment so take it, capture it, seize this moment, truly be in this moment.” So that’s exactly what I did. I remembered the number one rule of climbing that says to never sit down because you might not be able to get back up. But in that moment something inside me told me I had permission to break that rule. It was as if someone came up behind me, grabbed my shoulders, and plunked me down on this ridge. So I just sat.

If a situation like that happened and my two Sherpas saw me sit down, they would immediately get worried and wouldn’t let me sit down; they would do their best to get me to stand up again and keep going because I’d be breaking the number one rule of climbing.

But they didn’t.



Even though it felt like it was a really long time, I probably only sat there for about 10 minutes. It felt like it was hours. For this first time in my life, I had my first conversation with dad as an adult. He was sitting right beside me as I looked out at the beautiful mountain range being lit up and the stars sparkling above me. I sat there with dad and talked with him. It wasn't even anything like an intense conversation about Everest. It was just simply asking each other "how are you? How's it going? How are you doing? How's life?" It was just the simplest kind of everyday conversation you would have with someone you love, and it hit me so deeply. With the vividly alive view and everything I was looking at and feeling inside, it was so powerful.

At that point there, I had reached my summit. I was sitting there with dad and thought "this is everything for me, this is what I needed, this is what I came here for, this is what I was searching for, this is what I wanted from this whole journey." I had achieved what I was dreaming of. Whether I would make it to the actual summit or not, I didn't really care because in my heart and mind, I had summited Everest.

It's almost as if it was meant to happen, like everyone knew that this moment was incredible and needed to be soaked up in all its beauty. My Sherpas Pasang and Puhbar, who were a little ways away on either side of me, both sat down. I don't think that happens very often on Everest.

AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD!

Later that morning around eight am, we had reached the top of Mount Everest! We were standing at the highest part of the world and could see the whole Himalayan range! Usually, climbers can only stay up there for a mere 5 minutes or so before having to climb back down because the wind is so strong. But we got lucky because there was barely any wind and we were able to stay at the top for a whole 45 minutes to take in the view! It was so sunny and clear that you could literally see as far as your eyes would let you. I could even see the curvature of the Earth!

We took some pictures with our sponsorships and I took some time to myself to soak up the moment and take in the view. I called my family who was anxiously waiting to hear from me back home at a Capri hotel. We celebrated my making the summit and hearing their voices lifted my spirits so much! I was so excited to finally be at the summit!

Before I started talking on the phone, I completely took off my oxygen mask in the excitement of the moment and within seconds I was seeing stars; I totally blacked out and fell over. One of the two Sherpas who had summited with me quickly got the oxygen mask back to my face and I woke up. That definitely scared me a little bit. I realized just how extreme everything is up there and how dangerous of a position I was in. There was so little oxygen at the summit that I couldn't even make it five seconds without my oxygen mask on! I realized how important it would be to have enough oxygen as long as I was on this extremely high part of the mountain. For another 1,500 feet or so coming down from the summit, I would be very vulnerable to the extremely limited oxygen in the air.



Then the weight of the realization that I still had the rest of the way down hit me hard.

I was only halfway!

Everyone always talks about how when you get to the summit, you're only halfway done climbing the mountain, but it didn't truly hit me until I was at the top and had put everything into getting there. I realized the full reality of what I had left to do now to get back to safety. I hadn't really thought about that because I was so focused on making it to the summit! Since I was so unsure if I even could make it there, I poured everything into trying to do that. But when I did make it, I had a moment where I said to myself "look what that just took, look what it took to get to this summit, and now I need to do all of that again? Holy cow!"

My mind flipped. It went from reaching the summit as this goal for myself and for dad and the achievements I wanted to fulfill, to now wanting to go home and see my family and friends to tell them all about this whole experience.

All the preparation of sleep and food deprivation I had been doing leading up to climbing Everest was for this moment. I had to prepare to stay awake without much food or water for an estimated 36 hours to complete the push for the summit and getting back down to Camp 4. After blacking out instantly from taking my oxygen mask off, I was also nervous about running out of oxygen and hyper-aware of that possibility. But I knew that my body was ready for the next half of this challenging bit and so as long as I could keep my mind focused and stay sharp, I could make it down.

So after finally reaching the top of the world, it was time to start the descent.

I made my way down to Camp 5 with my two Sherpas, Pasang and Puhbar, but by that time I got really scared because I stopped feeling the majority of my body. It felt like everything was going numb and I was so exhausted that I was scared to stop moving and rest because I worried that I wouldn't be able to get back up. I was starting to feel hypoxic from the lack of oxygen I was taking in at this extremely high altitude so I was getting clumsy and it was getting harder and harder to think straight.

On my one-piece climbing suit, there were zippers on the sides and front that I could unzip, and for some reason I started opening up zippers. Here I was between the summit of Everest and Camp 5 in the - 48 °C weather unzipping my jacket because I thought I was burning up! I was tripping and stumbling over things in my boots with giant spikes on the bottoms and so I was getting clumsy. Earlier, I had accidentally ripped a huge hole down the side of my suit and I knew if I wasn't careful enough, I could end up really injuring myself with my spiked boots and exposed leg.

What is Hypoxia?

Hypoxia occurs if there is not enough oxygen in the body. It may make a person dizzy, disoriented, and unable to breathe normally.

I had to focus to keep my mind sharp and smarten up. We were still in the Death Zone at this point so I knew that if I stopped and couldn't get back up, rescuing me would be nearly impossible. With my body in such an exhausted state, I was really scared of stopping and felt safest option was to keep going further down the mountain. So as Pasang and Puhbar stayed at Camp 5 to pack up our tents and gear, I made the decision to keep pushing through to climb down to Camp 4 on my own without them.

In this state of physical and mental exhaustion, I told myself "alright, you are on your own so we need to do this to get home; you just made the journey to the top and you've summited, you can't call it quits now because this is not where your journey ends."

Being so weak, I was losing my drive and my ambition a bit. I had to stay focused and pay attention somehow. Since I had lost the drive for reaching the summit, I needed another source of motivation to keep me going. I realized that I was so excited to come home and share the stories of this incredible journey to my family and friends. I wanted to share this story with everyone I loved so much and show them what we were capable of doing. My motivation changed focusing on the summit to focusing on my people. I thought about coming home to see my people and giving them a hug, even though I'm not really that much of a hugger! I was so excited to see my mom and brother so that I could give them a big hug and have dinners together with my family and friends to tell them all about everything I did on Everest.

I decided to start thinking about everyone who helped me to get here and be on this journey. It distracted me from the pain and exhaustion in my depleted body and the doubt creeping into my mind as I felt the weight of everything Everest was throwing at me. Not only was it a distraction, but it was also a huge motivator to keep me going. I thought about how when I came home, I would tell people how much everything they said and everything they did meant to me. I imagined telling people how much they made a difference and that their support was the reason why I was able to do what I did.

So I started saying names out loud. I would take a step and say a name. Then I'd take another step and say another name.

I would say the names of all the people that had helped me in some way to get to where I was. I probably did that for a solid 10 hours as I climbed down. At the end, it felt amazing to reflect on how many people were involved in my journey, helped me achieve my goal, and formed the community that stood behind my every step up and down Everest. I wouldn't have been able to do it without them.

I noticed as I climbed down that the mountain **changed** between the time we had pushed for the summit and now. The massive heaps of snow that would fall down and bury certain places and the winds that blew the snow around changed the mountain considerably from what I remembered climbing on the way up. I would get to a certain situation going down and think "whoa, this looks way different, that's not supposed to be like that." It blew my mind how the mountain was constantly moving, like an ice field where things shift and break through all the time. The massive amounts of snow that came down would bury the fixed line that ran up almost every section of the way up the mountain. If they were too buried to be dug out, you would have to fix a new line, but anchoring it securely was difficult because it was hard to know if a spot was strong enough to withstand the weight of pulling and tugging on it while climbing.

All of the sudden, I stepped on this one section and heard a loud "CRACK!"

Immediately, the ground beneath me broke through and within seconds, I fell into a crevasse. Before I knew it, I was suddenly upside down and all I could see was blackness.

What is a Crevasse?

A crevasse is a massive crack in the ground that can be extremely deep. If a person falls into a crevasse, they have to be very careful to climb out instead of fall further down.

I had fallen into the snow down a huge crack in the ground and couldn't see a thing. As I realized what had happened, my mind started racing. I thought I was gone. I thought it was game over. I thought to myself "no one's going to find me, no one's going to know what happened to me. Why did I go by myself? Why did I make that decision?"

I was so scared.

I had done some avalanche training from an group that offered crevasse rescue courses as part of my preparation for Everest so I had an awareness of little things that one wouldn't really think of but are important to know if you get caught in a situation like I was. It taught me how to figure out how to determine what's up and what's down as well as various techniques depending on the situation. Because of that course, I knew that I needed to get myself repositioned and fixed to anchors in order to pull myself out. First, I shifted around to get right-side up and then I set in an anchor to harness myself off onto in case the fixed line broke. Then, I hung my bag in on a separate line and used the ice axes I kept in my bag to slowly and carefully pull myself out.



When I got out, I had a full fledged panic attack for the first time in my life. I was hyperventilating and couldn't breathe even though I had my oxygen mask on me. I had always heard about people not being able to breathe during a panic attack but being that I had never experienced one, I didn't truly know what that felt like. After climbing out of that crevasse and barely making it out alive, I sat on the ground gasping for air.

Camp 4 is 24,000 feet high which I had already been acclimatized to and is considered a relatively safe zone for the most part so I was eager to get there. I knew that if I could just get to Camp 4, I would be able to stay and rest there while I waited for Pasanh and Puhbar. But as I was getting closer to the camp, still on my own, a nasty storm hit.

It hit hard.

The winds were blazing, powerful, and freezing cold. I couldn't even see my bright neon red boots anymore so I had no idea where I was stepping or what was under my feet. Since I couldn't see where I was going from all the wind and snow that was pelting me, I had to solely rely on following the fixed line to guide me. But at first, I accidentally hooked onto the wrong one and climbed down in the wrong direction for about half an hour before realizing that I was not where I was supposed to be! I was running on nothing; I had no food or water in me and hadn't slept for a long time by that point so my brain was extremely foggy. It was so hard to think straight and my focus was waning. Nevertheless, I managed to get back on the correct fixed line and keep going through the storm.

When I had finally made it to Camp 4, however, I couldn't see where our tent was! All that I could see was nothing but a big white out from the storm. At that point, I became even more scared because now I couldn't stay at Camp 4 and rest.

What I thought would be a safe spot was no longer an option. I had to adapt again. I knew that I had to keep pushing and make a new goal to get to Advanced Base Camp if I wanted to make it out of this sticky situation.

Climbing down that far without stopping was unheard of on Everest, but I knew I had to.

The whole climb from Camp 4 down to Advanced Base Camp is still a blur to me to this day. There had been points on Everest where I was scared, worried, and doubted whether I would be able to do what was in front of me, but this stretch of climbing was the first time I truly thought I might die. Before, I had always felt relatively safe in my gut feeling despite there being tricky sections and sketchy situations. But at that point there, I truly didn't know if I was gonna make it.

There is a spot called Crampon Point which is a very tricky, steep climb that requires you to have the big spikes on your boots more than ever. I knew once I had reached Crampon Point that I was only about forty-five minutes away from Advanced Base Camp; I was almost there. At this point, no one had heard from me for about a forty hour period. I learned later that my two Sherpas stayed at Camp 4 thinking that's where I would be. I was truly one hundred percent on my own. Although it felt kind of good to be independent, it was also terrifying knowing that I had only myself to rely on and nobody else.

When I got to Crampon Point, I fell on my knees and just sat there for about 20 minutes. I didn't think I was going to be able to get back up. For the first time, I honestly felt like I was calling it quits. Even though I was exhausted, my body was prepared for this. It had been awake and starved of food and water for days during my training back home and was at its peak fitness, so I knew it could keep going.

My body wasn't what would hold me back; it was my mind. I felt so exhausted, depleted, and hopeless that I didn't think I could make it anymore. I felt the full weight of everything that Everest had thrown at me and felt extremely defeated.

In that moment, I thought "I don't know if I can do this anymore."

All of the sudden, I felt this wave wash over me. It was as if dad came and picked me up off the ground and said "you're not calling it quits here, there is no way." After feeling that energy, I actually got kind of mad at myself! I thought to myself "there is **no way** you get to Crampon Point and this is where you die." I thought "everyone will see you right here and how this is where you gave up. Are you kidding me?! Come on! Pick it up! You got this! You just summited, you made it to the top and you're calling it quits at Crampon Point?! I don't think so!"

Thus, with a newfound wave of motivation and courage from my dad, I mustered the energy to get up and keep going. I focused on moving one leg at a time and how I was nearly there to Advanced Base Camp.

When I finally got to the top part of Advanced Base Camp, my friend Steve and a bunch of Sherpas ran up and when they got to me, I collapsed. I had absolutely nothing left in me and they carried me in to safety. I had reached the 52 hour mark of staying awake and climbing without food or water and I was completely drained.



LIFE AFTER EVEREST

After getting back home, I found out that Camille, the school that I had attended growing up, had been creating a huge wall as they followed us throughout our whole journey on Mount Everest. They were posting pictures up while we were over there climbing! The first presentation I did when I came back home was at Camille and I was so nervous because the whole school was there to watch!

Despite the initial nerves, I felt so energized by the community. It felt so alive and incredible to share my story with people and to see how enthusiastically the community followed it. Before having climbed Everest, I had my blinders on: I always thought that I was just doing this for me and that it was only my journey without realizing how much it could affect others and how far it could reach people. I never considered that it might spark interest in others by showing them what we were doing. They might think "wow, I don't know if I want to climb Everest but I want to achieve other things and Phil has shown me that it's possible, that I can do it!" I realized that people started thinking "I know achieving what I want will be hard but if Phil did this and went through all that, then I can do it too!" I was so happily surprised to hear that from people after sharing my story because I didn't even think about how my accomplishment might inspire others!

In the beginning, I was just so set with my feelings and thinking about dad that I had a hard time opening up and sharing the emotional side of my journey climbing Everest. It just felt so personal. I thought I wanted it to only be a journey between me and my dad. But over time, people showed me that I needed to share this and that my dad would want me to share this because doing so could help other people.

I realized that he would be so proud of me for having the courage to share the personal side of my journey with others and that I don't have to keep it a secret. I learned that knowing the motivation and background behind my decision to go after climbing Everest could make my story incredibly inspiring, even though I never thought of it like that. In my mind, I was just doing what I felt I needed to do at that time in my life on my path.

Since I was really scared going into climbing Mount Everest and put all my time, energy, and attention into that endeavor, I didn't really consider the community I had supporting me. When I got back home, the people I had around me broke through my tunnel vision and helped me take off the blinders I had on. Sometimes we're like that when we get on our own path and are really determined to see it through. It's easy to forget or overlook the effect our actions and decisions have on the people around us.

It almost felt weird having people tell me that my Everest journey was really much bigger than I had considered it to be. To me, it was just between my dad and I. Honestly, I didn't think it was that big; I felt that it was just what I wanted to do and a dream that I wanted to go after. Everybody has their own dreams and goals, whether that's climbing Everest or something like graduating from high school or college. We need keep our eyes and minds open to acknowledging and seeing the "Everests" that people are "climbing" every day in their own lives.

Phil's Philosophy

You don't have to feel like you're extremely important in this world by doing something like climbing Mount Everest. What matters is doing what you're passionate about.
Do what you love doing!

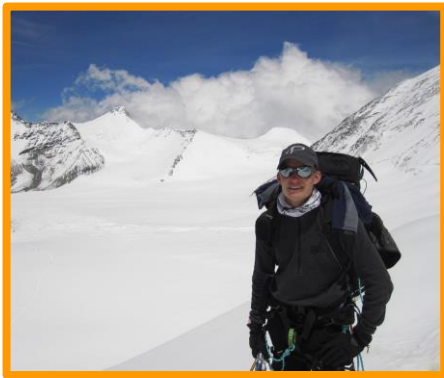
Sometimes we can get caught up in which accomplishments are flashy and look the most impressive to the inattentive eye so go after them in hopes of getting lots of recognition for our efforts. But that recognition is not what's fulfilling. What's truly fulfilling is doing what you love with a passion that flows out naturally from that love for what you're doing.

A big way that I've been able to relate to a lot of people and situations in my life has been through climbing. It's enabled me to understand other people's feelings, and to also understand my own feelings. I don't think I would necessarily know and understand the pain it took someone to do what they've done or go through what they've experienced until I've been through a situation like that myself. Because climbing has put me through pain and helped me understand my own feelings, I feel that I can better understand or sympathize with the pain others have. If you lose someone really close to you, a lot of people are scared to talk about it because they don't know what to say and it's hard to connect. For me, climbing has always helped to make sense of everything and made it a little easier to communicate by using what I've been through to try and relate to someone as best I can.



After realizing just how much was actually out of my control, I also learned that although it's good to be prepared and I'm extremely thankful that we prepared as much as we did, we couldn't prepare for everything. We had a detailed plan about where we wanted to be on the mountain and at what time we'd like to arrive there written down in a little book we carried with us.

But as soon as we laid eyes on Everest for the first time and started trekking up, we pretty much through that book out the window. None of the goals and deadlines we had set for ourselves mattered; what mattered was responding to whatever we had in front of us in the present moment, whether that was a storm blowing through or an emergency injury someone on the team had. Staying present and dealing with the situation in front of us was the most important aspect, not the deadlines we had previously set for ourselves before we knew what we would be getting into.



In one context, my Everest journey is over because I can't see myself climbing it again in the future. On the other hand, despite being on Everest was only a two month journey, it feels like it was a lifetime of learning and growing. When I go into all the other parts of my life now, it's that journey that I was on that really helps me to move forward and think about things a little more clearly and with more wisdom. When I came to Mount Everest I had tunnel vision and blinders on. But when I left, my whole world opened up. I was so happy to come home and see everyone to share stories about what I was doing on Everest and what everyone else was doing in their lives.

Honestly, I was just so thankful to be alive. When I got home, I felt so grateful to still be here and to be able to share this journey. Everest kind of set the path for the rest of my journey in life; it taught me to be flexible, open-minded, and stay present with the moment at hand so that I can take baby steps in tackling whatever the next “Everest” in front of me is. Oftentimes I realize that I’m having a moment in life that is similar to one I was having while climbing Everest that I can look back on in order respond better to the one facing me now. Because of the mistakes and stumbles I had experienced on Everest, I have the opportunity to continue improving by learning how I can capitalize better on the situation I’m experiencing now.

I really strive to emphasize loving the journey. A lot of the time, we get so focused on the destination that we forget about the journey leading up to that destination. But sometimes it’s the most important and most memorable moments that happen during the journey instead of when we finally reach our idolized destination. When I look through the books we made of our Everest adventure or go over the photos in the slideshow I’ve made for sharing my story and see the villages with all the kids and culture of Nepal, I can’t help but remember how incredible the journey was. I’m so proud of myself and my community for even making the whole adventure happen. I’m so proud of us for pushing through the hard parts and not giving up when the journey got tough or something went wrong. The summit was amazing, but it was more like the icing on the cake. The truly amazing part was the journey we took to get there!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stephanie Warnick is a student at Red Deer Polytechnic enrolled in a Bachelor of English program. She worked with her professor Dr. Anah-Jayne Samuelson and Denise Freedman from the Central Alberta Child Advocacy Centre to make this book come together. She loves writing and hopes to inspire readers with Phil's amazing story of perseverance and love!

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