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Adventure at the Top of the World

Amputee Who Climbed Mt. Everest to Speak at IWU, April 17

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. What's it like climbing to the rooftop of the world the snowy summit of Mt. Everest, 29,000 feet into the sky when you're an amputee?

Find out, April 17, when Thomas Whittaker shares the adventure of a lifetime in an IWU Family Day presentation, "Making It Happen." Whittaker is the first disabled person to reach the top of Mt. Everest, the world's tallest mountain.

Whittaker who was injured on Thanksgiving Day 1979, when a drunk driver swerved into his lane, hitting the van he was driving head on will tell his story of scaling the world's tallest peak at 7:30 p.m. in the Shirk Center, Performance Gym, 302 E. Emerson St., Bloomington.

Whittaker's multi-media presentation is open to the public, free-of-charge.

Climbing Mt. Everest

In May 1998, Whittaker started out on his third attempt to reach Mt. Everest's peak. The mission, which received corporate sponsorship, was dubbed: "Everest Challenge '98." The trek incorporated three projects:

- An environmental restoration project.
- An All Abilities Trek involving a group of physically disabled people on a climb to the Everest Base Camp.
- A service initiative enabling Prescott College students to participate. Prescott College is located in Prescott, Ariz.

Whittaker realized his lifelong dream of reaching Mt. Everest's summit on May 27. His wife, Cindy, and their 6-year-old daughter assisted the All Abilities Trek and waited at the base camp for Whittaker's return.

New Zealand climber Edmund Hillary, 33, and his Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norkay, 39, made the first successful ascent of Mt. Everest, reaching the peak on May 29, 1953.

Everest Odyssey

In 1989, Whittaker became the first disabled person to attempt the Everest summit. He reached the mountain's 24,000-foot level three times, but weather barred him from going on to the peak.

Undaunted, Whittaker made a second attempt in 1995, which also proved unsuccessful.

The American Dream

"The essence, the heart of the American Dream, is not money, status, or power," Whittaker says, "but the freedom to dream and the courage to embrace those dreams.

"As a people," he adds, "we love to compete and we love to win. But more than anything, Americans applaud the grip and spirit it takes to get back up and finish the race."

Recovering from a Car Crash

The toughness that took Whittaker to the top of Mt. Everest also is seen in how he battled back from a car crash that left him permanently disabled.

For five days after the wreck, he fought for his life. The crash resulted in multiple fractures of both his legs and severe injuries to both of his feet and knees, resulting in removal of a kneecap and amputation of his right foot.

"His doctors," a biography reports, "told him he would probably never walk again."

The biography continues: "Facing down pain, anger and thoughts of suicide, Tom struggled to put his life back together. He received an extraordinary amount of support from the surrounding Idaho community, and decided to remain in the U.S. and apply for citizenship. Despite his doctors' grim prognosis, he learned to walk again, and, remarkably, to enjoy his favorite outdoor activities as an amputee."

Wilderness and the Handicapped

In 1981, Whittaker finished a second master's degree and founded the Cooperative Wilderness Handicapped Outdoor Group (C.W. HOG) at Idaho State University. This volunteer group, funded by private and public

donations, has spawned similar programs on three continents. It introduces the disabled to outdoor activities as a means of physical and emotional therapy.

Whittaker directed C.W. HOG for a decade before he left Idaho in 1991 to take his current job as an adventure education professor at Prescott College.

Early Years

The outdoors always has been a big part of Whittaker's life.

The son of a Welsh Army officer, Whittaker arrived in the United States having worked his passage delivering a 65-foot yacht across the Atlantic.

While in the U.S., he worked on achieving his dream of becoming a professional mountaineer, participating in climbing exploits that took him around the country.

He completed a master's degree in education at Idaho State University.

Whittaker's Message

A Whittaker biography observes: "Ever aware of the impact of his message on others, he is now speaking to audiences worldwide about his extraordinary experiences.

"His achievement," the biography continues, "and the hard work, discipline, confidence, and faith that led to it, forms a compelling and universal story, a story that will remind audiences of the infinite power that we all possess as individuals."

Mt. Everest Lore

In Tibet, it's known as Chomolungma "goddess mother of the world." In Nepal, it's dubbed, Sagarmatha "goddess of the sky." And, in the West, it once went by the drab moniker, "Peak XV." But since 1865, this tallest mountain on Earth 29,028 feet tall has been named for Sir George Everest (1790-1866), the British surveyor general (1830-1843) who mapped the Indian subcontinent.

The great mountain straddles Nepal and Tibet.

The Great Trigonometrical Survey of India in 1852 measured Everest's elevation as 29,002 feet above sea level. This remarkably accurate measurement was accepted until 1955, when it was adjusted by 26 feet to 29,028 feet.

The dangers of climbing Mt. Everest are many: avalanches, crevasses, winds up to 125 miles-per-hour, sudden storms, temperatures of 40 degrees Fahrenheit below zero, and lack of oxygen at extreme altitudes.

In the so-called "death zone," above 25,000 feet, the air holds only one-third as much oxygen as at sea level, increasing the chances of hypothermia, frostbite, high-altitude pulmonary edema (when the lungs fatally fill with fluid), and high-altitude cerebral edema (when the oxygen-starved brain swells up).

Even when breathing bottled oxygen, climbers can experience extreme fatigue, impaired judgment and coordination, headaches, nausea, double vision, and hallucinations.

Members of expeditions typically spend weeks sometimes months getting acclimated to the treacherous Everest environment.

Climbs generally are slated for May and October to avoid winter snows and summer monsoons.

The first attempt to scale Mt. Everest was in 1921 by a group led by George Mallory.

In May 1996, eight climbers lost their lives in the greatest disaster on the mountain. A few weeks later, another group of climbers suffered four deaths. In 1996, a total of 15 climbers died, and the following May another eight mountaineers died.

As of 1996, it was estimated that 4,000 mountaineers have tried to climb Everest about 660 have succeeded and 142 have died.

About IWU

Whittaker's appearance is sponsored by the Issues and Programming Commission of the IWU Student Senate.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts.