CLIMB FOR A CAUSE

Mount Kilimanjaro, standing majestically at 19,340', is one of the world’s seven summits and the highest peak in Africa. Its massive, snow-capped mountains have long enticed climbers and adventurers from around the world.
DANBURY — Dr. Majid Sadigh has thrice climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. The first time was to earn forgiveness from his late father, the second to learn humility and the third to accompany his son and build relationships for his ongoing attempt to create a health center at the base of the mountain.

But a greater purpose will power him on his upcoming fourth climb. Sadigh, 69, aims to raise money for a microbiology lab at the St. Francis Naggalama Hospital in Uganda, one of the many places he partners with around the world through his Global Health Program.

“This time I have a bigger motivation,” he said. “My heart has been touched by the poor people of Naggalama.”

Sadigh is the director of global health and the Christian J. Trefz Family Endowed Chair in Global Health at the Western Connecticut Health Network. The Global Health Program sends medical students to provide care in countries such as Uganda, Zimbabwe, the Dominican Republic, Russia and Vietnam.

He hopes to raise $19,341 — one dollar for each foot of the climb — to cover the cost of the lab. He had raised nearly $8,000 by Sunday morning and said he is confident he can raise the rest. Community members can donate on the Western Connecticut Health Network’s website.

Sadigh said the Naggalama hospital is recognized as one of the best in Uganda, but has limited resources to serve some of the most marginalized people in the world. This lab will be critical to diagnosing tropical diseases, such as malaria.

“It’s going to keep some of the diseases, such as malaria. This is a life-saving intervention for that tiny hospital.”

Sadigh also hopes his climb will spread the Global Health Program message that humans are genetically related, regardless of skin color or religion, and deserve the same rights to health care.

“We are cousins and nephews and nieces,” he said. “We have to have access to similar health. It doesn’t matter if you are a mother giving birth in Naggalama, you should have the same access that a woman in Switzerland is going to have.”

Sadigh’s trek on Africa’s tallest mountain will begin Friday and take about a week, depending on the weather. If it rains, as it did on his last trip, he will only be able to climb for three to four hours a day, instead of the average six to eight hours. Several guides will accompany him on the Northern Circuit — a route that is easier than the intense Mawenzi trail — to the Uhuru Summit.

He has trained by doing aerobics, as well as climbing 165 miles on Connecticut mountains over the last 40 days. He has previously climbed Mount Elgon in Uganda and Mount Kenya.

On the first day of the climb, Sadigh described the final stretch of the climb to the Uhuru Summit. Sadigh said he will hike through a “beautiful” rain forest, with monkeys, birds and elephants. He will move onto a “lifeless” landscape, with temperatures dropping the higher he climbs. Some days he will hike as many as 12 to 13 miles.

He said seeing the mountain’s wildlife and volcanoes reminds him that humans are “nothing” in comparison to the rest of the world.

“For someone who is oriented to biology, science, Kilimanjaro is Holy Land,” he said. “You go to celebrate life, diversity and then understand what we have and how much we need to be careful about resources.”

Previous trips have restored his dedication to those in need.

“It makes you so humble,” Sadigh said. “I said, ‘Oh my goodness, I’m going to spend the rest of my life at the service of the poor people.’”

Sadigh described the final stretch of the climb to the Uhuru Summit as “torturous.” Hikers climb for seven hours overnight, moving slowly in the cold and wind as oxygen levels drop. They reach the summit at sunrise with burning chests and blue fingers and lips from the lack of oxygen.

But at the top are glaciers and a moon that seems close enough to touch, Sadigh said.

“When you get to the top and you see the dance of the sun rays on this icicle, you forget everything,” he said. “You are lucky. [You are like] a woman who has given birth to a beautiful baby, you totally forget your torture.”

Some theorize hikers hallucinate the incredible site because of the lack of oxygen, Sadigh said. Air pressure at the summit is about 40 percent of that found at sea level, according to a Kilimanjaro guide website.

Sadigh said he read his diary entry from his first trip and could hardly believe the site he described.

“It’s like going to the moon,” he said. “It’s like going to another planet.”

He said half the people who attempt the climb fail. But success or failure has little to do with physical fitness, he said. He has seen an 87-year-old woman reach the top when young people in their mid-20s could not, falling ill with “mountain sickness” from the lack of oxygen. What pushes climbers to the top is their motivation. And Sadigh said he will endure rain, headaches, chest pain — anything — for his cause.

“For the patients of Naggalama, I will do even more,” he said. “That’s the minimum thing I can do.”

By Julia Perkins
The Danbury News Times
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Dr. Majid Sadigh, director of Global Health for Western Connecticut Health Network, is running a clinical trial for a vaccine to prevent infections from Clostridium difficile, a germ that sickness thousands of people in the U.S. He is one of 200 nationwide, but only two in Connecticut. The other is in Bristol. He is photographed in his Danbury office on Monday, March 30, 2015.
I left Entebbe Airport (Uganda) for Kilimanjaro Airport (Tanzania) at 11:30 am. I was picked up from Kilimanjaro Airport at 1:30 pm and checked in to Kilimanjaro Crane Hotel at the center of Moshi (890 meter elevation) at 2:30 pm.

I was welcomed by the director of the tourist operating company, Washington (the guide) and Bernard (associate guide), and received an orientation session for the climb at 8:00 pm.

Thursday February 8th

Wake-up call at 7:00 am
Pack daily backpack and put everything else in duffle bag
Pack sleeping bag in duffle bag
Wash up with a gallon of warm water in a bucket
Have breakfast
Answer health-related questions and let the guide check your oxygen saturation and heart rate
Fill Camelbak with 3 liters boiled water
Apply sunscreen and put on mountain gear needed for that day’s climb
Climb 4-6 hours to the next camp
Rest and have lunch
Go on a two-hour climb for acclimatization
Dinner around 8 (the same health questions and oxygen saturation and heart rate monitoring)
Then try to sleep

Daily Climbing Routine
Friday, February 9th

**MORNING**

I was picked up at 8:00 am and driven to the main office of the tourist operating company. I registered and answered the first round of health-related questions, and had my oxygen saturation and heart rate measured. I was introduced to all members of the team (cook, waiter, and 3 porters) before we all participated in a traditional ritual “Sing and Dance to Kilimanjaro” together. On the way to the main gate, we stopped by a general grocery store to buy necessary items (cake, dried fruits, and chocolate). The drive to Londorossi Gate took approximately three hours from Moshi. The dry season made driving through beautiful cultivated land easy.

**AFTERNOON**

The Lemosho Route began at Londorossi Gate (2,250 meters) in the West. I registered with the Kilimanjaro National Park authorities. There was a long queue of porters waiting to check the weight of their load. After lunch I was driven for 30 minutes to the trailhead at Lemosho Gate at 2,100 meters, from which we began the short, relatively easy first-day trek to Mti Mkuwa Camp around 2:30 pm.

The track snaked through a dense and beautiful rainforest. I saw many birds and monkeys as well as diverse trees and vegetation. By 6:30 pm we were in Mti Mkuwa Camp, located in the rainforest at 2,820 meters. At night while in the tent, I experienced sleep phobia and completely lost my balance when standing. But by morning, I was again back to myself!
I spent the first 90 minutes trekking through the last section of the rainforest path before entering the low alpine moorland zone, which followed up onto the Shira Plateau. The trek was relatively short and gradual with many ups and downs and a stunning landscape ending at Shira Camp 1 (3,610 meters).
DAY 04

Sunday, February 11th

The plateau is beautiful and covered by many shrubs, flowers, giant senecios and running streams. The trek is relatively easy. At Shira Camp 2, I ate lunch and rested before trekking a little higher up the plateau to enjoy the stunning view across the valley below and Western Breach of Kilimanjaro above. The night was cold.
I started trekking due East from the Shira Plateau. The landscape rapidly became desert-like as I approached Lava Tower and the Shark’s Tooth formation at 4,600 meters. I had lunch at Lava Tower before descending a steep and slippery path passing through the Garden of the Senecios which featured many giant lobelias to Barranco Camp at 3,900 meters where I spent the night. It was cold.
Tuesday, February 13th

After breakfast, I started a difficult climb to the top of Barranco Wall (4200 meters), a 257-meter steep wall that must be traversed to arrive at the top of Karango Valley (amazing scenery; clouds a thousand meters below your feet). This was the only portion of the climb that I had to use all my limbs! From there, I followed a path that wound through many ups and downs to Karanga Camp (3,960 meters) where I spent the night. It was as Barranco camp - brutally cold.
DAY 07

Wednesday, February 14th

I trekked through the barren desert landscape that leads to the Mweka trail and up to Barafu Camp (4,680 meters). Barafu was foggy, windy, and cold. At Barafu I had an early dinner and then tried to rest before the upcoming summit attempt at 1:20 am.

DAY 08

Thursday, February 15th

Day 8 started at 1:20 am with hot tea, biscuits, and a long zigzagging hike up the heavy scree that covered the steep slopes of Kibo. The trek was slow, tough, and brutally cold. I struggled through every minute. However, I was lucky that there was neither much wind or snow.

Photo credit www.summitmarker.smugmug.com
After about 6 hours of hiking, I reached Stella Point (5,739 meters) where I watched dawn break across the Tanzanian landscape before continuing the trek up the crater rim to Uhuru Peak (5,895 meters).

Over 60% of climbers stop at Stella Point. Many of those who intend to get to Uhuru rest here for a few minutes before even thinking to advance an inch of remaining 1 km to Uhuru. To finish the climb from here you have to call upon your brain to drag the hidden energy to the surface. If you are lucky you then discover another source of energy which, like any discovery, brings joy and satisfaction.

But I kept going up for another half an hour then I stopped for a short break before continuing on to Uhuru Peak. There I spent only 20 minutes taking photos before heading back to Stella Point and sliding down the scree slopes of Kibo to Barafu Camp where I had the opportunity to rest and change my gear before continuing on to Mweka Camp (3,100 meters).
The final day on the mountain was a short one that began with a group song and dance, "Sing and Dance to Kilimanjaro," followed by a trek down a narrow path through thick rainforest. My body was exhausted and my knees sore from the previous day of descent. Regardless, I enjoyed the wonderful rainforest scenery as I slowly descended towards Mweka Gate (1,640 meters) where I signed out with the authorities and received a gold certificate for summiting Uhuru Peak. Around 2:00 pm, I was settling back into the hotel in Moshi.
DANBURY — Dr. Majid Sadigh was on the brink of exhaustion as he neared the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro. His right knee had been in pain for five days and he felt like he could no longer move. The Danbury Hospital doctor had climbed Kilimanjaro three other times, but never before had he felt so much pressure to reach the top. He knew the people of Naggalama, Uganda, were counting on him. Sadigh had promised to raise $19,341 — one dollar for each foot of the climb — for a microbiology lab at the St. Francis Naggalama Hospital, one of the many places he partners with around the world through his Global Health Program.

Then he remembered the advice another climber and donor had given him: When you feel like giving up, talk to the mountain. Sadigh did.

“I don’t mind to die, to be honest,” he told the mountain. “But if I die now, there are so many people that are going to be, really, under a lot of really emotional pressure.”

All at once, the sun came out. “[It] gave me so much energy — so much energy,” Sadigh said. “I basically stood up and then I finished almost another 2 ½ kilometers that I had in front of me.”

Sadigh’s eight-day trek, completed a day or two faster than expected last month, raised more than $20,200 for the lab, which will allow the hospital to treat patients with infectious diseases. These types of diseases are common in Africa, but the hospital does not have a way to care for these patients, Sadigh said. Most patients cannot afford to travel elsewhere for treatment, so they are forced to live with their disease, he said.

“They are so resilient because they have no other option,” Sadigh said. Sadigh is the director of global health and the Christian J. Trefz Family Endowed Chair in Global Health at the Western Connecticut Health Network. The Global Health Program sends medical students to provide care in Uganda, Zimbabwe, the Dominican Republic, Russia and Vietnam. Students from those countries also can spend three to six months studying in the United States. The Global Health Program is meant to teach people that everyone is genetically related and deserves equal care, Sadigh said. “We as the human, we have only one responsibility, to make the resources available to everyone,” he said.

After his trek, Sadigh spent several weeks teaching at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, and visiting St. Francis Hospital. Sadigh said the gratitude from the hospital has been overwhelming. Sister Jane Frances, the head of the hospital, and three other administrators surprised Sadigh at the bottom of the mountain. On their own dime, they flew from Uganda to Tanzania to give him a plaque and “unity award.”

Sadigh said the hospital administrators told him that what he had done was more meaningful than money, and that he was “an important person for us now.”

“I would say this is a golden page of my life because it touched my heart so much,” Sadigh said.

Sadigh said climbing Mount Kilimanjaro is more purposeful because he experienced and better understands the physical pain his patients could be in. He said seeing the vastness of nature is also humbling.

He said he is unsure whether he would climb Kilimanjaro a fifth time, but if he loses that humility he would need to return.

“If I get a trace of arrogance, [if] I know that I have some sentiment of impurity, I need to go to Kilimanjaro, just to remind myself how privileged that I am,” he said.

By Julia Perkins
The Danbury News Times

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Dr. Majid Sadigh on Mt. Kilimanjaro where he raised money for a microbiology lab in St. Francis Naggalama Hospital, one of the many places he partners with around the world through his Global Health Program.
To learn how you can support the WCHN Global Health Program, please contact the Foundation office at (203) 739-7227 or e-mail foundation@wchn.org.