



# Tall Mountains, Tall Dreams

BY ANNE MACK

On the Balcony of Mount Everest, a landmark halfway point between the South Col and the summit typically used as a resting spot for exhausted climbers, with snow and sleet stinging his face from every direction, Ryan Dahlem was grappling with a sudden new reality. His goal for which he had worked tirelessly for the past two months and preceding 10 years was now within a few thousand steps and was quickly slipping away.

At 27,500 feet above sea level, the air is thin. The body is exhausted from months of training and weeks of climbing rotations to prepare to reach this highpoint. Even for the most elite mountain climbers, the brain is firing slowly.

Breathing with supplemental bottled oxygen and clinging to the ice-covered mountain with metal-point boots, Ryan knows a decision, right or wrong, has to be made. His choices: go ahead and assuredly risk your and your father's lives due to the unexpected perilous storm that has descended on the mountain. Or, abandon the summit bid and return to high camp to face inevitable despair and heartbreak.

What do you tell yourself in that ephemeral, yet defining moment to courageously step in either direction?



Mountain climbing is a high-stakes sport that takes constant training, intricate command of technical equipment, and razor-sharp focus and precision in every step. The risks are often highest when the athlete is at his physical and mental limits. The sport has a reputation as extreme, individualist and thrill-seeking. For St. Margaret's Upper School Assistant Principal Ryan Dahlem, however, that couldn't be further from the truth.

Ryan began climbing as a boy with his family—his father John, mother Sioux and older brother Shawn. As Sioux often says, “motion is lotion for life” and the Dahlems embraced this as the family mantra exploring the outdoors of Southern California.

“Growing up, my parents were great role models. They embody an enthusiasm for life that was reinforced every day. They were very active at work, in the community, in education—they both pursued and attained advanced degrees when we were kids, and they enjoy physical activity. We were always encouraged and expected to be active,” explained Ryan.

“My dad was a high school principal and my mom was a principal of a school for the blind. The priority for summer vacations was to be together as a family, and we discovered outdoor adventures were a great way to connect.”

Together the Dahlems climbed the Southern Californian peaks. When those were exhausted, the family took a weeklong, 73-mile hiking trip across the High Sierras when Ryan was 12 years old. While his classmates were vacationing at the beach, Ryan was standing atop Mount Whitney, the highest mountain in the contiguous United States.

By the time Ryan was an adult, Gortex was like a second skin and hiking with a heavy backpack was ingrained in his life. His outdoor pursuits had become increasingly difficult and consumed much of his free time. For all of his adventures, his dad, Dr. John Dahlem, was by his side.

“We didn’t have a deliberate focus to become mountain climbers. It was a gradual, but continual process. When I was in college, my dad was planning to hike Mount Whitney again with some friends and asked me if I wanted to join them. I said, ‘of course.’ We connected to it naturally and our interest and passion for it grew from there,” said Ryan.

“I’m drawn to the reflective nature of hiking, the awe-inspiring vistas from atop a mountain. The enduring quality of rock...you could climb San Gorgonio today and its rocky summit will look the same as it did when I climbed it 30



years ago. The physical and mental challenges of climbing, the ruggedness of nature that can inspire you one moment and terrify you the next. My dad and I found a common bond in climbing. We enjoy doing it together and find that we make a great team.”

By the late 1990s, Ryan and John were fully immersed in their shared hobby. They attended technical training camps. They were subscribers of *Outdoor* magazine and had bookshelves full of climbing books with brawny, tell-tale titles like, “Hill,” “Ascent,” “High Adventure,” “High Points,” “The Climb,” and the ubiquitous cautionary climbing tale, “Into Thin Air.”

In 1999, the Dahlems climbed Mount Rainier in Washington. At 14,410 feet and a glaciated peak, Rainier was the most technical and risky climbing they had encountered. For the first time, they were climbing with ice axes, crampons on their boots and were roped together as crevasses and avalanches were new risks for the climbing duo. Dissuaded, they were not. The two-day ascent elevated their climbing skills and ambitions, and set the ball in motion for the major expeditions that would follow. From there, the ball only rolled up hill.

After receiving a Bachelor of Arts from Stanford University and Master of Education from Harvard University, Ryan returned to Orange County to teach at University High School in Irvine. While on summer break in 2000, he and John traveled to Africa to climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

“Embarking on Kili was exciting. The trip included the climb and a weeklong safari afterwards. To reach an elevation of 19,340 feet, we thought that was the highest we’d ever go.”

Travel was another natural appeal of mountain climbing for the Dahlems. “We have a love of travel, to learn about places and to interact with new cultures. We’ve seen the world through our expeditions and it has broadened our perspective on life,” he said.

It wasn’t long before they were gearing up for another major expedition. Prior to starting a new job with Stanford University as associate director of admission in 2002, Ryan took off with John to Alaska to climb “Denali,” or Mount McKinley as it’s more commonly known, the highest mountain in North America at 20,320 feet.

“McKinley was a new level for us. The expedition took three weeks and involved climbing to five camps before reaching the summit.”

As if training to climb America’s highpoint wasn’t difficult enough, climbers affix large sleds to already heavy backpacks to transport the cumbersome load of gear and supplies needed for an extended climb. To prepare, the Dahlems climbed local peaks with tires chained to their packs dragging behind them.



“Dragging tires was great preparation for McKinley and we used it for future climbs as well. It made it so much harder, which later proved to be great training for the limited oxygen supply we would face on Everest.”

The footage of their summit day on July 16, 2002 shows a joyous and tearful Dahlem team. “We had a beautiful summit day, clear skies in every direction. We were elated and overcome with emotions. We knew this was exactly what we wanted to be doing...and doing it together was even more special.”

After Denali came Mount Elbrus in Europe in 2003, Cerro Aconcagua in South America in 2005 and Vinson Massif in Antarctica in 2006 a few months before accepting a new job with St. Margaret’s Episcopal School as director of admission and financial aid.

With each highpoint, Ryan maintains that they never looked ahead to a larger goal. “We were not thinking about Mount Everest or completing the seven summits. If people asked, our most common response was, ‘no way!’” They took each mountain as a new adventure only focusing on one step at a time. “We looked for the next challenge. We told ourselves, let’s go for this climb and see how we do. That was it. It was about our shared love of climbing rather than an ultimate quest.”

Eventually, however, they had to face that they had climbed five of the seven summits, the highest points on each of the seven continents. The remaining were the easiest, Mount Kosciusko in Australia, and the toughest, Mount Everest, in Asia, at 29,035 feet the highest mountain on Earth.

The next natural goal was in front of them and they could no longer resist considering it. Kosciusko would be essentially a day hike at 7,310 feet, so they decided to set their sights on Everest. Were they ready for what Tibetans call Chomolungma, Goddess Mother of the World? They chose instead to cut their teeth on Himalayan climbing with a more calculated challenge, the sixth highest mountain in the world, Cho Oyu.

At 26,906 feet, Cho Oyu is one of 14 mountains in the world that exceed 8,000 meters. The distinction of an 8,000-meter peak is that oxygen levels are so low at that elevation the human body is simply unable to adapt. Even with supplemental bottled oxygen, which is standard for climbing above 8,000 meters, a person can only survive for so long. Mental and physical impairments are common, and this is where most fatal accidents occur. As a result, elevations above 8,000 meters have been coined as the “death zone.”

Ryan offers his perspective, “No one can ignore the facts of physiology. You’re literally dying while you’re up there. The other way to look at it, of course, is while you’re up there, you’re totally alive.”

Regardless of the excitement and quest for life, Dahlem-style, this was still a daunting task and there was no hubris in their approach. They trained and honed their technical skills incessantly and the mental weight of preparing for Cho Oyu was equally unrelenting. “I often wondered who we thought we were attempting this climb. Were we physically and mentally ready? Even if so, there were so many elements that would be out of our control. The weather, acclimatization, altitude sickness, frostbite, even attaining the visas to enter the country could have thwarted our efforts.”

Legendary mountaineer and Director of International Mountain Guides Phil Ershler, who was the first American to summit Mount Everest from the North Face, knows well the Dahlems from several climbing expeditions. He said, “When John and Ryan come on a trip we know they’ve done their homework. We take that as a given. They are always very well equipped physically, very well prepared mentally and truly committed to the expedition. We know their preparation and commitment can’t be beaten. They are also two super quality people and very positive people to be around. They support each other and support and bring up every member of the team. We couldn’t ask for more from someone on our expeditions.”

In October 2008, after a harrowing six-week expedition where they saw two experienced climbers perish, the Dahlems successfully ascended Cho Oyu. As they crested the summit, breathtaking views in every direction made them feel as though they were on top of the world. Looking at the mountain ranges around them, one was unmistakably above their horizon. The summit of Mount Everest stood majestically in the distance, staring them in the face and boldly reminding them that no, they were not quite on top of the world. Though they spoke no words about it then, they were of the same mind about their next goal... Mount Everest was looming and it was next.

On April 3, 2010, the Dahlems were hiking a leg of the 35-mile trek to Mount Everest Base Camp through the Khumbu Valley region of Nepal. From this remote corner of the world, Ryan accepted a new position with St. Margaret’s as Upper School assistant principal. He wrote in his journal that night from Namche Bazaar, “We saw the south side of Everest for the first time today. It was both daunting and

exciting. It is interesting to turn a page of life in Nepal. You have a new professional opportunity and you're starting an Everest expedition. A great day." It was Ryan's birthday... and Everest was the best present he could imagine.

Along the trek to Base Camp, the Dahlems had somber reminders of the magnitude of the challenge ahead. Buddhist monuments called chortens memorializing famed and unknown climbers alike who had died on the mountain lined the trail. "We were never overconfident, nor did we believe success would be measured only by reaching the summit. Coming home safely was most important."

Once at Base Camp at 17,500 feet, climbers begin the arduous training regime to acclimatize the body to handle the low oxygen levels higher on the mountain. Ryan explained, "You climb to Camp 1 and then down to Base Camp. You rest and go to Camp 1, spend a night, the next day climb to Camp 2 and then all the way down to Base Camp again, and so on until you reach Camp 3. Then you descend to Base Camp and await the green light for good weather to make your summit bid, a five-day climb to the top."

On May 22, 2010, Ryan and John rested after climbing to 24,000 feet. They had reached Camp 3 perched on a narrow ledge halfway up the Lhotse face. Ryan filmed footage out his tent vestibule of the beautiful Himalayan peaks around them. "This is the kind of weather we've been waiting for. It just doesn't get any better than this!" he is heard saying. As the camera zooms into the distance, the summit of Cho Oyu comes into focus and he remembered two years earlier when he had the opposing vantage point and dreamed of one day being here.

The next night at 8 p.m., the Dahlems stepped out of their Camp 4 tent at 26,000 feet; two months after their journey began. This was it, the final climb to the summit. They immediately saw the danger: the weather was bad. High winds, heavy snow and poor visibility. The expedition leaders advised that the forecast was good and that this could be a short-lived, passing storm. Unfortunately, as they knew too well from volumes of research, there's only so much forecasting and planning you can do on Mount Everest. They were already living in the death zone and had limited oxygen supply. It was go up or go home.

Rather than improving as forecasted, the weather got worse. Others began to turn around. From his journal entry on May 24, Ryan wrote, "A few hundred meters above the Balcony, I lost my footing on a narrow ridge on the loose snow powder and stared into a dark abyss. Was this danger worth it?"

Ryan admits he not only faced extreme conditions on summit night, he experienced a storm of conflicting emotions as well. "Despite the mental preparation to deal with the endless, uncontrollable factors that will likely threaten any climber's successful ascent, when it happens to you, it's a different reality."

He was unnerved by the quick turn of the weather when it was supposed to be ideal conditions and anxiety-ridden

by troubles with John's oxygen bottle and freezing goggles. Exacerbating it all was the real fear for his and his father's lives because he knew too well that attempting a summit bid in bad weather was ill-advised. There was also the accompanying exasperation that they had come so close and necessity and reason would force them to give up the summit.

It was a bitter sting of defeat and resignation. Ultimately, he asked himself the sobering question, "If we go for the summit, will we make it down? I can only imagine that similar thoughts were going through my dad's mind as well."

After consulting each other and their guides, they decided to proceed. "We had enough oxygen. It was the middle of the night so we had plenty of daylight ahead for the descent. Why surrender now?"

So, John and Ryan enlisted their tried and true approach to climbing the seven summits. "We told ourselves; let's not focus on the summit. Let's focus on the immediate challenge, the next step and the one after that."

The storm continued, yet they persisted and eventually reached the base of the Hillary Step, a 40-foot rock and ice wall named for the first man to climb Mount Everest, Sir Edmund Hillary. The famed pitch signals climbers that they are very close to the summit. A renewed excitement came over them. "We're really here! In the footsteps of Hillary, Tenzing and all the amazing climbers since," Ryan thought. Next they traversed the final narrow ridge, one foot in front of the other, one step at a time.

"I remember thinking, it must be close, but I still can't see it. We were moving so slowly – taking three and four breaths per step. Then I saw a small group of climbers ahead."

It was typical to see climbers stopped to rest and discuss conditions. It was then he realized they were not resting, they were on the summit. He was a few feet from the top of the world.

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Ryan turned to wait for his dad to take the final steps together. On May 24, 2010 at 7:55 a.m., John and Ryan reached the summit of Mount Everest, father and son on top of the world.

“I don’t think I can encapsulate in one statement the thoughts and emotions I felt when we reached the summit. Pure joy and an overwhelming sense of accomplishment and love for my dad, my mom, family and life were the most prominent thoughts when we stood on the top. It was an incredibly culmination of our journey,” Ryan says.

“We are often asked why we climb mountains. I wish I had a simple, yet profound answer like the one George Mallory gave in 1924 when asked about Everest: ‘Because it’s there.’ Ultimately for me, there’s the opportunity to be closer to God, myself, my father, and the cleansing of the mind that comes from disconnecting from everyday life. Also, whenever I look up at a mountain, I wonder what it would be like to climb it... because it’s there.”

On December 24, 2010 John and Ryan completed the seven summits when they stood atop Mount Kosciuszko in Australia, 10 years after they began in Africa. This summit was different because they invited a special guest to join them.

“We were thrilled to have my mom join us for Kosciuszko. In many ways, she is our third team member. She has given us unwavering support and unconditional love. Many people ask her how she could let us go. I can understand that reaction, but my mom has never given us a hint of reservation or restriction. She has incredible inner strength to overcome any fears. She has always been very positive and encouraged us to go for our dreams and to be happy. Her last words to us each time we embark on a trip are: ‘climb safe, climb confident.’ She has been crucial to our success.”

Everywhere the Dahlems go these days people ask about Everest. They are fascinated, yet they call them crazy. They say, “I would never do that!”

What is it about climbing the highest mountain in the world, then, that draws such marvel from so many? They have faced death-defying extremes and stood in places only a few others have gone.

Most importantly, though, the Dahlems’ story is of family, passion and implacable drive and determination. Their unwavering focus to achieve their dreams of climbing the world’s highest peaks is a source of inspiration for all to go for the high-points in our own lives.

“I’m profoundly grateful to St. Margaret’s students, parents and my colleagues for their love and support. I feel honored to share our story with St. Margaret’s, a school community that is about discovering passions and dreams. I was able to accomplish my personal dreams while a part of this community and it gives me great personal joy to hear that it inspires others, especially our students.

“This is our passion, one we came by naturally,” said Ryan. “We encourage everyone to find their Everest, whatever it may be, and go for it...one step at a time.” ●

## Reflections from Fellow Tartans

“Mr. Dahlem’s Mount Everest presentation inspired me to set goals, find my passion and go for it, continue my adventures and train hard to be prepared. I could watch his presentation over and over just to be encouraged and scared by the video of him crossing the crevasse! Thanks Mr. Dahlem.” *Connor Parks, Grade 8*

“The feelings that washed over me as Mr. Dahlem described his experience at the top of the mountain were indescribable—accomplishment, pride, honor and humility were among those feelings. This shows that with enough work and dedication, anything can be done. One of my favorite quotes is: anything worthwhile takes time. Mr. Dahlem and his father put massive amounts of time and effort into building an even stronger relationship with each other while scaling the mightiest peak on Earth.” *Harrison White, Grade 10*

“What’s inspired me most about Mr. Dahlem’s Mount Everest expedition is the determination he showed to accomplish this climb as part of his quest for reaching the seven peaks. I wish to bring this same determination and passion because without it, I don’t understand how we can live a meaningful life. Mr. Dahlem has obviously found that meaning.” *Colin Shaffer, Grade 12*

“I had never met anyone who had taken on such a challenge, with so much risk. What a commitment and test of both physical and mental strength! To be able to share this accomplishment with his father made it even more inspirational! Mr. Dahlem’s Mount Everest climb inspired me to not only set personal goals, but family goals. I enjoy stand-up paddling. How cool would it be to paddle the four main oceans with my dad? I can’t think of a better way to see the world! Thanks Mr. Dahlem and congratulations!” *Nick Scheel, Grade 6*

“Mr. Dahlem’s climb of Mount Everest inspired me to work extra hard on both my physical and mental performance so I can build up the strength I need to always do my best. He also demonstrated to me that you should never give up, even during the most difficult challenges. Congratulations Mr. Dahlem on your achievement!” *Maxwell Morin, Grade 7*

“Ryan’s Mount Everest expedition was so much more than that: it was bigger, it was broader, it was seven mountains climbed together as an incredibly close father-son team buoyed by the love of wife and mother, family and friends. It was not unlike Ryan: seemingly quiet and unassuming, yet incredibly strong, straightforward, deeply forceful and meaningful on more levels than can be imagined. Our family not only marveled at them, but “climbed” alongside with them.” *Jeanette Arbogast Shaffer, Upper School Parent*

“I was struck not only by the magnitude of their accomplishment, but also by what an amazing wife and mom Mrs. Dahlem must be. I found myself pondering what else I can do to encourage my husband and children to pursue their dreams and goals to the fullest.” *Judy Sweeney, Middle and Upper School Parent*

“Inspiration and aspiration come together with Ryan’s story not just about the Everest climb, which is world class, but that he did it with his dad. The lesson for us is that if we stick together during the tough times, love and encourage each other not only will we survive but prosper as a family.” *Mark Warren, Upper School Parent*

“Ryan and John’s journey embodied themes that touched my family on several levels: the pursuit of dreams; the strengthening of bonds across generations; and the value of hard work and honest effort. Their tale rekindled fond memories of outdoor adventures spent with my father, experiences I now am able to relive with my son. For that I am grateful.” *Gregory Jue, Upper School and Tartan Alumni Parent*

“No matter what challenges or obstacle one may have; I believe everyone has the potential to achieve something great with their life. Ryan and his dad’s climb of Mount Everest is a perfect example of how we all can reach for the stars and achieve our goals by committing with passion, focus, determination and hard work.” *Gerry Hampton, Upper School Parent*

“I am so proud of you Ryan, for what you and your Dad accomplished, and for generously sharing your story with the St. Margaret’s community. I know I am not alone when I say that your outstanding presentation is a life-changer, an event that alters priorities to some degree for the rest of our lives.” *Harry White, Upper School Parent*



For additional stories and photos, including a perspective from Ryan Dahlem on the cultures and landscape of the Everest region, visit The Tartan Today at [smesnews.org/today](http://smesnews.org/today) and search “Everest” or scan this QR tag.