

# ACE-ING Kilimanjaro

By Wendy Davis Johnson    Photography by Edmina Bradshaw

**IN JULY 2002, 15 BRAVE SOULS “ACED”** the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the highest mountain in Africa, completing a physically and mentally arduous climb that raised more than a quarter of a million dollars for charity. The ISIS Foundation is a Bermuda-based aid organization that assists children through health and educational projects in Nepal and Uganda. The trip was conceived and spearheaded by Edmina Bradshaw, chief learning officer of ACE Limited, a leading global insurance and reinsurance company headquartered in Bermuda. The team endured a grueling eight-day climb of 55 miles through increasingly intense weather conditions to achieve the summit.

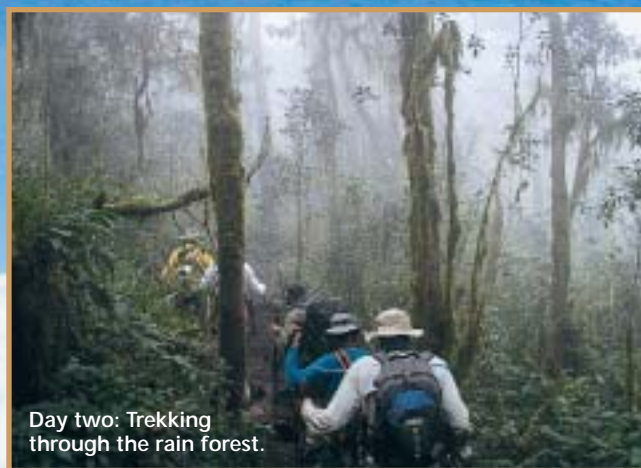
At midnight on Thursday, July 11, as their families and colleagues slept peacefully back home, the ACE climbers pulled themselves out of their tents for the final ascent to the summit. Eight hours later, one excruciating step after another, they reached Uhuru Peak, the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, at an elevation of 19,340 feet (more than four miles high). It took strong leadership and collaboration to overcome some unexpected challenges and reach the summit above the clouds.

## The Impetus

Edmina Bradshaw is no stranger to adventurous expeditions. She’s participated in Outward Bound and has led a group of teenagers and young adults on a trip through the Amazon in 1999. As a learning and development professional, she recognized the inherent value of such expeditions in fostering leadership and team-building among diverse groups of individuals. In fact, Ms. Bradshaw noted that she learned more about leadership, personal growth, and team development from such experiences than she ever learned academically. And this comes from someone who has earned three graduate degrees.

Motivated by her past experiences, Ms. Bradshaw researched the possibility of leading a group of ACE employees on such a trip, and selected the challenging journey to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. The goal: To provide ACE employees with a physically challenging, memorable journey that would raise money for a good cause while imparting to its members a true sense of personal and team accomplishment.

“This was the most difficult and humbling experience of our lives, but also the most awesome,” says Bradshaw. “We couldn’t



Day two: Trekking through the rain forest.



Day four: Shira Caldera, a high-altitude desert plateau four days from the top.

have done it without teamwork and collaboration, nor without the direction and encouragement of the guides and porters who accompanied us and gave us the confidence to reach our goal.”

#### **The Beneficiaries**

Not only did the 15 climbers achieve a personal sense of accomplishment unlike any they'd ever experienced, but they raised substantial funds for a worthwhile charity. To qualify for the trip, each individual was responsible for raising at least \$10,000 for the chosen charity.

“I used the fundraising as a qualification mechanism,” says Bradshaw, “determining that the people who were driven enough to raise this sort of money would likely have the necessary gumption to reach the summit.” She was delighted that several employees raised even more than double the requirement.

The group used three criteria to select a charity. First, they wanted to contribute to a low-profile organization because they felt their contribution was more likely to have a valuable

and distinctly measurable impact. Second, Bradshaw was dedicated to supporting a charity in which every penny donated would go directly to the people it would benefit. And last, they wanted to raise money for a cause related to their journey, such as benefiting children in developing countries. The team chose the Bermuda-based ISIS Foundation, as it fulfilled all three criteria, and shared ACE's hometown roots.

#### **The Climbers**

The ACE climbers included Roger Gillett, Patrick Mitchell, Deborah Smith, and Keith White from ACE's Bermuda offices; Tim Fisher, ACE INA (Washington); Gregory Kelder, ACE INA (Philadelphia); Joanne Massey, ACE INA (Atlanta); and Leo Takagi, ACE Japan. They were joined by Walt Massey (Joanne's husband), Taylor Lane (a reinsurance broker), Miyoki Oda (a friend



**An intrepid team from one of the world's top reinsurance companies climbs Africa's tallest peak to raise money for children. It's not just another day at the office.**

Stella Point, the end of the worst of the steep slopes. Recovery stop before the final few hundred feet to Uhuru Peak.

of Leo's), and Dr. John Tanner, the team physician, accompanied by Petra Tanner and Kenny Tanner.

After considerable research, Bradshaw selected the outfit of Gane and Marshall to lead the climb. In addition to their excellent reputation and 95 percent success rate (there are no guarantees), Bradshaw liked the fact that they didn't push for speed. They allowed plenty of time for acclimatization, and took that time to acquaint them with the local flora and fauna as well.

The group was led by two guides, Daniel Ngoro and Felix Mtui, who proved to be, according to Deborah Smith, "gentlemen with exceptional mountaineering skills, who also had caring and compassionate attitudes." About 30 porters carried much of the heavy gear.

"Their [the guides and porters] caring and help went beyond what they needed to do to perform their jobs," says ACE climber Roger Gillett, who suffered a severe lack of oxygen in the final one-and-a-half miles of the trek, and required considerable assistance.

### Preparation

The group trained for the trip individually, working to strengthen their legs and backs for the hours of climbing with a backpack. Bradshaw climbed to the top of the Bermuda lighthouse several times a week to increase her cardiovascular stamina and leg strength. The team also held virtual meetings during the months and weeks preceding the climb, to provide emotional support, and to share research and information to make sure each participant had the proper climbing gear.

For Joanne Massey, coping with the altitude was nearly impossible to master, or even prepare for. Bradshaw agrees.

"In retrospect, we never could have prepared for the amount of physical and psychological strength it would take to endure the physical climb," she says, "traveling through four climate zones and struggling with sub-zero temperatures and diminished oxygen for much of the trip."

When the team arrived at the lower slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro on July 5, 2002, they were greeted by expedition leaders Daniel and Felix, who were responsible for their well-being and safety for the next eight days.

"Although I'd planned the trip, it became obvious very quickly that I needed to cede my leadership role to the expedition leaders," says Bradshaw. "We were in an environment that required their specialized knowledge and expertise."

"Daniel was our lead guide, and Felix always kept his eye on us from the rear," adds Smith. "Both were very knowledgeable about the mountain.



Wildflowers bloom everywhere.

They also encouraged us and ensured that we consumed an adequate supply of water for the day. The intake of water was essential to avoid dehydration. It was necessary to drink a minimum of four liters every day."

After registering at the base of the mountain, the climbers began their journey following the Lemosho trail, which allowed for maximum acclimatization and would lead them all the way to the summit.

The first stretch of the trip was a rainforest climb to the first destination, Big Tree Camp, at 8,000 feet.

The following day, the group rose to a strenuous nine-hour trek through desert-like terrain, where they began to encounter patches of frost-covered plants. They stopped to camp just inside the Shira crater at approximately 10,000 feet. After several hours of hard hiking up the steep incline, members of the group began to experience their first signs of altitude sickness, which included headaches and nausea.

Upon reaching camp, there was an optional acclimatization hike, ascending rugged terrain for an additional two hours, resulting in a reward like no other: witnessing a stunning sunset.

From this day forward, the climbers woke each morning to find that the water left in their washing bowls the night before had frozen solid.

But they ate well. Valance, the camp cook, prepared carefully planned meals for them, designed to keep up their strength and enhance their endurance. For breakfast it was soup, eggs, oatmeal, sometimes peanut butter. Sandwiches for lunch, along with bananas or a boiled egg. Dinners consisted of soup, rice or pasta, beef or chicken, and dessert. And during the day, they would snack on power bars.

"Everything was very well thought out," says Bradshaw. "By the time the bananas had passed their peak, that's when we had banana fritters for dessert. The food was more about energy and efficiency than gourmet dining."

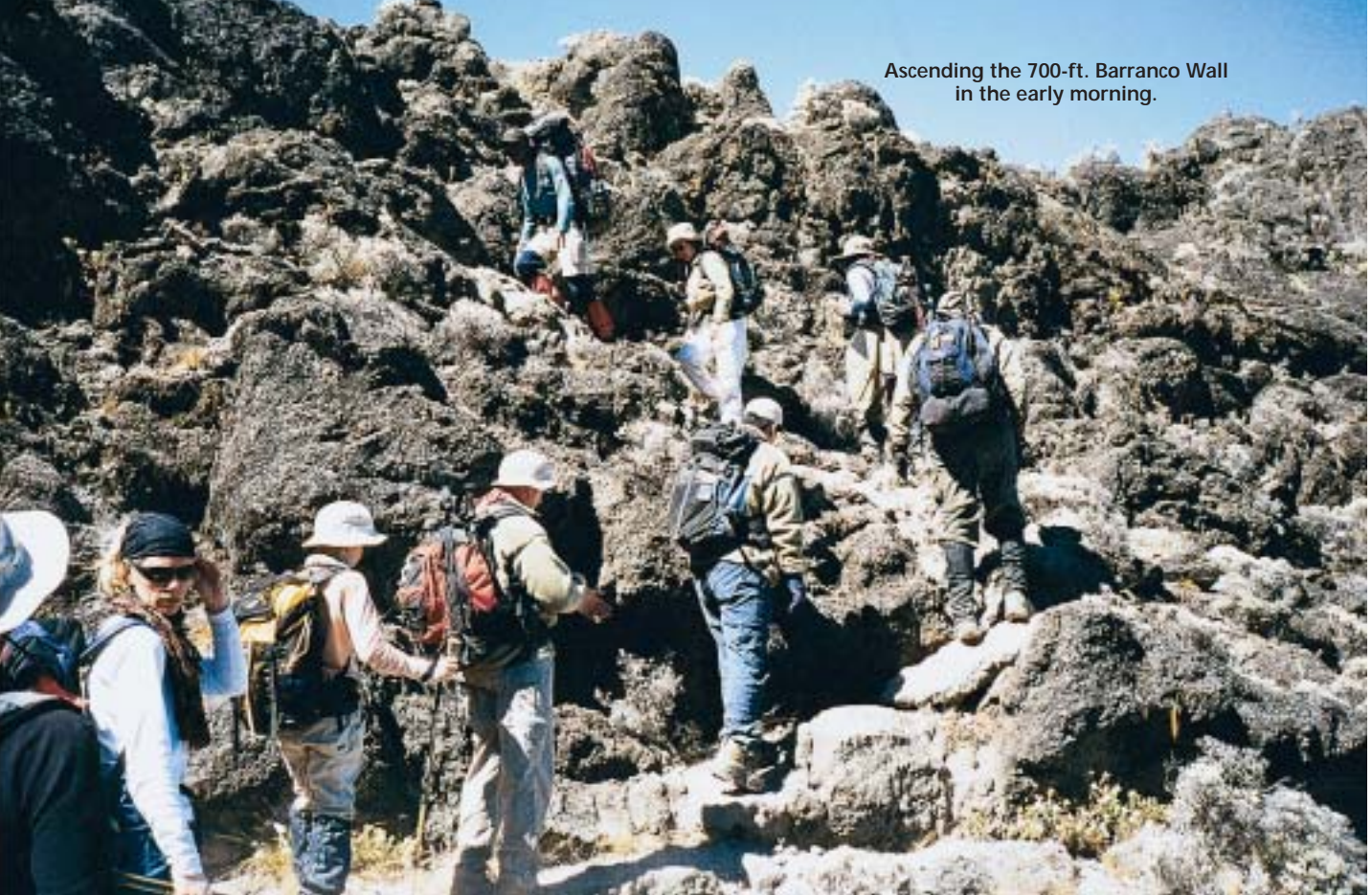
Despite the physical wear and tear on their bodies, the group maintained a steady pace. Throughout the trip, they endured headaches, nausea, blisters, exhaustion, and intense pressure on their knees and toes. Patience with and compassion for each other was a necessity. The guides insisted that the weakest people move to the front of the group each day, so they would set the pace and maintain the cohesion of the group. This strategy also helped them to become re-energized.

"One thing I noticed developing in the group was a very close bonding," says Bradshaw. "At first there was a lot of modesty and decorum, but after awhile we began to consider each other almost as family. Conversations became easy, personal, and basic. We all started to understand that what we relied on in our daily corporate lives was relatively insignificant. We began discussing



Daniel Ngoro, the lead guide, tries to contact base camp from 15,000 feet.

Ascending the 700-ft. Barranco Wall in the early morning.



things that mattered, things that were personal to each of us.”

On July 7, they crossed the Shira Caldera, a high-altitude desert plateau. After the group faced a very steep climb, which included scaling bare-faced walls, they were rewarded by spectacular views.

“We were above the clouds,” says Bradshaw. “It was a very dramatic experience for all of us. The hike that day had been extremely difficult, and we relied greatly on the expedition leaders to reach the top. Climbing through the clouds, though sobering, symbolized that the seemingly impossible was well within our reach if we stuck to the plan.”

That day, at 4:00 p.m., the climbers reached their camp, Shira One, at an altitude of approximately 11,500 feet. Exhausted, they retired at 7:30 p.m.

The following day, the group trekked across the southern flank, ascending and descending the mountainous terrain of Barranco Valley to camp at Barranco Wall, 12,900 feet above sea level. Although the sun was quite strong, the team encountered a bitter wind, requiring them to don fleece clothing to stay warm. Needless to say, fleece had become an indispensable part of their gear.

“For the duration of the trip,” says Bradshaw, “the guides regularly checked in on how everyone was doing, providing feedback to set personal goals and helping the group as a whole improve. They were preparing us for what was to come. One day’s post-climb briefing was a strict talking-to from Felix who advised that we needed to work together and stay together better than we had been doing.”

As a group primarily of executives, she says, most of them were used to being in charge and making their own decisions. But those decisions are not usually about life and death. On the

mountain, Felix told them, eating what and when you’re told can make the difference between having the resources to complete the climb and exhaustion. Staying together as a group was an order, not a choice. Their survival might depend on it.

On July 9, assisted by the leaders, the team scaled the Barranco Wall, a tall and steep mountainside, with an immediate height gain of 700 feet. It was the most difficult and dangerous part of the climb. The climbers had to hug the wall, and the guides supervised their progress every step of the way.

“Felix stood on a ledge on the outside of the wall giving us the clear guidance we needed to climb this dangerous piece of rock,” says Smith. “We all looked back on this moment with pride at what we’d pulled off.”

The climb recommenced early the next morning with a tough three-and-a-half-hour climb over a mixed terrain of rock that had fallen from layers in the cliff. Camping at Barafu Ridge, a harsh and desolate terrain at an elevation of 16,000 feet, the team piled on layers of clothing to combat the freezing temperatures. They retired early to rest in preparation for their final ascent.

### The Summit

With varying degrees of trepidation, the team rose at midnight on July 11 for their final and most difficult climb. They breakfasted on hot, sweet tea and biscuits, something warm but light and full of energy for what was to come. They were accompanied by five guides whose mission was to lead them to the summit of Uhuru Peak at 19,340 feet. The temperature was minus 20 degrees Celsius, and they wanted to reach Uhuru Peak in time for sunrise. Clad in multiple layers of clothing, they snaked their way upward in single file, headlamps lighting the way. The water in their bottles was frozen. They stopped often to catch their breath.



Mweka camp site for a well earned rest after 18 hours of trekking on victory day.



The mess tent, a rare photo opportunity with the flaps up.

After eight exhausting hours, they reached Uhuru Peak. Though they had missed the sunrise, they celebrated by admiring the breathtaking views of the crater and ice, enjoying the sense of accomplishment, and congratulating one another.

“Reaching the summit was almost an anticlimax,” says Bradshaw. “Having endured the challenges of the climb, and fighting the urge to quit, we wondered if we’d ever make it. After the final torturous effort, we each felt a sense of achievement but also had other personal thoughts and feelings on finally reaching the summit.”

The staff of the ISIS Foundation, who had been following the climbers’ progress from their office, were also delighted that the adventurers reached the summit.

“All the climbers have been so generous in taking the time to fund-raise for this extraordinary project,” says Audette Exel, chief executive officer for ISIS. “We were hoping that the expedition would in some way leave them with lifetime memories, even if those memories were ones of challenges overcome rather than the joys of mountaineering. We were cheering for them on the day they reached the summit. Although it sounds like it was a long, hard climb, their efforts will benefit hundreds of children in Uganda and Nepal. It really makes a difference to those kids.”

The ISIS Foundation will use the donations the expedition raised to continue its work in Nepal and Uganda. “We will not only be able to sustain our current projects,” says Exel, “but we’ve been able to expand our work in both countries as a result of this funding.”

In Uganda, a remote hospital will now have more equipment, more staff and resources for the neonatal intensive care unit, assistance in transporting women in labor to the hospital, and better Internet access for the medical staff. In Nepal, the money raised by the expedition will fund the set-up costs of a new clinic laboratory in Kathmandu, which will provide treatment to more than 5,000 local people each year. A group of Tibetan doctors

will be able to travel into the high Himalayas to treat people who live in dangerous, mountainous regions, around 12,000 feet above sea level.

### Reflections

“The challenges we faced each day ranged anywhere from altitude sickness to sore muscles, twisted ankles, badly blistered feet, and throbbing joints,” Bradshaw says. “But we were also struggling with emotional challenges, being faced with feelings of desolation, loneliness, and digging deeper and deeper to find the will to keep on going.”

The team relied greatly on the strength within the group. Everybody alternated playing coach and encouraging each other. Often, when team members lagged behind, the group would rally around, carry their gear, and keep them motivated to continue.

Throughout the trip, the expedition leaders kept the group focused on the task ahead. They held morning, afternoon, and evening briefing sessions, as well as daily personal appraisals. They prepared all the participants for the challenges they’d face the following day, and provided insight into how each climber could improve and contribute to the welfare of the team.

“Working together with the group to accomplish this goal reinforced a great deal about leadership, collaboration, feedback, and team building,” says Bradshaw. “We also learned a great deal from our guides, Felix and Daniel. The role they took on would credit any corporate leadership position, and I’m able to align some of their tools and techniques to our own learning and development programs.”

“We’re extremely proud of our employees and of their strength and commitment to complete this remarkable expedition to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro,” says Brian Duperreault, chairman and CEO of ACE Limited. “It’s gratifying to know that the climb and their fund-raising efforts will be truly appreciated and will make a positive difference to the lives of many children in the developing world.”

**WENDY DAVIS JOHNSON** IS DIRECTOR, GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS, FOR ACE LIMITED IN BERMUDA.