Rising Above It: Valencia woman plans Mt. Everest climb

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Article By Ken McCarthy  
Photo by Bob Donaldson

In April, Maggie Schneider will mark the 10-year anniversary of the day she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She'll celebrate by spending $10,000 on a trip that she has wanted to take for a very long time.

But no Hawaiian sunsets or French museums are in the Valencia resident's travel plans.

Instead, Schneider will go to Nepal to hike 17,500 feet to the base camp of Mount Everest.

Schneider, 44, said her reasons for wanting to make the trip are many.

As someone who has been mountain climbing for years, Schneider said Everest represents the ultimate challenge. The oxygen-depleted peak lies about 29,000 feet above sea level, and its slopes are littered with the bodies of at least 120 climbers who never made it back down.

Perhaps more importantly, Schneider wants to show others who have multiple sclerosis that they can set goals and achieve them.

"I want to show people with MS that, although it is debilitating, you can fight and you can win," she said.

Schneider is an academic adviser at the University of Pittsburgh. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in April 1994 after she developed a vision impairment.

She said she would awake each morning with no center vision, able to see only peripherally, because of lesions on her brain.

Today, one of her symptoms is constant numbness in her right leg.

"It's not really like pins and needles, but sometimes it aches a lot," she said.

Schneider takes an injection once a week to keep the symptoms at bay. So, she'll pack medicine when she leaves in May for three weeks on the slopes of Everest, a feat that amazes Anne Mageras.
Mageras, vice president of the Allegheny District Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, said climbing Everest is an incredible challenge even for experienced climbers with no impairments.

"But it's doubly challenging for someone with MS," she said. "I just shake my head."

That's because fatigue is a universal symptom of those with multiple sclerosis. It can be a problem with little or no exertion, Mageras said.

People with the disease also are sensitive to temperature changes.

"Either heat or cold can exacerbate the symptoms," she said.

One challenge that Mageras' organization was able to help Schneider meet was how to carry her medicine, which needs to be kept cold without freezing. Mageras said the group found a sleeve that will be easy to carry up the mountain and will keep the temperature stable.

She said Schneider is only the second mountain climber with multiple sclerosis she has encountered in her 10 years with the society.

"We have better medicine every year to treat the symptoms," she said. "We used to tell people to go home and wait until the symptoms got worse. Now, we tell people they should continue to follow their dreams."

Schneider won't be climbing to the highest point of the mountain but to the base camp, about 11,500 feet below its peak.

Because of the time required to get acclimated to the thin atmosphere on Everest, Schneider said she would have to spend another month in Nepal and possibly another $30,000 to attain the summit.

But "it's the opportunity of a lifetime just to be there," she said.

She is working to arrange trips to other peaks in the mountain range, including one at 18,200 feet.

She said she also will live vicariously through her friend, Will Cross, who will attempt the summit.

Cross is a teacher in the Pine-Richland School District who has diabetes. He trekked across Antarctica in late 2002 and early 2003 in a journey to raise money for diabetes research.

Schneider said Cross has climbed four of the Earth's "seven summits," a mountaineering feat that takes climbers to the highest point on each continent.

Schneider hasn't done that, but she is hardly new to mountaineering.

In 11 years of climbing, she has successfully reached the summit of eight of the 14 peaks she has tried.
Those include Mount Popocatepetl in Mexico and Mount Washington in New Hampshire. On that trip, her husband, Paul, developed frostbite.

He will not accompany his wife to Everest, but the two will keep in touch by satellite phone, she said.

Part of his role will be to remind Schneider to drink enough water and take her medication.

"You need somebody to nag you," she said.

According to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, multiple sclerosis is believed to be an autoimmune disease that affects the central nervous system.

About 400,000 Americans acknowledge having the disease, and every week about 200 people are diagnosed with it. Worldwide, it affects 2.5 million individuals.

Most people with multiple sclerosis are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50, and 73 percent of those are women.

But Schneider said the disease won't stop her from doing something she has dreamed of for so long.

"You have to push the envelope and have that attitude to begin with," she said. "People with MS know it's a struggle you have to fight on a daily basis."

(Ken McCarthy is a freelance writer.)